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## Acclaimed 'Star Trek' artist Keith Birdsong dies

By Jimmie Tramel Tulsa World 6 hrs ago



Keith Birdsong, who gained acclaim for his "Star Trek" art, was commissioned in 2017 to create a piece of art featuring the cast of the new "Star Trek" movies.

Tulsa World file

Cory Young

Oklahoma artist Keith Birdsong, whose realistic likenesses of "Star Trek" actors made him one of the world's most in-demand Trek illustrators, died Tuesday. He was 59.

Birdsong was born July 14, 1959, in Muskogee, where he spent much of his childhood. He had a residence in Tulsa at the time of his death.

Services — scheduled 2 p.m. June 14 at Christian Chapel in Muskogee, 4043 Chandler Road — will take place one month shy of what would have been Birdsong's 60th birthday. He was hospitalized following a recent automobile accident and was unable to recover.

Birdsong's body of work includes hundreds of illustrations linked to the Star Trek franchise, including posters, book covers and collector plates. But he also was hired to provide likenesses of Elvis Presley and others for the U.S. Postal service. Some of his works are in the Smithsonian Institution, including a likeness of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Self-taught, Birdsong said during a 2017 interview that he was told by his mother that he was drawing before he was talking.

"The big breakthrough for me was getting the nose right when I was 4 or 5," he said.

Birdsong said he found a Michelangelo book in the library when he was in elementary school. He checked it out for all of his second grade year and part of his third grade year. The book helped Birdsong learn how to illustrate muscles.

Though art would become Birdsong's livelihood, he said he got paddlings in elementary school because he couldn't resist drawing in class.

"I got more whippings than the bullies and the people causing problems because I couldn't concentrate on what the teacher was saying," he said.

"I was always in the principal's office, and he was always (saying), 'You're back again?' He would walk down the hallway looking for me because he knew I would be in the hallway. He already had his paddle in his hands."

Birdsong said he also got in trouble for illustrations of men and women that faculty members thought were too detailed. He started drawing monsters because that seemed likely to get him in hot water. He said he did not make good grades in art class.

"I didn't follow directions," he said. "I always drew what I wanted. I would kind of start with what they wanted and then end up doing something else, doing my own thing."

Birdsong said he lived in Muskogee until he was 14. He spent his sophomore, junior and senior years in California, Texas and Missouri. He entered the military in 1980 and was a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne.

"My first time I ever flew in an airplane, I jumped out," he said.

Birdsong was a journalist during his four and a half years in the military. He took photos to go with stories he wrote and began submitting illustrations. He built a portfolio and began making pitches to magazines and book companies.

Birdsong, hired to do magazine work while in the service, said his first gigs were for magazines aimed at teens. He drew Michael Jackson for Right On! magazine.

He also drew a caricature of Jackson and Mick Jagger together. Birdsong heard Jackson was so fond of the piece that he wanted to buy the original art.

“I put it aside to save for him, but I never heard from him again,” Birdsong said.

Another of Birdsong’s early magazine works was an illustration of Duran Duran for Tiger Beat. It was published at the same time as a 1984 issue of Penthouse magazine that featured scandalous photos of Miss America Vanessa Williams. Birdsong said he went to a store and saw many people buying Penthouse, but he felt embarrassed because he was buying a teen magazine.

“It’s my painting on the cover,” he said at the store. “They looked at me like I’m a liar.”

Birdsong said he used his magazine income to pay other sergeants to do his guard duty. By the time he left the Army, he was doing illustrations for book covers. He built a relationship with a book company and decided he could make a living as a full-time artist. He worked as a commercial artist in Raleigh, North Carolina, before moving back to his home state to work as a freelance artist in the late 1980s.

Birdsong became best known for his Star Trek work. In a 1990 Tulsa Tribune story, Pocket Books spokesman William Weisser said this in a story about Birdsong: “The cover is always important. And it’s important for the characters to look right, especially these characters, because they’re very familiar.”

What’s the secret of nailing likenesses? “Don’t overthink it,” Birdsong said. “Do what you see.”

Birdsong said he did 97 Trek paintings in one year during his peak era and was booked for many jobs a year in advance. Eventually, he reached a point where he needed to abandon Trek and do other things. He returned to the Trek world in 2017 when Lightspeed Fine Art commissioned him to paint an image of the cast of the new Star Trek movies.

Birdsong suffered a stroke in 2018. The stroke resulted in memory loss and impaired vision. Birdsong was told that he should not attempt to draw because the result could lead to depression. But vision began returning and Birdsong proved to himself and others he could still draw, using an old photograph as the inspiration for a new work.

“I was never supposed to walk, talk or do anything,” he said in March after hosting an art show at his home.

Birdsong was eager for a visitor to see a painting hanging on an upstairs wall of his home. The painting depicts two young girls at a lemonade stand. One is plunking on a guitar and the other is leaning against the lemonade stand. Birdsong said it was a painting of his granddaughters.

“I loved painting my granddaughters,” he said. “My granddaughters are beautiful.”

An organ donor, Birdsong was taken off life support Tuesday afternoon.

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