Radiant Baby

February 1, 2001 By James Servin

Using Day-Glo paints, felt-tip pens, city sidewalks and his own bad-boy but beguiling imagination, Haring made his name as the '80s top street artist -- while rarely naming his work. But fame was bittersweet. "My friends are dropping like flies," he wrote in his Journals *(Viking Penguin, 1996). "Work is all I have, and art is more important than life."*

When Keith Haring revealed in a 1989 *Rolling Stone* interview that he had HIV, a ripple of shock hit not only the pop-culture enthusiasts who loved his inspired squiggles in New York City's subways and art galleries, but even those fellow artists and members of the gay community who knew of his status: Back then, most public figures were still deep in the closet about being queer, let alone positive -- you only learned about that in their obituary. Haring's announcement made him unique. The *Rolling Stone* news prompted more press and a command from my editor at the short-lived downtown weekly *7 Days* to interview Haring. Faxes to his rep proved futile: Haring had said all he had to say on the subject. Instead, he launched a one-man safe-sex t-shirt campaign, protested Mayor Ed Koch's AIDS policy, joined a kiss-in at St. Vincent's Hospital, stormed St. Patrick's Cathedral with ACT UP and danced until dawn at Paradise Garage. On February 17, 1990, my editor called to tell me that Haring, age 31, had died the night before. "People will talk to you now," he said. "Get on a bus to his hometown." I had no contacts in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, but talking around, I met his old friends and eventually his mother. I most remember being greeted at the door of the Harings' home by Zoe, the family German shepherd with a deafening bark. I smile when I see Haring's famous barking-dog drawing today. It's a reminder that his images are not idle fantasies, but connected to what was alive and real around him. Haring was the conduit between the street and the angels, zapping UFOs and radiant babies, monstrous contortions and wacky genitalia. His was less a vision than a groove, a tribal interplay of constantly unfolding experiences. I think of him often, especially on the dance floor.

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