Sidedoor Season 3, Episode 9: This Color Is Who I Am

Haleema Shah: Just a quick warning. This episode contains mature themes that might not be appropriate for all ages.

[INTRO MUSIC]

HS: This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Haleema Shah. We're going back to the early 1970s. New York City. A 16 year old kid from Greensboro, South Carolina has just arrived in New York...to chase his dream of becoming a professional dancer. His name is Frank Holliday, and here is how he remembers Manhattan's East Village.

Frank Holliday: There was nothing. I mean, it was burnout buildings, and it was like blocks that were just like fallen down and abandoned. You kept twenty dollars in your pocket for the mugger, and the rest of the money in your shoe, because you were going to get held up.

HS: New York was a whole different world for a young gay kid from South Carolina. During his early time in the city, where he still lives today, Frank accidentally stumbled into one of its earliest gay pride parades.

FH: I just kind of walked up Fifth Avenue with these people. And into the meadow and all these like lesbians with like curly hair, you know, "Ahhh!"

HS: He worked for Andy Warhol.

FH: I went to the opening of Studio 54.

HS: And he used to party with Madonna.

FH: It was a very busy time.

HS: Frank was in the city to chase his dream of starting a career in professional dance. But that career derailed before it could start...by an acid trip in a museum.

FH: So my friend Andy Rees, who was also a dancer, he gave me LSD one day and took me to Museum of Modern Art. And I had never seen modern art. And It was all of modern art happened that day for me. And I quit dancing the next day, and I said, 'No, I went to the MoMA, and I knew that's what I had to do.'

HS: But what makes Frank's story amazing, and important, is that this odyssey puts him in the middle of the New York arts scene and gay community...which became the epicenter of
America’s AIDS crisis in the 1980s. So this time on Sidedoor, we’ll meet Frank Holliday, and get a glimpse into the life of an artist in the center of an epidemic.

[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: After Frank Holliday quit dance he was a little directionless. But, with some parental encouragement, Frank found his way to New York’s School of Visual Arts.

Frank Holliday: I got a lot of support at School of Visual Arts. From the painters, they saw talent in me that I didn't even see.

HS: And we have Frank telling us all of this because of an oral history collection by the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. The project is called "Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic." As part of this collection, the Archives’ team interviewed 40 artists who lived through the terror of the early AIDS Epidemic. Here’s Liza Zapol, who manages the collection.

Liza Zapol: The people we interviewed continued to live their lives as artists, art workers, and many people are living on carrying the responsibility of the memories of those we lost. Um, so in some sense you could say it's a memorial project, but yet it’s also much more than that.

HS: The Archives is a repository of artifacts – letters, photos, and other documents – that help future historians, as well as the public, decode the lives of artists. It uses oral history, which is the act of gathering first-person stories, to let the artists tell us about their worlds.

LZ: It allows people to talk about their work and define themselves so they’re not being defined by anyone else or a critic or art history writ large. They’re speaking about themselves in their own terms.

HS: And Frank Holliday is one of those people. Here’s what he told the archives in his oral history interview: seven hours of storytelling, done over a two-day period. And Frank’s interview with the Archives was so raw and so personal, that we didn’t want to ask him to do it again. So, Frank said that the teachers at the School of Visual Arts gave him a lot of support. But even more important than that, he met the people who became his best friends, his artistic inspiration, and…his rivals.

FH: I mean that's where I met Keith Haring and Kenny Sharf, and all these people were there. It was an incredible group of people.

[MUSIC]

HS: Frank Holliday and his classmate Keith Haring really clicked. And with this crew of artist friends they ran all around the city, and made art wherever they could, including a lot of graffiti. But what they really wanted was a space to show off their work, collaborate with their friends…and to party a little too. And they found their answer in the basement of a Polish
Church. They called it ‘Club 57.’ Frank says that they got their inspiration for the name from Studio 54. And it sounded a lot cooler than ‘This church basement we rent.’

FH: We rented it for 25 dollars a night.

HS: Just a note, in this clip you’ll hear the voice of the oral historian doing the interview, Ted Kerr. They spoke in Frank’s studio. Tedd’s also a community organizer, an artist and he’s spent years studying the art around the early HIV-AIDS epidemic.

Ted Kerr (on tape): Twenty-five dollars a night, and how would you get the money for that?

FH: We would charge admission. [Laughs] Keith Haring and I had our first shows together, me and Keith, and we’d charge 50 cents to get in. I mean, Keith and I. [Laughs] Yeah, and I remember somebody coming out of the doors and saying, ’That sucked!’ and I said, ‘Here's your 50 cents back, now get out of here!’ [Laughs]

HS: At the time, Frank’s art was…kind of intense. Here’s Liza Zapol again, talking about one of Frank’s works from the time, called “Black Mirror.”

LZ: I think Frank was trying to make what he calls a ‘vampire mirror.’

HS: The way Frank describes it, it’s a mirror, covered in wax that’s been mixed with black powder to make the viewer invisible.

LZ: So he's looking at a mirror and not being able to see a reflection or see himself. It's a bit punk. It's a bit annihilistic, as Frank says, and it's very dark.

HS: But Frank experimented with a lot of different artistic formats.

LZ: I think he was finding himself. He was working in performance and film and theater. In music, had a fake rock group called the Youth Against Death. He’s experimenting in a lot of different ways with his work.

HS: Club 57 was Frank and his friends’ way of saying, ‘Your SoHo art galleries don’t want us? Fine. We’ll make our own gallery down here, in this church basement.’ Club 57 gave Frank and his friends the creative freedom they needed.

[MUSIC]

FH: There were no limits, there was no consequence. We were bad boys, and we were getting famous for it. For, you know, a couple of years there was no hierarchy, and there was no…nobody was doing it for money. We were doing it because, it was like kids playing in the basement.
HS: So try to imagine that. Frank was enjoying life, doing what he loved. None of his friends were making money from their art, but life was cheap. They were running around the East Village between 1977 and 1980, at a time when it wasn’t glamorous. But then all of a sudden, the world showed up.

FH: Our generation never really had an identity.

TK (on tape): Hm.

FH: There was the X-Generation. There were the punks. We weren't the punks, we weren't hippies. You know, we were looking for an identity, and who knew we would be the identity of that time? And then the outside world comes in, you know, something hot goes on and everybody's like ‘Whoa! We want a piece of it.’

HS: Unfortunately for Frank, it was Keith Haring they were after. If you don’t know who Keith Haring is, he’s a big deal in ’80s art circles, and his work is still really popular today. Here’s oral historian Ted Kerr again.

Ted Kerr: Keith Haring is probably best known for the colorful and strong line drawings that he did. Most often people would see it now on clothing or as tattoos.

HS: Haring’s work is probably still familiar to most people today. And it's just a little more cheerful than Frank’s "Black Mirror."

TK: Just imagine like a circle for a head, a block for a body and rectangles for an arm, and then movement lines to suggest that dancing is happening.

HS: Like boxy stick figures, gyrating to an invisible beat.

TK: And think about primary yellow and primary red and primary blue and green. And put all of that in a 1980s kind of like city landscape, and then you have some sense of who Keith Haring was.

FH: I just knew that he was a genius and I knew that he had hit it. And it…I was used to being the star—I was the pretty one! [Laughs.] You know, it was kind of a shocking thing, like, 'Oh my God, Frank — you are not the star of this show.'

HS: There were some musical acts who performed at Club 57, like Madonna, Cyndi Lauper and RuPaul. All of these people passed through Frank’s world and got famous. He felt left out. But as 1980 turned into 1981, something else started to happen. Something much bigger than the fame lifting Frank Holliday’s friends out of his orbit. It was the HIV-AIDS epidemic.

[MUSIC]
FH: It was scary and people, like, you know went into—it was kind of like Club 57 and that whole scene it was like a bomb went off and everybody just like—and then we would come together for, we didn't know what to do, we were children! We were children and our dreams were—there was a monster in the house. And we don't know where it is. It was scary. Because it was, it totally changed everything.

HS: But at the time, there was no name for the illness, no expectation of how it would progress, and definitely no understanding of who would get it next. Here's Ted Kerr interviewing Frank Holliday.

FH: I mean, we were dying and we didn't know what was happening.

TK (on tape): When was the first time you like even heard or caught wind of something like that HIV was happening?

FH: Gay cancer? I read an article. Henry Post, he was my boyfriend. And I really loved Henry. It was, I think, 1982 or 1983.

HS: Henry Post was an editor at New York Magazine.

FH: And he was, like, number 37, you know, AIDS person. He was the first person that I know that died.

HS: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that 42 thousand people were living with HIV in 1981. But by 1986 nearly a half million people had the virus. And the number of new infections—and people dying—continued to skyrocket through the '80s and early '90s. It disproportionately affected gay men. Ted Kerr says that it's really hard to translate how widespread the impact of the epidemic was to Frank Holliday and his friends.

HS (on tape): Can you give me an example of how this was touching everyone's lives?

TK: I mean, this is one of those hard questions. It's difficult to answer because I would hate to suggest that there's a monolithic experience of HIV AIDS. Everyone dealt with it differently. Activists definitely were experiencing death and funerals on a weekly, if not every second day kind of basis.

HS: Frank still made art during this time, but, it very understandably did not hold his focus.

FH: I planned on dying pretty young. I was pretty much counting on it. I think from the very beginning of 1982, I knew that—I mean, I was, like, I mean, I was—knew all the people that were dying—[laughs]—and I had slept with all of them. So, it was—and then there wasn't a test and I was just so afraid. I was afraid of...I was just so afraid. It scared me.

HS: There's a time in the 1980s where Frank says he 'broke up with art' in the middle of all this heartbreak.
TK: Frank himself, is at times super clear when he talks about this time, but at other times is understandably protective. I think this was a time shrouded in a lot of fear, and we know that he begins to question his commitment to art and his whole way of life.

HS: By 1989, HIV-AIDS was the leading cause of death in men between 25 and 44 years old. Homophobia, fear and lack of research left people living with HIV stranded with little to no options. Keith Haring died in 1990, when he was just 31.

[MUSIC]

HS: In 1996, Frank’s worries about his own health were confirmed. He was traveling for work when he came down with what felt like the flu.

FH: I went to the hospital and they told me to take some aspirin. I came back in the hotel room and then I was so sick, and I woke up, like, naked in the corner two days later.

HS: Frank had been around HIV enough. He knew the signs. Here’s what he told Ted.

FH: So, I kind of thought— the shock of it, like, okay, I know I have it. And then I knew I was going to die. And so, I decided—my first thought was, 'I don't want to cause anybody a hassle of having to transport my body to Greensboro. So, what I'll do is I'll fly home and I'll die at home.'

HS: When he got back to Greensboro, his sister took him to the hospital. He was quarantined, cordonned off under fluorescent lights and strapped to an oxygen machine. One night, amid drips and beeps in the Intensive Care Unit, and lots of testing...the Tony Awards came on.

HS: And I was looking at the Tonys and all of the sudden, these three doctors come in, like, in their quarantine space suits, like hazmat suits. And they're like, 'Mr. Holliday?' And I was like, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.' 'We need to talk to you.' And I'm like, 'Wait, wait, wait, wait. Liza's on!' [laughter]

HS: Frank’s talking, of course, about Liza Minelli.

FH: And then they ask me, 'Mr. Holliday, are you a homosexual?' And I went, 'Liza's on.' [laughter] I mean... really? And I was like, 'Yeah!' And they said, 'Well, you know, we think you have AIDS.'

HS: Doctors said there was nothing they could do for him. He had three months to live. So he went back to his mother's house where Frank prepared to die. He hadn't even turned 40 yet. And then one day...

FH: Then I come home and I remember my older sister, Lynn, bringing me an article. That article with Dr. Ho.
HS: The article promised a treatment, not a cure, developed by one of the world’s top AIDS researchers.

FH: It said we found drugs.

HS: Frank called a friend who worked for a prominent AIDS researcher in New York.

FH: And he said, ‘Frank, get out of there. You're not going to die. Get your ass back to New York.’

[MUSIC]

FS: Coming up next, we’ll hear about how Frank Holliday’s brush with death helped him heal, and find success in his art.

[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: So before the break, Frank Holliday found out that he had AIDS.

[MUSIC]

HS: Soon after, though, he got access to life-saving drugs. But even with a new lease on life, Frank was still struggling, this time internally.

Ted Kerr: The world changed in 1996 when highly active antiretroviral treatment was made available to people living with HIV, which was proven to be prolonging people’s lives. And as if almost overnight people who were at death's door, were getting a new lease on life. And this meant something of a “Lazarus Effect,” meaning that people who had had resigned themselves to having a short life were now having to figure out: what will the next 10, 20, 30, 40 years mean?

HS: In the late ’90s, Frank threw himself back into his art, but he didn’t have the support he needed -- he lost his closest friends, his body was weak, and on top of it all, he felt overlooked. He still wasn’t getting the recognition he craved from the art world. Frank was struggling. And Elizabeth Murray, the artist who taught him to paint, gave him some tough love.

FH: Well I remember Elizabeth Murray came to my studio, and she said, “You know, these paintings are great, but I'm looking around…” and I had a mattress in the corner. And she said, ‘Well, so what else do you have going on?’ And I was, like, well, you know, blah, blah, blah and I’m—maybe do this show and thinking blah, blah, blah and she says, ‘I'm not talking about art.’ And she basically said, ‘Get a life, Frank. Build something outside of this art world. Start with getting a couch.’
HS: Turns out, this need to rebuild was a very common experience in the gay community at that time, especially for men with a recent HIV or AIDS diagnosis. And being gay in America didn’t get any easier.

TK: All that happened was that life-prolonging medication became available, but all of the factors that exasperated an HIV diagnosis did not go away. There is still stigma and discrimination. There was still homophobia and there was still concerns with how to be oneself in the United States at the end of the 20th century.

HS: Frank did eventually get a life – one with a couch. He joined social welfare programs. He went to Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. He got sober. He rebuilt his community and started living like there was a tomorrow. And in the middle of all that, Frank found love.

FH: That changed my life. I was walking down Third Avenue. And I saw this very cute guy on the street and I was like, ‘Your life is going fine. Do not stop, No, no, no.’ And I said, ‘I’m just going to look back and see…’ And there he was standing there on the corner. And we’ve been together ever since. Nineteen years.

HS: Frank created some space for himself outside of his art. And for the first time, he stopped craving the recognition that eluded him.

FH: I had to get to the point where I was, like, ‘Maybe I’m not going to be a star. Maybe I’m not going to be recognized.’

HS: Frank started making art for himself. He decided to try to make art that spoke to him. He wanted paint something beautiful.

FH: And at some point I said, ‘Ah, fuck it, I'll just make a Frank Holliday.’ And I did it. I mean, it looked like just messy paint smeared up, but it was a Frank Holliday.

HS: And since I’m not an “art-person,” I wanted to ask Smithsonian Archives of American Art’s Liza Zapol, who we heard from earlier, to describe for me: what exactly a “Frank Holliday” looks like.

Liza Zapol: I think that it is really funny that he called his emergent style ‘messy paint smeared up.’ But I think…his work is often large canvases. I’d call them neo abstract expressionist.

HS: ‘Neo Abstract Expressionist’ doesn’t mean much to me...but maybe the name Jackson Pollock will ring a bell. He was of the most famous abstract expressionists from over 60 years ago.
LZ: They're layered, they're very strong images. You're not necessarily seeing figures at all. But I think for him it's also addressing beauty in a way, like a delicacy or a beauty, that the abstract expressionists were turning from. And I think he wants to put his own identity as a gay man into his work.

[MUSIC]

HS: Frank began to paint life, action and joy. For example, in a work of art completed just this year – 2018 – Frank made a beautiful painting. It's a strong example of all of his work following his 'I'll just make a Frank Holliday' epiphany. It's called: “Liza.”

LZ: It's very red. There's orange, there's some yellow, and then near the middle of the painting you see a bit of white, or light really coming through. And it feels, it feels like a strong, like, unapologetic painting.

HS: This painting is bold and colorful, a far cry from the darkness of “Black Mirror”. And Zapol says for someone who was diagnosed with AIDS while Liza Minelli was in the room (though on TV) this big red creation is a powerful nod to his own story. But it's also a testament to Frank's joy in creating art, decades after he was diagnosed with this illness that he was told would kill him.

LZ: You can see his brush strokes. He uses really long brushes. And I think for someone who is living with AIDS and he's thinking about how so many people were lost, there's always this sense of people with AIDS feeling invisible or disappearing. He's really affirming his own body and space, that he is alive and that it's also a testament later to affirm that he was here.

HS: And as soon as he stopped reaching for recognition, and started painting true “Frank Hollidays,” the art world took notice. His old art dealer called him up.

FH: And he's like, 'Frank, I love these paintings.' And then he sold, like, 20 of them. And now, all of a sudden, I have a book, I have a second book. I have a museum show. It's like, everything is just happening. I started showing in Singapore, showing in Italy, and people are starting to collect me.

HS: In fall of 2017, more than 30 years after a visit to the MOMA inspired him to drop out of dance school, Frank Holliday is back in the museum…but this time, on a gallery wall. It's part of a Club 57 retrospective, so Frank finally has the sense that he has arrived.

FH: I've done all that work, you know, I've done all the past and I've made peace and amends with the past and I am headed towards the future.

TK (on tape): Yeah.
In a way, Frank's art is his memoir. He talks about including his background as a dancer. He feels the pain of the HIV and AIDS epidemic. And you can also feel the joy that Frank talks with today.

FH: Like if you look at my whole history that we've been talking here: I was a human being with a disease, and having the disease is the experience that I'm putting into the paint. It's like, there's AIDS in all of this. Gay was a part of it— but I wasn't making gay art. All of these things came through me, and I was all of them. And then, the mark is who I am, and the brushstrokes are who I am. And this color is who I am. And it's really amazing. It's amazing, it's amazing.

[MUSIC]

That was Frank Holliday. To hear more from Frank and other 39 artists featured in the Archives of American Art's "Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic" collection, you can find a link on our website at si.edu/sidedoor.

[Haleema Shah: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

HS: Sidedoor is made possible by funding from the Secretary of the Smithsonian, as well as the Smithsonian’s National Board. And thanks to listeners like you – your generous support helps make all the amazing work you hear about at the Smithsonian possible.

HS: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Jason Orfanon, Lizzie Peabody, Jess Sadeq, Greg Fisk, and Lara Koch. Extra support comes from John Barth, and Genevieve Sponsler. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. This episode features original compositions by Nico Porcaro. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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HS: I'm your host Haleema Shah. Thanks for listening.]
[07:45:30] I mean, for so many years I tried to, you know, make something that people would say you're smart or you're talented or you're brilliant. And this is not about the, it's just some letting. I'm letting myself do what my body does.

But that change in Frank changed his art.

/ I think recovery taught me that it was okay to be Frank, to be who I am

Listeners might feel like they know the broad strokes of what happened during the AIDS Crisis. But *just in case* you're foggy... here's a quick breakdown: Back in 1981, primarily gay men in major cities -- New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco especially -- suddenly got sick with a mystery bug. At the time, nobody knew what it was. But, it spread FAST. The AIDS epidemic destroyed communities, shattering entire social networks. And… there wasn't much help from the outside; medical research was sluggish, and with little government response, the gay community was left to suffer and die in silence.

Questions for Ted:
How should we refer to you?
We use the term "AIDS Epidemic" a couple times. Is it fair to call it that? Or should it be the HIV-AIDS epidemic? Or.... something else?
Is it accurate to say that you're a community organizer, artist and have studied the art around the AIDS Epidemic?
I read this somewhere, but want to be sure it jives with your understanding as well: Madonna, Cyndi Lauper and RuPaul used to hang around Club 57?

Questions for Frank:

Which school did you study at: Juilliard, The School of American Ballet? Did you just take classes at each school? Was it a summer program?
When did Elizabeth Murray teach you? Like.. in the 90s or earlier than that?
You said she was your “painting teacher” -- did she teach you to paint? What was the nature of your teacher/student relationship? Like… how should we introduce her to the audience?
I believe you touch on this in your oral history, but I just wanted to clarify -- did you know Madonna? Did she used to go to Club 57? In our conversation with Ted Kerr, he was a little unsure about that detail.
When you were really sick in Greensboro, were you at your mother’s home, or your sister’s?