

ESSAYS

Artists Dying

Thomas Rayfiel [📍Brooklyn, NY](#) [📅 02/14/2017](#)

Lord Byron on His Deathbed, Joseph Denis Odevaere (public domain)

The first time I saw an artist dying onstage, I was a kid. I went to see Rahsaan Roland Kirk at the Village Gate. The great saxophonist, composer, and vocalist had recently suffered a stroke. His body was non-existent inside a rumpled tuxedo. His sightless eyes were, as always, invisible behind dark glasses. He was carried up steps by two men and set in a chair. Loops of sticky tape had been wrapped around his fingertips. He sat and mimed blowing notes, the keys resolutely not moving, while the band tried to compensate, furiously breaking into one of his classics, *Freaks For the Festival*. At sixteen, I didn't know what to think. Was it theater? Was it a new kind of jazz with silence for solos? I came away with an acute sense of pain and embarrassment, a