Sly Stone (1943–2025), a funk pioneer who rejected musical and racial boundaries

Erik Schreiber
27 June 2025

Sly Stone, a musician and songwriter best known for his work with Sly and the Family Stone, died June 9 at age 82. The cause of his death was chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, as well as other underlying health problems, according to his representatives.

Stone and his band achieved artistic success and wild popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s with songs such as "Everyday People," "Hot Fun in the Summertime," "Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)" and "Family Affair." Their music blended rock, soul, gospel and psychedelia in a way that set them apart from their contemporaries. Stone, moreover, was a pioneer of funk whose legacy has influenced generations of musicians. But he is also known as an artist who, under various pressures, including success, became increasingly erratic and ultimately withdrew from public life almost entirely.

Stone was born Sylvester Stewart to working-class parents in Denton, Texas, in 1943. His father K.C. was a janitor and maintenance worker at a department store. His mother Alpha raised Stone and his four siblings. The deeply religious family belonged to the Church of God in Christ, a Pentecostal denomination.

After World War II, Stone's family took part in the Great Migration of African Americans from the American South to the North and West in search of industrial jobs and greater racial justice and equality. The Stewarts moved to Vallejo, California, a predominantly working-class Bay Area city that was home to a Naval shipyard. Vallejo offered stable jobs, but also segregated housing.

As part of their Pentecostal traditions, Alpha and K.C. encouraged their children to sing or play instruments. Stone quickly showed impressive musical talent. By age seven, he was a proficient keyboardist. By age nine, he and three of his siblings released the gospel single "On the Battlefield" (1952) as the Stewart Family Four. Over the next two years, Stone mastered guitar, bass and drums. Stone gained a taste for performance, and his mother recalled that audience members often wanted to touch him.

In high school, Stone played guitar in doo-wop groups, joined an all-black group the Webs for a time and enjoyed his first industry attention as a member of the mixed-race group the Viscaynes. After graduating, he intermittently studied music theory and broadcasting in Bay Area schools. While working for Autumn Records, Stone helped write "C'mon and Swim" (1964), which became a Top Ten hit for Bobby Freeman.

From 1964 to 1967, Stone became a popular disc jockey on the Bay Area AM stations KSOL and KDIA. Defying the stations' black-oriented format, Stone also played artists such as the Beatles, Bob Dylan and Lord Buckley. Looking back at this time, he told *Rolling Stone* in 1970, "Like, I think there shouldn't be 'black radio.' Just radio. Everybody be a part of everything. I didn't look at my job in terms of black."

The 1960s was developing into a period of rebellion and radicalization. Auto and other manufacturing workers, along with coal miners and postal workers, waged increasing numbers of sanctioned and unofficial strikes. Black and white workers and young people fought together in civil rights campaigns such as the Freedom Rides and Freedom Summer. Opposition to the imperialist US war on Vietnam swelled later in the decade, especially on university campuses. Joblessness, lack of access to education and persistent racism led to urban uprisings in America's major cities.

In 1967, Stone merged his group Sly and the Stoners with his brother Freddie's group Freddie and the Stone Souls. In the resulting group, Sly and the Family Stone, Stone played organ while Freddie played guitar and their sister Vaetta sang. Drummer Gregg Errico was white, as was the later added saxophonist Jerry Martini. With the entrance of Cynthia Robinson on trumpet and Rose, another Stewart sister, on vocals and keyboards, the lineup was complete. The formation of a band that included blacks and whites, and both sexes, was a powerful political statement at the time.

The band's blending of musical styles reflected not only Stone's omnivorous tastes, but also the desire for unity and self-expression among young people of the time. Although the band's first album *A Whole New Thing* (1967) was not successful, the subsequent single "Dance to the Music" (1967) became a Top Ten hit. The jubilant song, which introduces musical instruments *à la* Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* (1936), earned the band fame beyond the Bay Area, which had become a bastion of psychedelia.

With their fourth album *Stand!* (1969), Sly and the Family Stone vaulted to stardom. The album's infectious songs brimmed with *joie de vivre* and urged listeners to dance. "Everyday People," which combined a simple melody, playground rhymes and a message of racial unity, became a Number 1 hit. "I Want to Take You Higher" drew on Stone's Pentecostal upbringing and expressed a yearning for transcendence (among other things). The album's lyrics evinced optimism and humor, encouraging listeners to pursue their hopes, while occasionally admonishing them not to get discouraged by life's setbacks. Class and race questions were addressed breezily and in general, though progressive, terms. The band seemed to be the herald of a new society of multiracial equality.

Within months of the release of *Stand!*, they found themselves playing at the Woodstock Music and Art Fair, which became a symbol of the 1960s counterculture. When he arrived on site, Stone was amazed by the sea of people he saw. During the band's set, Stone encouraged the audience to sing along and started a call and response

on “I Want to Take You Higher.” Some attendees remarked that the band’s set had the air of a revival meeting. Today, the performance is considered one of the festival’s high points, as well as the peak of the band itself.

But success greatly increased the pressure on the band. Epic Records demanded new material, and the band’s touring schedule became more onerous. When the musicians moved into a mansion in Beverly Hills, their drug use increased, as did the friction between them. Stone became increasingly unpredictable and paranoid, sometimes failing to show up for concerts. His new wealth insulated him ever more from the concerns of the general population.

Pressure also came from the Black Panther Party, which demanded that Stone replace Errico and Martini with black musicians. The party sometimes resorted to threats, which it delivered in person. To his credit, Stone consistently resisted this reactionary demand, implicitly rejecting the perspective of black nationalism. “Sly always, always stood up for me, and in many instances, he saved my butt,” Martini told NPR.

In July 1970, Sly failed to appear at a scheduled concert at Grant Park in Chicago. The audience grew restless and started throwing bottles and rocks at the stage. Police officers quickly moved into the crowd, swinging batons. In the resulting riot, as many as 162 people were injured, and three young people were shot. Stone was deeply disturbed by the incident. “I had sensed a shadow was falling over America. The possibility of possibility was leaking out and leaving the country drained,” he wrote in his memoir *Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)* (2023).

The title of the band’s next album, *There’s a Riot Goin’ On* (1971), responded to this incident, as well as to Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On* (1971). Optimism had given way to paranoia. Communal joy was replaced by withdrawal from society, and references to drug use peppered the album. The music was more mournful, the lyrics wary and terse. A harder-edged funk style predominated. The sound quality was like a grainy photograph, compared with *Stand!* The album captured Stone’s inward turn in the face of music-industry pressure, the ongoing Vietnam war and urban uprisings. It also reflected the souring of the counterculture’s romance with drugs and its growing disillusion with the prospect of social reform.

“Family Affair,” which became a Number One hit, reflected this new mood. A certain world-weariness had crept into Rose’s vocals, and Stone recorded his vocals lying down. The ambiguous lyrics, set to a spare, light funk arrangement, refer to tensions between parents and children, as well as a romantic relationship that has become strained. Though it is a remarkable, inspired performance, the shadow of pessimism hovers over the song.

Stone’s unpredictability and intra-band tensions became mounting problems. But the next album, *Fresh* (1973), was a fine effort that included the hit “If You Want Me to Stay” and a soulful version of “Que Sera, Sera,” which had been made famous by Doris Day. Stone began to rely on stunts like marrying actress Kathy Silva during an elaborate performance at Madison Square Garden in New York in 1974. The marriage did not last. Promoters had become leery of the band since the Grant Park riot, which made touring difficult. After a poorly attended concert in January 1975, Sly and the Family Stone broke up.

Stone recorded four more albums, three of them under the group’s name, but none was successful. The last, *Ain’t but the One Way* (1982), began as a partnership with collaborator George Clinton (founder of funk bands Funkadelic and Parliament), but was completed by a producer after the two leaders abandoned the project.

Stone became a recluse and stopped releasing new music after 1987. Except for several arrests on drug charges and rare public appearances, he remained out of the public eye. He became as famous for his silence (and for rumors about his poverty) as he had been for his music.

Like Beach Boys founder Brian Wilson, who died days after he did, Stone was a prodigious musical talent who recorded a remarkable amount of inventive, highly popular and enduring music during a relatively brief time. His vocal arrangements, partly influenced by doo-wop, exploited much of the human vocal range. His arrangements highlighted each instrument individually while uniting them in a coherent whole. His blending of diverse musical styles seemed innovative and exciting yet completely natural.

This musical synthesis reflected Stone’s lighthearted defiance of boundaries both musical and social. It reinforced the early message of optimism, possibility and unity in his lyrics. Opposition to oppression and injustice was another theme. That Stone addressed these subjects in abstract terms did not detract from his sympathetic and human message. *Stand!* and *There’s a Riot Goin’ On* were early steps in the evolution from soul to funk. Stone’s influence extends not only to many later musicians such as Prince and Rick James, but also to countless hip-hop groups like De La Soul, Public Enemy and the Roots.

During the heyday of black nationalism and its supposedly liberatory calls for racial segregation, Stone took a stand for racial unity that was musically and socially progressive. Musicians who reject identity politics are difficult to find today.

He was a talented, intelligent and sensitive artist, no doubt unprepared, like so many others, for the pressures of the entertainment world. Nothing destroys artists more effectively in America than success. What role personal difficulties also played, including the legacy of religious zeal and possible family conflicts, is not clear. In any case, a great many artistic figures found the dissipation of countercultural optimism and the rise of political and social reaction in the late 1970s very disconcerting or worse.

The combined effect of all this apparently led to Stone’s artistic exhaustion and social withdrawal decades ago. But his musical legacy will continue to inspire artists and listeners alike.