

## LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

### MARSHA P. JOHNSON'S QUEER LEGACY LIVES ON: TOURMALINE & QWEEN JEAN ON TRANS LIBERATION

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MARSHA P. JOHNSON: But when Angela Davis was arrested on six, and arrested by the federal government in New York.

INTERVIEWER: Oh yeah.

MARSHA P. JOHNSON: All the gay people went down and demonstrated in front of the Women's House of Detention to get Angela out of, Angela Davis out of jail. And we were all in that demonstration for a few days. I mean, in the gay movement, they think we only get into certain gay demonstrations, but it's not true. We get all kinds of political demonstrations too.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever go to any of the ones in Washington?

MARSHA P. JOHNSON: I was just in the one in Washington. In fact, I was the one that arranged for free tickets. Free tickets for all poor people that couldn't go to the demonstration.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

LAURA FLANDERS: That was Marsha P. Johnson, activist, artist, fashion icon. You may know her now as a participant in the Stonewall Uprising of 1969. You probably wouldn't have heard of her then because of the biases of that time. Indeed, it has taken years for recognition to come for Marsha P, but today we celebrate the publication of a new biography, "Marsha: The Joy and Defiance of Marsha P. Johnson", by our guest Tourmaline. The book traces Marsha's working class beginnings through to her work with sex workers and street activists in New York to her death in 1992 in circumstances that are still unclear. Was Marsha central to the Stonewall Rebellion? Absolutely, and to the liberation movements that have exploded afterwards. She was also, as Tourmaline writes, larger than life on the stage and in the street. She, quote, offered everyone a clear, resounding answer to the question, what does a greater sense of freedom look like? "Her answer", writes Tourmaline, "Was, freedom is me." In these tough times for non-conforming people, I am excited to be joined today by Tourmaline and Qween Jean, who are in many ways carrying Marsha's legacy forward. [Tourmaline](#) is a Guggenheim fellow and TIME 100 honoree. Qween Jean, an author herself, is also a New York City-based costume designer

and the Founder of [Black Trans Liberation](#), an organization that provides food, groceries and housing resources to the transgender and non-gender conforming community. What has changed and what hasn't since Marsha P. was on the scene? To this special [Pride edition](#) of "Meet the BIPOC Press", I welcome Tourmaline and Qween Jean. Welcome, both. Tourmaline, starting with you, I don't know if you timed it this way, but it seems to me that the release of this book could not have come at a better time, a time when so many are seeking a story of joy and defiance of the sort that this story brings. So thank you for it. And I gotta ask you, why Marsha P. Johnson?

TOURMALINE: You know, I have been blessed to be hot on the heels of Marsha P. Johnson's big spirit for nearly 20 years now. I moved to New York City as a 19-year-old in 2002, and soon made my way to the Christopher Street Piers. I joined this group called FIERCE. It was a group that was showing up and showing out for queer, transgender, non-conforming people of color. And so that was my real early entry into organizing. I later joined Queers for Economic Justice and Sylvia Rivera Law Project as an organizer, but everywhere I went, people were talking about Marsha P. Johnson. And so I was just taking notes, who was this brilliant freedom dreamer? Who was this profound organizer? And to me at every step along the way, in terms of my life path, first as a young person, then as an organizer around healthcare and welfare and housing, then in my art career now in kind of a spiritual place, Marsha's voice has called me along and it's just been a blessing.

LAURA FLANDERS: Tourmaline says, Qween Jean, that you describe yourself as a spiritual daughter of Marsha. Is that true?

QWEEN JEAN: Correct.

LAURA FLANDERS: How so?

QWEEN JEAN: First of all, I just wanna say thank you to you both for this opportunity. It just feels so resonant and deeply, deeply profound. I moved here in 2012 into New York, also young and trying to figure it out. Ended up at Washington Square Park like many people do, and never left, you know.

TOURMALINE: Literally.

QWEEN JEAN: And I went to school, I went to NYU. I graduated and I really, like many people, trying to find purpose and realized that my purpose was right there. In the summer of 2020, like soon after I graduated, there was the unfortunate unalivings of George Floyd, Tony McDade, Nina Pop. And that summer continued. On record, there was over, you know, 52 trans people, Black trans folks that had been killed, Black and Brown trans bodies. And that was the

record, right? That on record was a trans person a week that had been unalived by transgender violence, gun violence. And so a coalition started, a coalition and a commitment to community. Every Thursday, we met on the stoop of, right outside of the Stonewall Inn Bar, and we held space, we disrupted, and we demanded equity and justice and freedom for all. And that spirit, honestly, continues today. The Supreme Court justice just ruled that the people in Tennessee, the young people, their healthcare, transgender youth will, their healthcare is now banned. And we know that that sets a precedence for other, there's about 22 other states that have been waiting, right? That are in tow to also create a path line towards destruction. And so we will be outside in the streets in literally just a few hours. So for me, this is ongoing work. This is my mission's work for freedom, collective freedom, and that centers transgender people. We are sacred people and we deserve as much equity and respect as any other community. And for me my mission at Black Trans Liberation has started with feeding people. Black Trans Liberation Kitchen is a home. It is a refuge. It is where our community, our New Yorkers who are queer and trans can feel that they are safe. This is where I have felt saved. I'm a proud Black trans woman who's an artist, who's a visionary, and who understands what it takes to feed her people. In this current climate, we are pressed against a lot of tumultuous legislation, very harmful rhetoric, but through all of that, we have found a way to connect, to heal, and to gain a sense of confidence that we indeed are proud, resilient New Yorkers. When we embrace, when we connect, we're able to heal. These are the ways that we love on our people. These are the ways that we empower them, that they can get jobs, that they can have the resources that they need to continue Black Trans liberation. Everyone needs a place to sit, to eat, and to be loved on and to supported and to be especially fortified. And that is who Marsha P. Johnson at her core was. She fortified the people around her, and the stories about how she galvanized, how she merged unions and merged communities together in the name of freedom. And so that is something that I will continue to live by today as a young Black trans woman who is deeply, and committed to solidarity work towards the liberating world for Black people in this country, immigrants in this country, asylum seekers, Palestinian families. Across the board, we recognize that there's attacks on humanity.

LAURA FLANDERS: It comes up so much, this dichotomy in the life of Marsha P., and in just our lives, of joy and violence. And I guess insofar as we're in some ways talking about media coverage and the media treatment of this community, my question to you is, how do you balance those two things, and how do you suggest the journalists think about that balance?

TOURMALINE: Well, it's not [unprecedented](#). You know, I was one of the lead organizers of, New York State had a provision that specifically denied transgender non-conforming people healthcare under Medicaid. And it was repealed in 2014. I was one of the lead organizers who worked around that exclusion for transgender non-conforming people to access healthcare that we know keeps us alive. When we have care that we need, our suicidality goes down, our mental health goes up, and we are able to live full and complete lives. One of the most incredible interviews I heard about Marsha P. Johnson took place in 1971 when she was on hormone

replacement therapy. And she is reveling, you can hear the gender euphoria in her voice as she describes her body changing in beautiful, blossoming ways. You can hear how alive she is. And so we have been here before, just like in New York State that denied transgender nonconforming people access to the healthcare we need, we're seeing it happen in Tennessee. We're seeing it happen in other states. We're seeing the Supreme Court ruling. One page that I take about, take from Marsha's book though, is that she was in a moment navigating extremely harsh conditions. She wasn't putting a happy face sticker over any of them, but she was looking for relief. And so she moved when she was 18 to Times Square in 1963, when you would be arrested and put in jail as a trans or gender nonconforming person just going outside and living your truth. What she did was she rented these hourly hotels with her sister, a 13-year-old Sylvia Rivera. Just think about how young some of these people were, right? They were hustling in Times Square because they weren't safe at home. So she rented these hourly hotels and they would call them hot spring hotels because of whether it was winter, spring, summer, or fall, you know, if you've been in New York in a pre-war building, you can't crack a window and the heat is boiling. But it did provide safety and sanctuary from the realities on the street. And what did they do in those rooms? They dreamed. There's a beautiful [interview](#) with Steven Watson, a Village Voice journalist who talked to both Sylvia and Marsha in 1979, and they both talked about how they used that space to dream beyond what is, to see the harsh conditions for what they were, but to imagine, well, what would it be like to go outside and feel safe, to know our value, to not be harassed, to live in our power? And a beautiful way to move from a place of fear because of harsh conditions, and to go to a place of more empowerment is relief. Having that space with community, it reminds you, what are you fighting for? That's a really important way to get back to joy. But I keep coming back to joy too because Marsha knew that these conditions didn't get to determine how she felt about herself. No court, no Supreme Court, no police officer, no governor, no president gets to determine how we feel about ourself. And so she was creating the conditions to remind herself and each other that we too get to feel beautiful and know our value firmly.

LAURA FLANDERS: Qween, how does Marsha's work show up in your work today? She worked on housing, she worked on AIDS, she worked on no end of issues, including policing as you do.

QWEEN JEAN: Yes, there is a deep through line of, I would say, alignment, right? [And of care](#) of humanity. And I think to me, to this day, there's a lot of synergy around, as you were saying, around housing justice, sovereignty and ensuring that people have a place to eat, a place to actually, have a safe space, right? To feel human and loved on in a way that a lot of, you know, a lot of resources and organizations, you know, they offer nine to five, you know, walk in, but you know, there's not an actual designated space for fellowship. And that's what my organization has been committed to. We think about immigration, we think about, of course, the unfortunate

ongoing crisis of police brutality, police violence in a way that I myself has been, you know, a survivor of that. And, but it doesn't stop me.

LAURA FLANDERS: I have to remind people in that very initial reporting on the Stonewall Uprising, I think it was the New York Times that ran the headline, four policemen hurt in a Village raid.

TOURMALINE: Exactly.

LAURA FLANDERS: And the only others who were mentioned were men. You didn't hear the women, you didn't hear the non-binary people. You certainly didn't hear about the drag queens, the transvestites or the trans folks like Marsha P. What did you find in your research was lying there as a surprise, even for you?

TOURMALINE: To me, it's so important to remind anyone having a conversation about Stonewall that Marsha was there, and also there were street queens and street kids in the park who were part, firmly part of the uprising, right? And also, Stonewall was a segregated bar. They used to have the back room bar. David Carter wrote a long text about Stonewall and mentions Marsha, you know, in the footnote by name saying it's almost undoubtable that Marsha was among the first to start the Stonewall Uprising, and yet because of ableism, people didn't wanna, and anti-Black racism and transphobia, people didn't wanna credit Marsha with being instrumental in the uprising. And so to me, my research was, you know, profound. I, you know, was able to interview and also read about first encounters of many, many people who saw Marsha taking part in the Stonewall uprising.

LAURA FLANDERS: What about that question about [what's changed and what hasn't](#) in our reporting? You mentioned earlier we have the kind of housing story over here, and then we have the LGBTQ story over there, or maybe we don't have it at all. This is one of those subjects where our reporting has become very siloed. In terms of the immigration rates that are happening with such audacity right now, where do trans people stand? Where is your community feeling this? And are you able to track what is really going on?

QWEEN JEAN: This question comes at a great time. There is little information that is being really shared, the truth. Ultimately, we know that a lot of trans and queer people, especially here in New York City, that are asylum seekers that have had to leave other countries from persecution now find themselves in a place of purgatory. We have community members, trans and queer folks that are afraid to leave their homes, that are afraid to have gone to work. They can't even go to get a hormone shot because they're afraid, what if ICE is literally outside waiting for us? People are terrified to go to their court dates because of what footage that has been released. Brad Lander, a duly elected city leader, was tackled and violated by ICE agents because he was

questioning if they could present a warrant before they took away his constituent. He was holding onto his constituent, right? To bear witness to the process. And so these are the things that our LGBTQI community members who are in this very, very vulnerable place, have no line of support because ultimately they are already targeted, right? Because we're targeted for our existence. But literally in this moment, people are terrified to leave their homes. And the lawyers, and you know, we understand that there's a sanctuary status in New York City, but the powers that be, unfortunately, the current administration, I'll say that, they have ushered in and opened the door for ICE agents and the Homeland Security to desecrate and to attack anyone that they deem will help to build their 3,000 weekly arrest quota.

LAURA FLANDERS: We mentioned the Skrametti case at the beginning of this conversation, and that was a case brought by Tennessee parents. Parents of trans kids who have now been deemed unworthy of care and denied that care in Tennessee. This is a Supreme Court precedent now that people will be feeling all across the country. What's your advice to those folks, not just in Tennessee, but in this country as a whole, who care, who have trans members in their family, who may be trans themselves, who wanna know what they can do?

QWEEN JEAN: I've been thinking about this all morning and just, you know, in about an hour we'll be taking to the streets with our community in solidarity with the families in Tennessee, but mostly, and concurrently to help send a message to everyone in this nation that the system will try and, you know, in this moment have aimed to de-legitimize an entire group of people. And if we cannot recognize that this is a pipeline towards destruction, we have seen this happen in the '50s, in the '60s, in the '70s, right? Where we identify a group of people as unfit, unworthy. And so we know that this attack on healthcare is truly a way for them to deny healthcare for all transgender people in this country. And we have seen it happen before in the past and it feels deeply heartbreaking that we are witnessing this happen again.

LAURA FLANDERS: It does seem historically true and repetitive that in moments of crisis, people shrink their population. Shrink their group identity, thinking that maybe they can protect themselves if they get smaller. So we'll just worry about people here. We'll just worry about people like us. We'll just get our laws in place, everything you've just described. What does the story of Marsha tell us about that as a strategy, particularly in a moment right now where there are a lot of people- We just saw Pete Buttigieg take his pronouns out of his, out of his resume, and we've seen Gavin Newsom kind of running away from trans rights in sports. This is a moment where we are in a very frightening time for a lot of people, and perhaps they too are feeling a tendency to just shrink a bit. You describe beautifully a scene where people come off the bus at Port Authority or Times Square and they see an invitation to a certain kind of freedom. All sorts of people. And seeing Marsha P. Johnson, saw an invitation to a certain kind of freedom. And I guess my question to you in all of this is, A, what's changed you in doing this

research about Marsha and producing this book? And B, what are you seeing as her invitation to others who might not think that they're part of this community?

TOURMALINE: One thing is you can't get small enough to make an insecure population feel stable, right? You can't shrink your life to make anyone who is looking for the reason why they are in a hard situation feel better. It's just not gonna happen. And so Marsha's lesson is actually what we need to do, the thing that gets us to the solution side of the wave rather than the problem side of the wave is be fully alive, right? Turn the volume up on our lives. And Marsha's life was an invitation to do that. Like I said before, she wasn't slapping happy face stickers on the harsh conditions. She was using those as launching pads to dream beyond what is and ought to and into what ought to be. Qween Jean was at NYU, Marsha took over NYU, right? There's a real powerful connection between Marsha P. Johnson and Qween Jean. Marsha was in the basement of the student center in occupation in September of 1970, dreaming up a world where there was literally free childcare, alongside free tuition for universities, alongside gender affirming care, alongside not being held in places of incarceration. And so Marsha's freedom dreaming message is profound and so relevant. She's an architect of a movement that's never been more alive. But all of that starts with our determination to turn up the volume of our life and be all of who we are, right? To revel in that. When I talk about joy, I like to remind myself, there's no hierarchy, right? It's not better emotion to feel joy and a worse emotion to feel anger or despair. It's all part of the path. And so, you know, just like when you're in a place of fear, an easy place to get relief is righteous indignation and anger and coming together in the midst of a mess of a thing. Marsha knew she had the best clarity in her joy. She had the greatest access to resources to change a problem into a solution in her clarity and in her joy. And so she did that throughout her life. And I think that's an open invitation for all of us to be reveling in what we are defending. What are we fighting for? What is this community about? And I'm so excited to be here and, you know, talking to the legendary Qween Jean who is day by day, by day, by day, embodying that legacy.

LAURA FLANDERS: Is it true you have Marsha's face on your shoulder, Tourmaline?

TOURMALINE: Yeah, on my heart, I'm sorry, right here.

LAURA FLANDERS: Oh, beautiful, beautiful. We are at time. We could continue this conversation, and I hope that we will, but we are at time, and I need to ask you both the question that I ask all of our guests at the end of our episodes, which is, what do you think is the story the future will tell of this moment?

QWEEN JEAN: The future will say that there was a uprising, a resurgence of people who said that they will no longer have to audition for empathy, and that society will respect by any means necessary. And that means that we will demonstrate, we will agitate, we will educate, and we will organize so that we have what we need to survive. And as a people, we will have done it, but

in the past, our ancestors have done it and we will continue to model that forward, because what I know to be true is that I desire to have freedom and liberation in this lifetime. I would love to breathe it in air, right? I can smell the aroma of liberation, and I smell it and I feel it every time I'm with my community, I'm with my people, we are truly in deep, deep joy, right? As Tourmaline has beautifully, powerfully articulated, we are in this place where we feel so powerful and unstoppable. And that is what I believe this future, oh my God, the people are calling me now, it's time to go. But that is what I believe that I hope that people will say about this moment in particular.

TOURMALINE: I think that the future will tell that we were, found ourselves yet again in the midst of a mess of a thing with undeniably harsh conditions and yet we tuned to our profound knowing that we can turn out a problem into a solution by coming together and reveling with each other, by moving in clarity, by getting the solutions together and by demanding the world understand that we're powerful people, we're beautiful people, and we deserve to be fully alive.

LAURA FLANDERS: Tourmaline, the book is "Marsha: The Joy and Defiance of Marsha P. Johnson". It is out now. Thanks for joining us.

*For more on this episode and other forward-thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast. It's all at [lauraflanders.org](http://lauraflanders.org)*