

# Walls of sorrow on the lower East Side

**M**ICHAEL STEWART was alive the other day in a part of the city that understood him while he lived. He was the subject of three of the many murals which cover the sides and backs of buildings on E. Eighth St., between Avenues B and C. Some of the murals are two and three stories high. There are large works about Judgment Day and Central America and South Africa. But the murals people looked for the other day were those concerning Michael Stewart.

A person and occurrence which lends itself to art could signal the creation of a movement.

A young woman named Margarita, who said she would show us the murals, led us through the puddles of an empty lot alongside a plumbing supply shop at 331 E. Eighth St. The side of the plumbing supply shop was covered with a wall mural of the Last Judgment, an awesome painting consisting of six neighborhood people and six faces of Central and South African leaders sitting as a jury and looking down at the defendants, who are all white, successful-looking white businessmen in suits. The businessmen, to even the most untrained eye, do not seem to be doing too well.

"He's back here," Margarita said. She went up to a corrugated fence that rose from the mud and was covered with a mural, done with spray can, of a subway train, the sides covered with a gold graffiti design, rushing into a subway station. Michael Stewart, on a platform, his back to you, waves a spray can. From the far left, a cop holding a club comes running.

Behind the corrugated fence, in a garden planted and run by people in the neighborhood, there was a mural showing a cop on a horse rushing towards a youth, meant to be Stewart. A second mural of Michael Stewart is done in nine frames and shows police closing in on Stewart.

"Who did these?" Margarita was asked.

"I don't know. One morning I got



## JIMMY BRESLIN

up and found this."

"It couldn't have been done in a day," she was told.

"I wake up and find it. Maybe I never look before that day."

"Did you know Michael Stewart?"

"I read about him."

"What did you read?"

"That they kill him and everything."

Stewart, 25, was arrested on Sept. 15, 1983, at 2:30 a.m. for placing graffiti on the wall of the subway station at First Ave. and 14th St. He was taken to the transit police station at Union Square. Then, in the custody of six transit police officers, he collapsed. He was brought to Bellevue Hospital at 3:30 a.m., where he slipped into a coma and died 13 days later.

**I**N COURT last Sunday, the six transit police officers were acquitted. Which leaves us, out in

the world of highly reasonable and orderly procedures, with only one possible cause of Michael Stewart's death: He killed himself while six cops stood around him.

The police, who refused to testify at the trial about why a citizen of the city had died in their custody, went directly back to work after the jury verdict. They most certainly would fulfill their duty of taking a city paycheck and cashing it.

On E. Eighth St. the other day, where buildings with tin eyes look down on streets of the poor, a man in coveralls, who said his name was Junior, said that he knew all about the murals.

"Girls do some of them," he said.

"Who were the girls?"

"I have them here."

He looked through his wallet. Inside the plumbing supply warehouse, a man called out, "Don't do that. He might be a cop!"

## IN SUNDAY'S DAILY NEWS



'50s-vintage Clark

**DICK CLARK.** A visit with the multimillionaire, one-time leader of "American Bandstand," on his 56th birthday.

**DEE-FENSE!** A close look at some behind-the-scenes heroes of the NFL, like defensive coordinators Buddy Ryan of the Bears and Bud Carson of the Jets. Sports

**A HARD LOOK** at the movies. What's wrong with them, anyway? City Lights

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Junior gave the names and phone numbers of the artists. The corrugated iron fence mural of Stewart was done by Chico, the graffiti artist who has become popular enough to be hired by merchants around town. The murals were started long before the six transit police officers were put on trial. The two murals in the garden were done by artists Seth Tabacman and Etienne Li. One of the artists in Junior's wallet was Kristin Reed, who was found yesterday at work in an advertising agency, Bruce Jay Bloom, on W. 44th St. Kristin, 33, is a graphics artist. At the start of last summer, she and her friend, Robin Michals, heard that there was a chance to do outdoor art under the auspices of Art Makers, which was fine with Kristin.

The theme of all murals on the Eighth St. walls was to connect Central America, South Africa and the lower East Side.

"When we first got there," Kristin said yesterday, "the neighborhood women sat across the street. They thought we were there to steal the men. The men stood on the sidewalk near us and waited to be stolen."

"Did anybody talk to you?"

"Oh, Robin and I both speak Spanish. When of the men said something to us in poor English, we answered in Spanish. We had a Mexican accent. The first thing each man did was to step up and give us his life story. Junior said he was from Mayaguez and that he lived in a basement. He wanted to save \$10,000 and go back to Mayaguez and open a gas station."

"How long did you work?"

"We were there every night until it was too dark to work. Then we worked every weekend. All summer. Chico, Seth Tabacman and Etienne Li were doing Stewart. Seth was cynical. He didn't think anything would happen to the police."

What did you think?"

"What am I supposed to think? How did he die? I feel it's like letting the Klan off after they machine-gun five guys someplace."