

Exhibit to commemorate Miles Saal's art and promote advocacy for mental health awareness in the Pittsburgh African American arts community

By [Alex Gordon](#)



Miles Saal

Corrine Jasmin

Instagram and Twitter, eventually developing an "internet friendship."

His drawing style was hard to forget and easy to recognize; other folks took notice. Around the time Jasmin was introduced to Miles' work, it was starting to be shared more and more online, on album covers for Benji. and Mars Jackson, in commissioned work, in affectionate portraits of his friends and collaborators drawn on coffee sleeves. Then Jasmin, a poet, author, and artist, had the opportunity to meet Miles at an event at the Flow Lounge where he was showing his work. They connected and she was drawn into his world, a network of artists and friends where Miles was always looking to help people connect and collaborate. He was a brilliant illustrator and gifted musician, but he had a special knack for recognizing kindred spirits, and getting them in the same room to create something new. He liked to bring people together.

In November of 2017, after struggling with depression for years, Miles Saal took his own life at the age of 21. It was a shock to the community and, in the wake of the loss, many of his friends and collaborators were left to confront their own struggles with mental health and wonder what they could be doing to take better care of themselves and their friends and family. For Jasmin, it was a brutal loss but also a wakeup call, eventually leading her to be more honest with herself and to be more willing to ask for help when she needed it.

This pivot in Jasmin's thinking about her mental health is something Miles' family hopes to inspire more of with a new program called The Yung Mulatto Project, launching at the August Wilson African American Cultural Center on Sun., Oct. 13. With support from a grant from the Advancing Black Arts In Pittsburgh Program (a joint program between The Pittsburgh Foundation and The Heinz Endowments), The Yung Mulatto project will promote "advocacy for mental health awareness in the Pittsburgh African American arts community with a collaborative art mural workshop and open discussion forum."

The event will commemorate Miles' work with an exhibit and catalogue of his illustrations, and feature musical performances and readings from Jasmin, livefromthecity, Alona Williams, Shakara Wright, Clara Kent, deejay aesthetics, and Miles' musical mentor David Eggar. This event will provide Miles'

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community with a chance to celebrate his work and life, and encourage more open attitudes about mental health treatment, but the goal of the project goes beyond a single event.

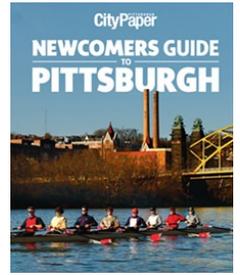
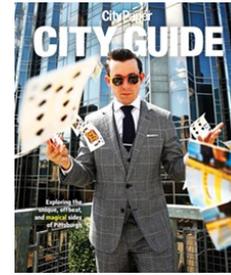
"One of my pet peeves — particularly in 'underserved' communities, African-American communities — is that you'll have this big outreach event during a cancer screening and whatnot and it's just for the day," says Dr. Felicia Snead, Miles' mother and a radiation oncologist. "Then you do it and what happens? There's no follow-up. No follow-through. That's why it was really important for this event that the mental health forum group continues through the year, after the event is over to be an ongoing resource for our community."

The Yung Mulatto Project is focused on keeping the conversation open and ongoing. Snead and her husband Jimmy Saal experienced firsthand how hard it was to get Miles the help he needed over the years. But it can be especially hard for the younger, African-American artists in Miles' community to find the resources they need, to learn how to navigate insurance, and find inexpensive or free treatment; these are the people they want to reach.

"After his death, a lot of his friends and colleagues, some we knew and some we didn't know about, just reached out to us and shared their stories and their struggles with mental illness, or just knowing what to do and how to help each other," says Snead. "They stated that we talk about our mental health challenges all the time but what we'd really like to know is to learn some skills and have resources to better support one another as well as ourselves."

The program started after a group called Leading Education and Awareness for Depression (LEAD) reached out to Snead and Jimmy Saal to offer support for a potential collaboration, and helped them connect with the proper professionals to get the project started. Snead and Saal then created The Blackout on Mental Health, a group of "professionals created specifically for mental health outreach programming for The Yung Mulatto Project" that will have its debut at Sunday's event.

In addition to the performances, there will be a collaborative art mural activity led by an art therapist, a nod to Miles' way of dealing with pain through art. Guests will also have an opportunity to see never-before-seen



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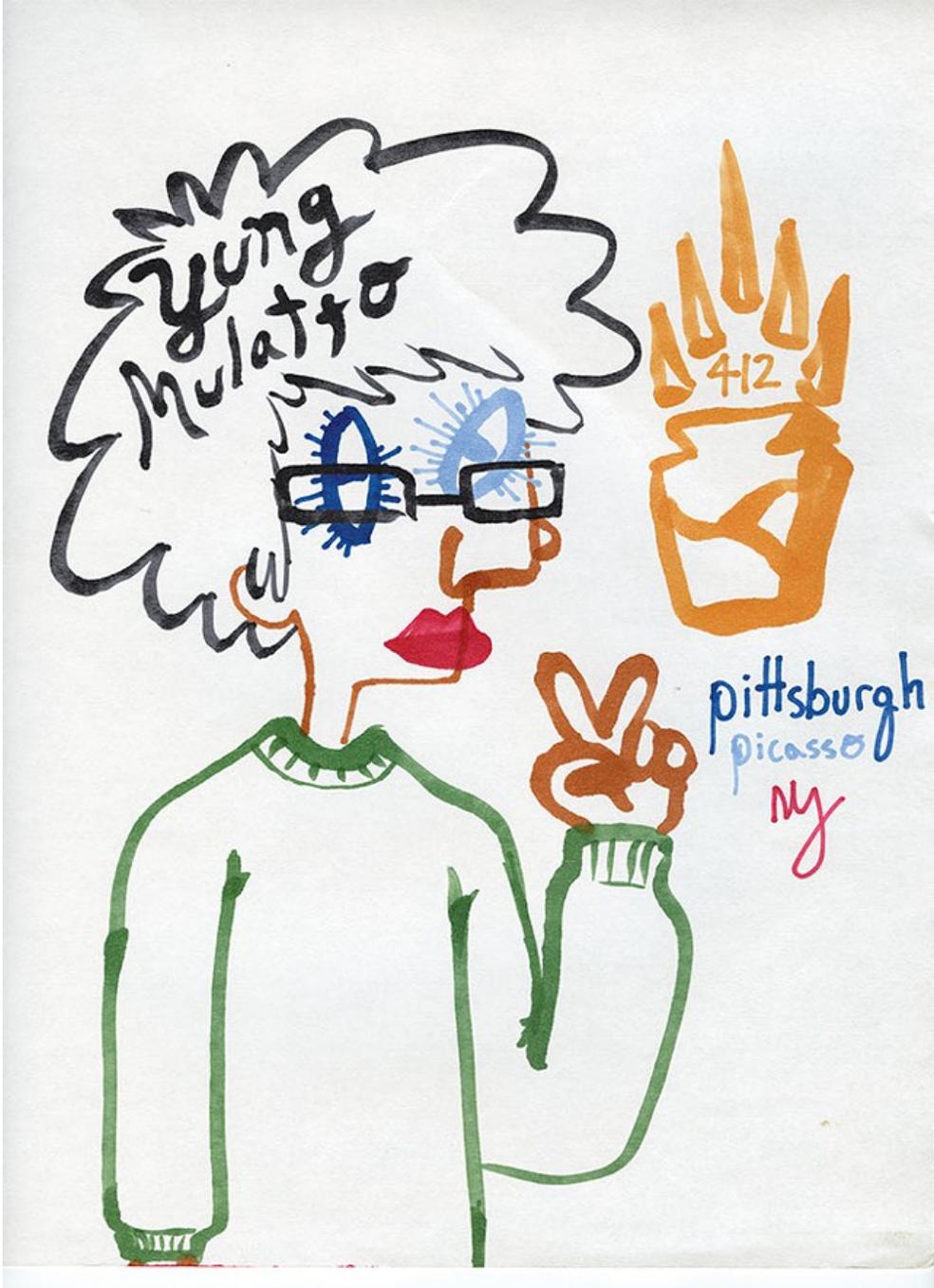
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illustrations found in the aftermath of Miles' death. While the pieces cover a lot of ground, it was important to Snead to include works in which Miles acknowledged his mental health struggles, as a way to underline the message of the show, to encourage people to be open about their pain.



Courtesy of Jimmy Saal

Illustration by Miles Saal

Pittsburgh City Paper spoke with a number of Miles' friends and collaborators, including livefromthecity, musician and family friend Herman "Soy Sos" Pearl, Eggar, Jasmin, and Kilolo Lockett, a family friend and curatorial consultant at August Wilson Center (she is in a volunteer capacity for this event). Though they all connected with Miles in different ways, each painted a similar picture of a deeply kind, curious, smart young man with an exciting, fulfilling life on the horizon. They're all processing it in different ways.

For Jasmin, the two years since Miles' death have been challenging, though not without creation and growth. She threw herself into her work and wrote a book of poems, including one called "A Prayer for Miles Saal," which she'll read at Sunday's event. She's still working through her own struggles with mental health, but speaking about them more publicly. Her new mindset is to "bring light to being honest, being open, allowing people the space and energy to be open."

In the meantime, she's been thinking about one of her favorite memories of Miles. It was early on in their friendship, the first time they'd ever hung out alone, and Jasmin brought over a camera with a roll of black-and-white film to play around with. Miles showed her his room, which was littered with those coffee-sleeve drawings; they hung out on the porch; they drank tea and talked a lot; and Jasmin took pictures.

When the roll was developed, Jasmin was overwhelmed by the beauty and vulnerability in Miles' face. In the photos, he is unguarded and candid, and the ease between the two is palpable. The images have the same abstract sense of affection that Miles imbued in his illustrated portraits, the way his choice of a line or color or detail could communicate that he really understood these people and saw something in them that he liked.

After months of keeping most of the photos to herself, Jasmin has begun to share them, first in an altar for Miles during her show at BOOM Concepts, and with *City Paper* for this story, and finally available at this weekend's event. It's her way of embracing the Yung Mulatto Project's spirit of openness and celebrating Miles' memory.

"[Miles'] energy is still in the air. There are so many people that have become friends because of his passing. The community, it could use some work, but he left his mark on [it]," says Jasmin.

"He started a movement."



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