



LOVE OUR COVER?
BUY THE T-SHIRT!

MERCH

Arts

News

Miles' Masterpiece: Depression Led A Gifted Artist To Take His Own Life In 2017. Now, His Legacy May Very Well Save Others From The Same Fate

By Charlie Deitch | October 1, 2019 | 2 Comments

By

Miles Saal self-portrait

Charlie Deitch

Pittsburgh Current Editor

charlie@pittsburghcurrent.com

Miles Saal, AKA Yung Mulatto, was just 21 years, two months old when, in the grip of severe depression, he took his own life a week after Thanksgiving 2017.

When you talk to Saal's family and friends, you get a strong sense of the kind of son, friend and artist he was. But, If you want to get a complete picture of Miles Saal's life, or more accurately, what he was going through at what was probably the apex of his condition, you have to take a journey into his prolific art portfolio.

After Saal died, his parents, Dr. Felicia Snead and Jimmy Saal, found an apartment full of drawings. There were self-portraits, drawings of friends, album covers he's done for several musicians, and thousands of others ranging from several doodles on one page to fully completed works. But there's one, in particular, that tells Miles' story from his own point of view

The piece is called "2 Miles" and it's two self-portraits of Miles Saal. One is drawn in full vibrant color and the first Miles is confident and talented saying things like, "People seem to really like my art!" "I've got real talent!" "I've got lots of friends that love me and I love them!"

The second Miles is brooding, drawn in black and white except for a light-blue tint to his face. This Miles Saal is hard on himself to say the least. "Everyone is just pretending to like you," "no talent faker," "Maybe if you weren't so stupid ...," "the world would be better off if I was never born."

This image, which the *Current* agreed not to publish, shows the internal struggle with the depression that Miles Saal dealt with every day. A struggle, despite having so many people in life, ultimately fought alone. It's been nearly two years since Saal passed away and his mother wants to use Miles' story to hopefully prevent others from going down the same path. That's the priority of the "Yung Mulatto Project."

"This project has two main goals," says Snead, a radiation oncologist with UPMC Cancer Centers. "To celebrate and be a memorial for Miles and his work and to be a conduit to talk about depression and mental illness.

"After Miles passed, a lot of his friends and other artists who knew what happened to him started coming out and talking about the hard time they've had dealing with their own mental health issues; a lot of them didn't know where to go for help. This needs to be part of the national conversation."

The Yung Mulatto Project kicks off Oct. 13 with an opening event at the August Wilson African American Cultural Center. The event will feature an open forum to discuss mental health issues as well as performances and exhibits by other artists that Saal Collaborated with including Clara Kent, LiveFromTheCity, Alona Williams, Corrine Jasmin and deejay aesthetics. An exhibit, "The Selected Works of Miles Saal" will be on display at the August Wilson Center through Dec. 8. The project is funded by the Advancing Black Arts in Pittsburgh Program, a partnership of The Pittsburgh Foundation and The Heinz Endowments.

Snead is also partnering with Pittsburgh organization, Leading Education and Awareness for Depression (LEAD). Lead is running the open forum

portion of the event. One of the main focuses of the project will be how mental health issues are handled by medical professionals.

“What makes you so angry and frustrated is how depression and mental health are handled in the medical community,” Snead says. “It’s hard to find a therapist, half the time they don’t take your insurance and they’re not accessible.

“This is a real disease ... and it needs to be treated. If you have cancer, you don’t hesitate to get treatment. This is the same thing because it will get worse if it’s not treated. We need to learn to speak to our loved ones gently and effectively to help them get treatment.”

Miles Saal began playing the piano at the age of six. He and his parents lived in Jacksonville, Florida until Miles senior year in high school. In Jacksonville, he played in the youth symphony and was a good student until his junior year of high school. Snead says her son was introverted and artistic and his grades started to suffer. They had him evaluated and his parents were told he was gifted and had a very high IQ. Maybe, doctors would surmise, he had attention deficit disorder. A lot of children battling depression and mental health issues are often misdiagnosed as having ADHD. Miles was put on medicine for ADHD, but it, of course, didn’t help.

Jacksonville wasn’t a very diverse place, Snead says. And Miles, whose mother is black and father is white, was bullied. The family would move to Pittsburgh before his senior year, where he attended CAPA High School.

Florida wasn’t only tough on Miles Saal. After moving to Pittsburgh, Snead sought out therapy and it was who therapist who first suggested that Miles

Saal may be suffering from depression. Miles Saal became difficult to communicate with, he was lashing out at his family, his parents and his younger brother. After CAPA, Miles Saal went to IUP to study music and, later, film. Once he came home, he would see his family at least once a week, but communication was still difficult. While communication between father and son was somewhat better, Snead says it became even harder for she and Miles to communicate.

It was around this time when Miles' engagement with visual arts grew. His family knew he was having success as an artist, but he was still battling severe depression. Then in 2017, Miles agreed to seek treatment. While he wasn't on medication, he was in therapy. By the time Thanksgiving rolled around, Snead says Miles seemed like he was doing so much better.

"It was one of the best days we'd had in a long time. He was selling his artwork and making a reasonable living as an artist. I told him how proud I was of him and how much I loved him. He was doing what he loved and he was doing it well," she says with a quickly fading smile. "I thought we were turning a corner. But then, a week later, we got the call from his roommate that Miles had passed."

Snead trails off and stops speaking. She stares at the table and begins to softly cry before saying, "My heart ... is just broken."

That broken heart has led her to this point. She wants the Yung Mulatto Project to initiate conversations between family members and friends. She wants to see change in the way mental illness is handled in our healthcare system.

“It’s impossible to get any information on what’s going on with your own family members; your own children,” she says. “We should be helping our loved ones, helping to facilitate their treatment. I’m a cancer doctor. When someone is diagnosed, the first thing we do is ask, who can we call. We spend so much time with family members making sure they are involved in every aspect of their care. Everyone buys in and hard work is done by the patient and their team. How can someone seeking help for depression buy in to treatment if they have to do it in isolation.

“After he was gone, we found out how influential he was as an artist,” she says. He produced quite a few songs for local artists, he created album covers, he did graphic design work. He tried to uplift and shine a light on other people. I’m definitely a proud mom of who he had become.”

It wouldn’t be fair to the memory of Miles Saal to end the story here. Yes, the young man met a tragic end, but in his very short time on earth, he made a difference to those around him. Yes, he was a good guy, gifted artist, talented musician. But in the three or four years before he passed, he was probably the most influential person in Pittsburgh’s music scene that you’ve never heard of.

Felicia Snead and Jimmy Saal knew their son was a talented artist, but they soon found out that he worked with and was an influence on many people in the Pittsburgh music scene.

One of those musicians/artists was singer/songwriter and visual artist Clara Kent. Kent and Saal lived close to each other in Garfield, but she didn’t know it for quite awhile.

"I actually saw Miles' art before I ever met him," Kent says. "At that time, there were a lot of venues popping up and people were performing and showing their art. I saw his art at [an event] and thought, 'man, this is really kinda dope, I hope I run into him,'" she says. Little did she know, she saw him several times a week hanging out on Penn Avenue at places like Roboto. "I started seeing this kid with an afro and a head wrap. I'd see him everywhere. He was always drawing.

I later found out that was Miles, and I'd seen him a lot around the neighborhood."

Kent says Saal wore a lot of different hats and "he would attract people to him because he had all of these different energies around him. I knew he could draw and then I found out about his music and I was like, "You do beats too!" Kent says Saal collaborated with a ton of artists like Mars Jackson, Benji (Saal did his first album cover) and Sierra Sellers to name just a few.

"He was so humble and sweet. His gift was he was able to stand back, take everything in and represent what was going on in his art," she says. "We were really building a great friendship. It breaks my heart to this day that he's gone. There just seemed to be so much ahead. It hurts that he's not here, but he accomplished so much in such a short time.

"He was the music-scene historian. He knew about everybody and he'd spread the word to everybody else about who they should be checking out. He was the invisible thread that connected the whole thing."

Hip-hop artist Mars Jackson agrees. He says Miles had an uncanny ability to

spot future talent. He would go to shows and then, through his art and social media, broadcast what he seeing to everyone else.

“In fact, I met Miles after he tagged me in a picture he drew of me and a couple of other prominent folks in the hip-hop community,” Jackson says, “He had such a big heart, that’s what got to me. He was always sharing his art.

Jackson says some people might not realize how influential Miles Saal was. In 2015 when Jackson met Miles, for most people the hip-hop scene was Mac and Wiz. “Nobody knew that anything else was even building in the community, not even Mac and Wiz,” Jackson says.

“Miles knew. Man, that boy was nice,” Jackson says. “He was at every show. He would draw us on those coffee cup jackets, tag us on social media. He knew back then that the people he was seeing were the next Mac and Wiz. People like me, Benji, Clara Kent, Sierra Sellers, and a bunch of others. He would call up different publications and yell at them about who to cover!

“He connected this community. It was scary how in tune he was to what was coming next,” Jackson says. “I can’t even imagine how far he would have gone. No ceilings. In fact, there is no doubt in my mind that Miles would be traveling the world by now.

“I told you, that boy was nice.”



Charlie Deitch

WATCH PITTSBURGH WRESTLING!

INDYWRESTLING.US NETWORK

\$5.99
Per Month

FREE 7 DAY TRIAL!

IWC INTERNATIONAL WRESTLING CARNIVAL
RYSE PRO WRESTLING
RWA
2PW PRO WRESTLING



**Want the
Current
delivered
right to
your door?
SUBSCRIBE
NOW!**

**6-months for \$75
1-year for \$150**

Contact
bethany@pittsburghcurrent.com
for more info!



**CLICK HERE
to place
your ad**

Real Estate

Recruitment

Goods & Services

Adult

**BOOK YOUR AD
TODAY!**

andrea@pittsburghcurrent.com



Pittsburgh
Arts &
Lectures

Inspiring creativity
and a passion for
the literary arts.

pittsburghlectures.org

Submit An Event

Want your event listed for FREE in print and online editions of the current?

Fill out the form below completely. The Pittsburgh Current will run your event online and, as space provides, in our print edition.

Your Name (required)

Your Email (required)

Your Phone (required)

Event Name

Event Date

Event Time

Event Description

Submit

*All listings are subject to editors approval and availability of space

Recommended For You

News

Jim Krenn, No Restrictions: The team heads to Castle Blood with Ghosts N'at



Bethany Ruhe

October 6, 2019

Inside Kennywood's Newest Fright Nights Attractions



Jake Mysliwczyk

October 4, 2019

Arts

Strange Negotiations, showing Saturday at the Regent Square Theater, follows the career and faith journey of Pedro the Lion's David Bazan



Margaret Welsh

October 2, 2019

2 Comments



Monica

October 1, 2019 at 12:17 pm

I miss this man every day.

↳ Reply



Heather

October 1, 2019 at 3:07 pm

Oh, Miles... if you only knew how much you were loved and how big of an impact you left on everyone around you. We love you.

<3

↳ Reply

Leave a Reply

My comment is..

Name *

Email *

Website

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

Submit Comment



LOVE OUR COVER?
BUY THE T-SHIRT!

MERCH

Contact Us Here.

Copyright © 2019 PittsburghCurrent.com.

All rights reserved.

1Brand Design Studios Chicago.

