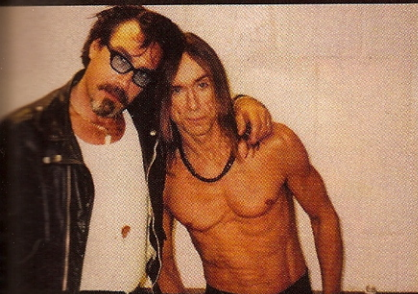


JONATHAN SHAW

OUTLAW INK

Jonathan Shaw's **indelible icons of love and hate, emblazoned in subcutaneous splendor, adorn everybody. Roving reporter George Petros investigates.**





HERE IS JONATHAN SHAW, American classic living abroad, traditionalist discarding history, barbarian intellectual, optimistic cynic. One of the most, if not *the* most, celebrated tattooists, he reluctantly accepts the accolades while avoiding fame's phantoms.

He uses a tattoo machine like a gun, spitting hot ink into naked flesh. He'd probably enjoy killing many of his customers, but what the hell—why not just leave his mark etched into them forever? Honey, don't you ask him who he tattooed? Don't you know about Johnny Winter? Or Mike Tyson, Tupac Shakur, Johnny Depp, Iggy, Dee Dee Ramone, Kate Moss, Joe Coleman, Vanilla Ice, Sepultura, The Cure, or the Great Train Robber, Ronnie Biggs?

Proprietor of NYC's notorious Fun City since '82, Shaw deals with stars and scumbags alike. He really is a motherfucker, edgy and in charge, renowned for his tenacity, capable of great good and great bad. Of course he comes off as a sweetheart to those who love him, in the manner of a warlord or a mob boss. Nowadays he runs Fun City from afar; in his absence, two cool cats—Elvis, from Fort Worth, Texas, and Pon, from Queens, New York—cover the customers' cutises.

Some tattoos run like rivers of rusty railroads across the body; some flow from head to toe like clouds. Some depict loved ones; some say, "Don't fuck with me." Shaw has done 'em all. He once said, "I'll tattoo anything on anybody, any place, anytime, anywhere." His work complements its wearers like shadows of living jewelry.

Juxtapoz tracked Jonathan to Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he currently resides in the mode of screenwriter. Under interrogation

he bitches about tattooing's present state, but his love of the art form shines through. Keep this in mind: with this guy, many questions must remain unasked.

Where in your life do art and crime intersect?

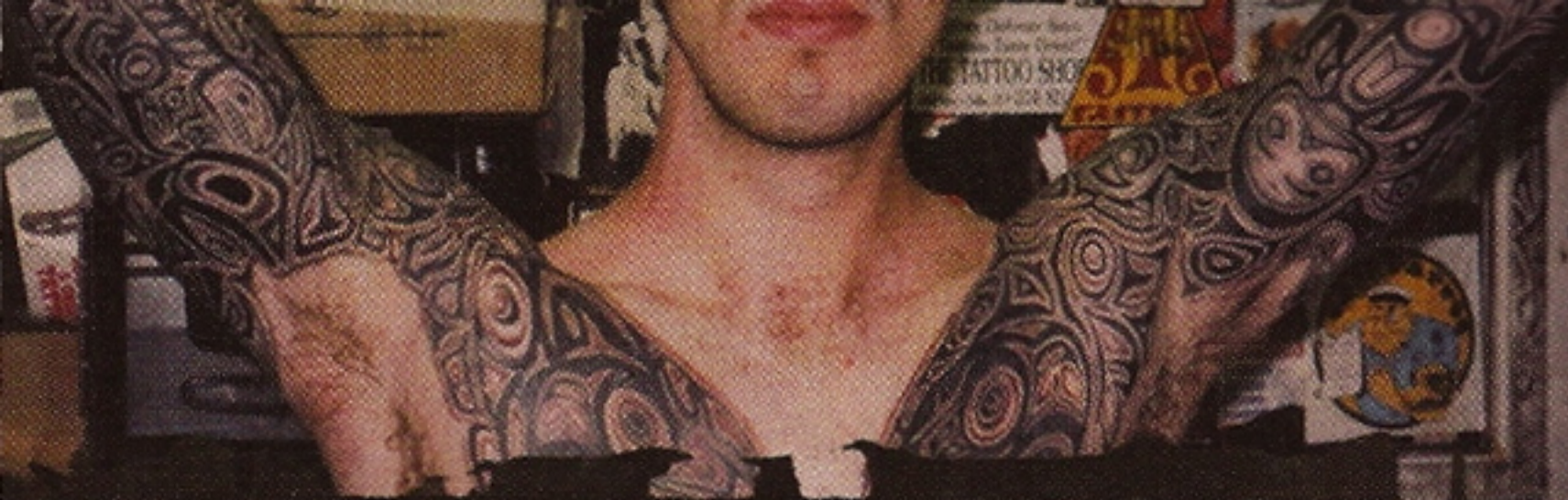
Before I became a tattoo artist, I was a marginalized human being. I was living in shanty towns and fuckin' slums in South America with bandits and street people and the scum of the earth. I came to tattooing through lifestyle, not so much for love of the art. I was an alcoholic, I was a drug addict, and I lived in the most sordid parts of the universe. That was in the early '70s. Tattooing was a completely marginalized form of expression, done by people who would otherwise have nothing except for rape and murder and mayhem. Only lowlives had tattoos, and that's who I came up with, so tattoos were part of the landscape in the places I frequented—dockside dives and seedy warehouses in Latin America.

Where were you born?

I was born in New York and essentially grew up in Rio de Janeiro, but I lived all over Mexico, Columbia, Argentina, et cetera.

What kind of tattoos did you see down there?

They were mostly homemade, of the sailor or prisoner or antisocial variety. Having an inclination toward drawing and design, I got sucked into tattooing that stuff as an entrance to the world of commerce. I developed a skill, and I fine-tuned and honed it in order to



make my way from one sordid shanty town to the next, one country to the next. I also was a sailor and shipped around, so I picked up the skills of tattooing in a romanticized, underground kinda way. Over the years my skills got refined; eventually I moved to the States and got in with some of the American masters. That's when I learned traditional techniques, which in turn evolved into my own style. I got captivated by the art and history, and my career took me to a trendy, fashionable place. That was the deal.

What was the first tattoo you did?

A skull and crossbones on a rebel bandit in Columbia.

Was he happy with it?

Yeah, sure. We were all happy with everything.

What was the first tattoo you ever received?

A crooked jailhouse star I put on myself in jail in America.

What were you in jail for?

Drugs.

What kind?

Hard drugs—the kind I liked. But I don't use them anymore.

How long did you do them?

A while.

What was tattooing in New York City like when it was illegal.

It was great. There was a handful of us; we were elite. We had the place to ourselves. It was totally underground.

Were the police looking to shut you down?

No, no. The police were my friends. I tattooed them; it wasn't a criminal matter.

Were there ever problems with the patrons?

Oh, sure. It was a bloody mess. We had to beat people out the door every fuckin' day. It wasn't some nail-salon tattoo shop like you have now. Back then, you'd better be ready for Freddy. We had death threats, so it was always dangerous—and you had to be prepared to defend yourself.

As tattooing entered the mainstream, how were you affected?

It caused guys like me to either become dinosaurs or get real creative. I didn't become a dinosaur.

It became a more artistic pursuit, as opposed to a lifestyle thing.

I've said so much about this, there's not much more I can say. The outlaw status of tattooing suited me well, but tattooing became fashionable and socially acceptable, and it lost a lot of its appeal for me. I'm kinda out of the game these days—I'm not a



Photo by Ursula M

Untitled, acrylic on canvas, 18" x 24," 1995.



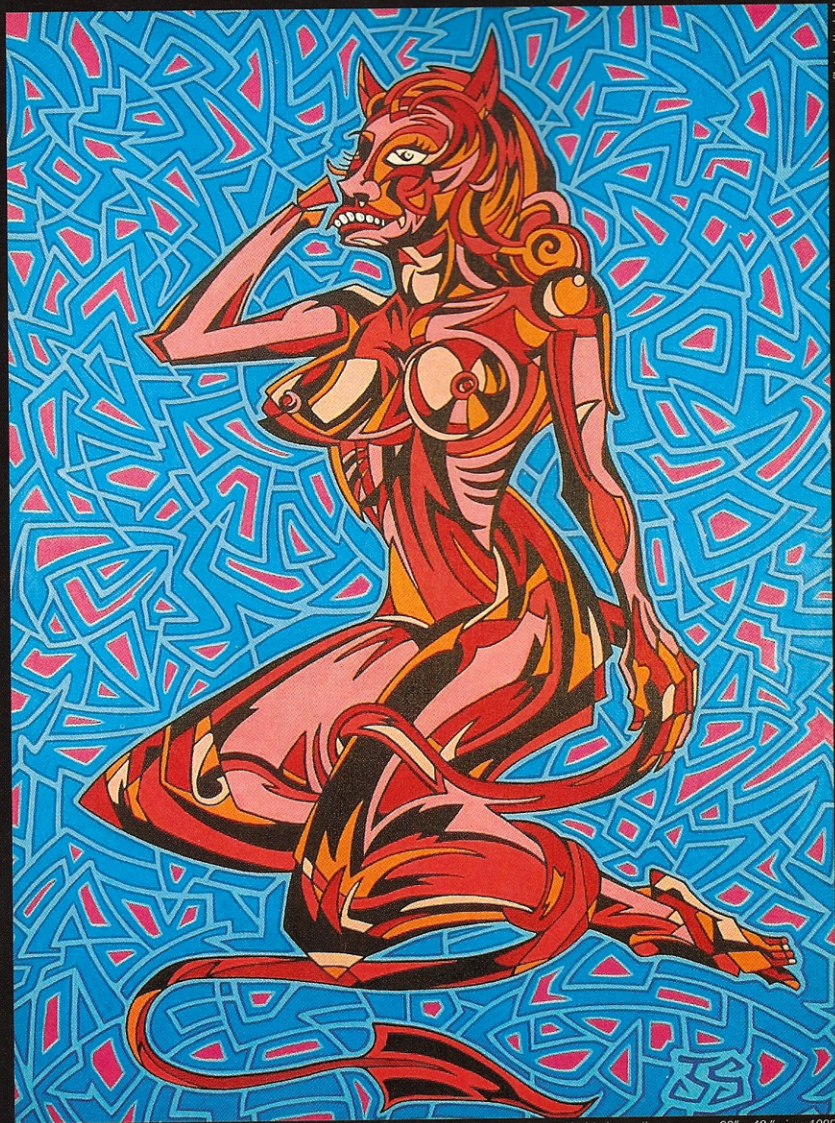


Photo by Ursula M.

Untitled, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48," circa 1995.

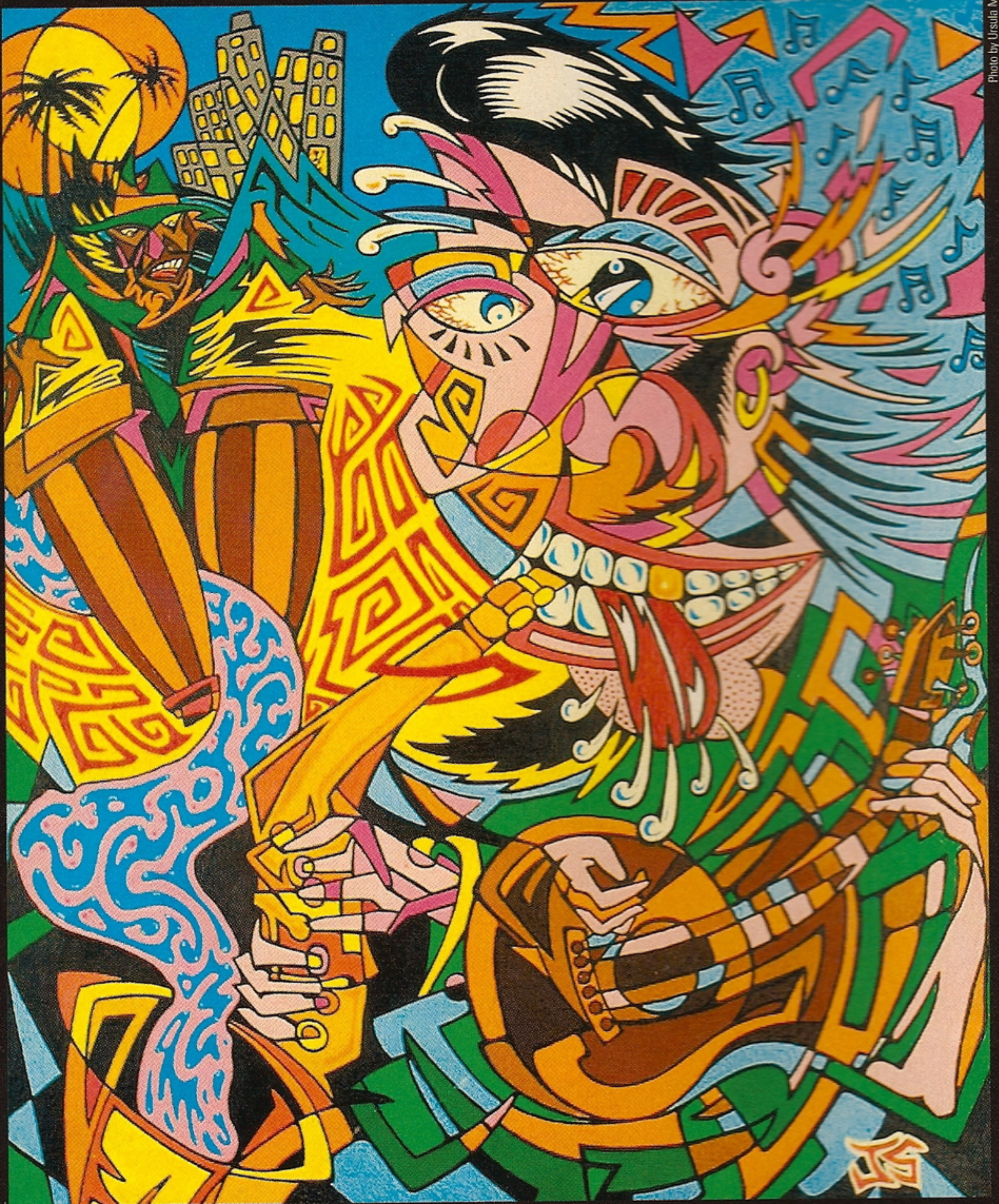


Photo by Ursula M

Untitled, acrylic on canvas, 18" x 24," circa 1995.



“Tattooing was a cracked windshield through which I saw the world for many years.”

full-time tattooist anymore. To be perfectly honest, I'm not really interested anymore. I do the odd tattoo on friends and special customers or that rare person who wants what only I can do. Most people want a tattoo from me because I have a name. They think I'm some magician with a magic wand. I've had 25 years of it, and I've pretty much done everything I can do with the medium. I'm pursuing my dreams as a writer. But tattooing treated me real well. I just can't go much further.

What bothered you the most?

If your so-called public doesn't encourage you to expand your vision, then anything you do for them is fraudulent. That's how I feel about where tattooing went. It's stifling. Think about if a painter like Robert Williams or Joe Coleman had to sit down at a canvas and work with somebody of limited vision breathing down their neck all day and constantly trying to tell them what to do while they painted. For me, as a tattoo artist, that became extremely annoying over time. I envied the freedom of artists who didn't have to interact with their canvases. Their canvases don't complain to them while they're painting. I always envied that. But I'm not a public commodity anymore.

How have a tattooist's sensibilities influenced the writing you now do?

It's given me a unique world view. I'm sure if I was a hooker or a cop, I might have a similar view. Tattooing was a cracked windshield through which I saw the world for many years. I was enchanted with it, but everything passes.

Yet you say you were treated well by the tattoo world.

With all due humility, I can say that you get out of it what you put into it. I gave it my all, and it returned as generous gestures over time. I have no complaints. I just don't want to be Jonathan Shaw The Tattoo Guy all my life. I didn't want to get into the metaphysics of it all. Tattooing as I learned it was an old-school thing practiced by pirates and ne'er-do-wells and traveling men. It was a very lowbrow, gutter-type thing. I came into it as a humanist. I was attracted more to the lifestyle than I was to the artistic possibilities, but I've always been an artist. I got into it with a reverence for the old-timers who taught me.

What forces transformed it from folk art to pop art?

The mass media changes everything. Maybe I even unwittingly contributed. Who knows? The real old-school tattoo guys never told nobody nothing. I'm not gonna resist evolution; I'm gonna be the first one to evolve and strengthen my own art through whatever channels become available. But what's responsible for the decadence in contemporary tattooing is the hype. Those doing the hyping have never even been there. They live in offices, in computer worlds, et cetera.

So is it a lost cause?

Most people tattooing today don't know how to spell the word.

You're one of the best-known tattoo artists...

I guess. I mean, I haven't seen too many other tattoo artists doing David Letterman's show.

Obviously, your work is good, but there had to be some other magic ingredient.

I don't know about that. I'm good at what I do. I innovate and keep it fresh.

What makes you happy?

Gosh ... I love life, I love being in the world, being around people, and just kinda floatin' around and groovin' on the whole big thing. The world is a museum. I love the language of the street. I could sit on a corner all day and watch humanity in all its glory. That's what I like.

What's your epitaph gonna say?

That I pioneered some very popular styles. I hopefully might have done something to elevate the standards. I've done quality tattooing on a shitload of people for a lot of years. That's it. ■

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