

# JONATHAN SHAW

**“Most people tattooing today don’t know how to spell the word.”**

**BY GEORGE PETROS**

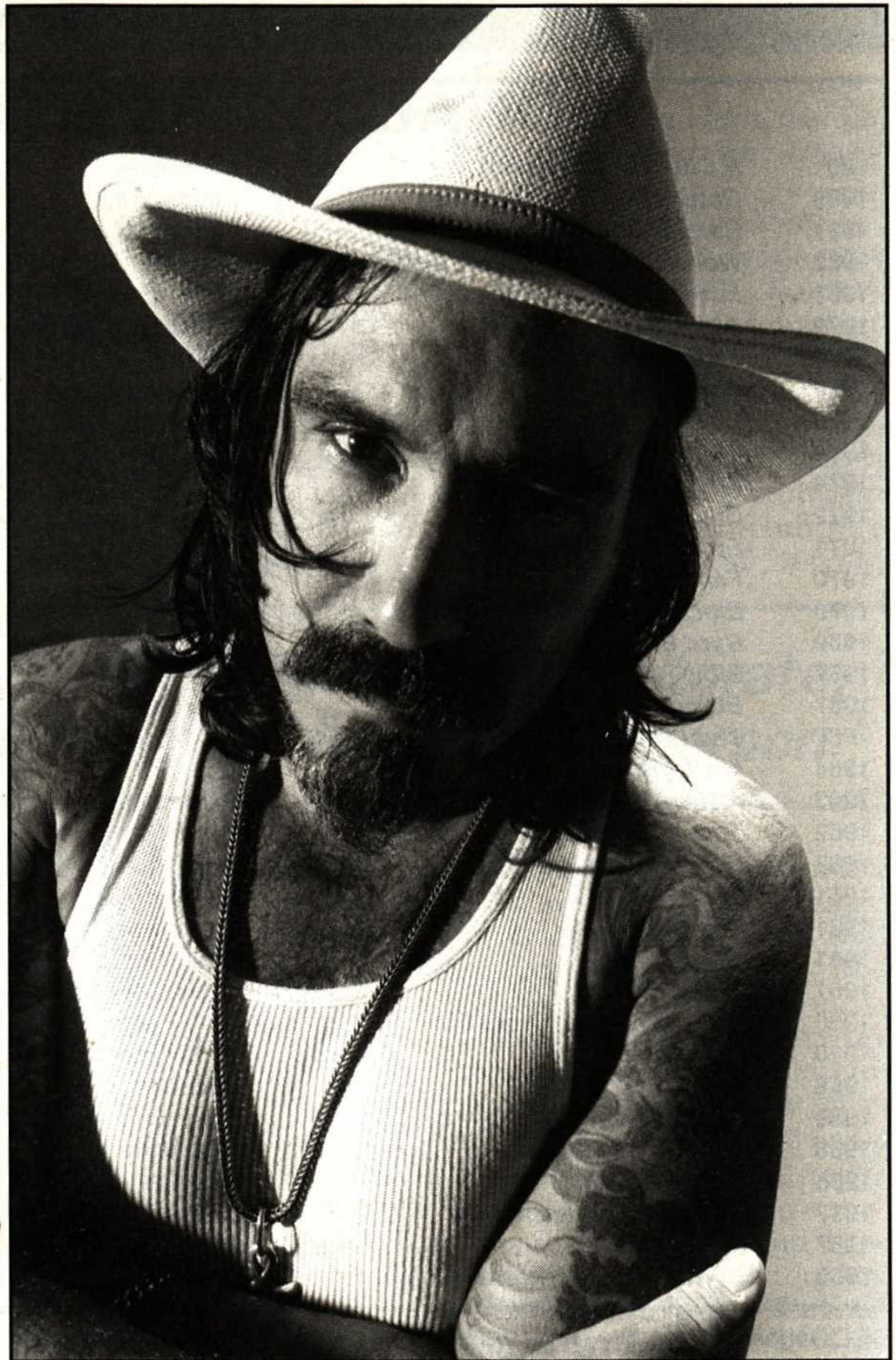
**S**trip the clothes off almost anybody and you’ll surely find tattoos. Indelible beacons of love and hate emblazoned in subcutaneous splendor, tattoos are everywhere — or, more precisely, they are on everybody. But that hasn’t always been the case. Tattoos were once taboo among our twinkie trendsetters. Only those who perceived themselves to be outside of conventional society reinforced their identities with permanent, one-of-a-kind designs on their bodies. Rare individuals who were rebellious combinations of illustrator, designer, cosmetologist, and doctor would administer the designs in semi-scientific rites. Among the apprentices was **JONATHAN SHAW**. He must have paid attention, because now Shaw is acknowledged as a master craftsman of the present era.

In the beginning he traveled the high seas and the endless highways, and he keenly observed the subtle rippling of muscles and the smooth stretching of skin, and no doubt he envisioned living scenes and dazzling patterns adorning the blank canvas of the human body’s largest organ, while only hair and wounds resisted his imagination’s inventions. By magic he hooked up with influential tattoo artists such as **Bob Shaw** and **Colonel Todd**, who taught him what was up. In those days tattooing was beyond Underground — it was a form of Folk Art that combined the imagery of Americana and religious fetishism and Erotica, then introduced the resulting mixture about 3/16” into the hides of sailors, railroad laborers, carnival con artists, and convicts.

Shaw kept learning and got himself a reputation in the then-rarefied world of body arts. He came to specialize in a form of tattoo design best described as “tribal” at a time when highly-illustrative motifs were the standards: hearts pierced by anchors; dice; roses; etc. Eventually the cycle of style turned and, through the twin virtues of perseverance and self-promotion, Shaw set the tone for much of what has come to be known as Modern Primitive.

Throughout his career he has rendered his mark upon the epidermal areas of many prominent people, including movie stars who in earlier times would not have been marketable commodities had they been adorned with personalized works of art. That is an indication of how far tattooing has progressed towards the social legitimacy it once shunned. As his contribution to that evolution, Shaw has shown, through his fluid lines and subtle motifs, that tattoos can complement the human form like shadows of living jewelry.

Some tattoos represent lifestyle ideals; some are random doodlings. Some tattoos run like rivers of old rusty railroads across the body; others flow from head to toe like



cloudy Chinese dragons. Some depict heroes; others promise death. Some are vaguely allegorical; others simply mean “don’t fuck with me.” Jonathan Shaw will give you whatever tattoo you want.

**SECONDS:** Was Tattoo International magazine a success?

**SHAW:** It was successful as far as it made the publisher buckets of duckets and that’s the only reason it ever existed. My original goals were somewhat broader ...

**SECONDS:** Was it your idea?

**SHAW:** It was my idea, my brainchild. There’s been a lot of tattoo magazines over the years and most of them have been on a very grassroots level. Real trailer park stuff.

**SECONDS:** Were there tattoo mags around when you started out?

**SHAW:** No. This is all a fairly recent development. Basically I thought they all sucked and I thought I could do something more intelligent. The only problem with that is I found that you’re basically casting your pearls before swine. I know I’m going to make a lot of people mad by saying that but I also don’t care because I’ve been there and done that. I created a real first-class magazine that was very educational and edifying to tattooing and, sadly, I found that most people who get tattooed really only buy the magazines to cut the pictures out so they can take it to their local scab vendor and have a handy set of references to pirate other people’s creativity from. As long as you don’t expect tattooing to rise above that, then you’re not going to be disappointed. But I was talking about the history and traditions of tattooing. We were trying to inform, educate and entertain with this magazine. Unfortunately, most of our readership can’t even read. It just goes with the territory.

**SECONDS:** Who was the publisher?



**"I'll tattoo anything on anybody, any place, anytime, anywhere."**



**SHAW:** I really have no idea. It's a big corporate thing. I never met most of these people.

**SECONDS:** Did you get fucked over by these people?

**SHAW:** Yeah, I would say I got done over.

**SECONDS:** So, the idea was yours, the mag was yours —

**SHAW:** Yeah, and it was a labor of love. It became my total obsession. I don't know from mass media. I'm just an artist, a creative person, a practitioner of a low-brow, grass-roots art form. I'm not a publisher, I'm not a corporate entity. These guys have lawyers, legal staffs, big overheads, advertising executives — all that corporate slam-dancing. I got myself involved in the corporate world on a gentleman's agreement and then I found out there weren't any gentlemen. Duh. It was just a battlefield like the Crack trade — or the tattoo business. Originally, they approached me with the premise of starting a tattoo magazine that would be a cut above the rest. I said, "I can definitely deliver that package to you on a monthly basis and I only require one promise from you and that is that I will have full editorial control of the magazine." They made me that promise and I delivered the magazine as I promised and the thing went swimmingly for months and months — years, I suppose. Then, once they started seeing that this thing was going, they got attracted to the whole tattoo mystique as moths to a flame. Then things changed. These people who were basically un-tattooed, garden variety office types suddenly became tattoo authorities. The jungle drums beckoned and next thing you know these nine-to-five scarecrow art directors were wanting to take editorial control and shit. You know how it feels to see your art pirated by fuckin' yuppies? I'm a veteran tattooist. I've been tattooing for over twenty years and I'm one of those rare people in tattooing today that came into it through the old school. I'm a direct link to people who were

tattooing way back when. **Bob Shaw**, who brought me into the tattoo business ... he referred to me as his nephew and I thought of him as Uncle Bob; we were very close. This guy was a father to me. The guys that brought me into this business had a set of principles that applied to tattooing. There was an old-school train of thought. Tattoo was a very particular thing. There was ways of doing things that went back to carnival times. A lot of those roots live on into modern tattooing. Some of it is still there but a lot of it isn't because of these corporate fucks getting into the tattoo business. It's like anything, man, it's like Rock & Roll. Rock & Roll was **Elvis** and **Chuck Berry** and then it became fuckin' **Hootie & The Blowfish**. You can see an innocent, vital Folk Art form become a fuckin' monster with seven heads eating everything in its path. How does tattooing go from its simple, human roots into this corporate sludge machine that it's become today?

**SECONDS:** Will we see franchise tattoo parlors?

**SHAW:** God knows what we'll see. Hopefully I'll be living in some Third World country again by the time it comes to that because I really don't want to see something I cherish on a very personal level turning into the fucking MTV Awards.

**SECONDS:** Who started it down that road?

**SHAW:** I think the mass media affects everything in today's culture. Maybe I even unwittingly contributed — the road to Hell and all that ... the real old school tattoo guys never told nobody nothing. Now, older guys like me are starting to realize that this is something that we have to live with. A lot of our old school ways are going right down the shitter. I'm not going to stand here and resist evolution, I'm going to be the first one to evolve and strengthen my

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own art through whatever channels become available to me. I'm not gonna be some old fuck saying, "We've got to keep things the way they were." That's not the way I feel at all. But what's responsible for all the decadence around tattooing is all the hype it's gotten. What happened with the magazine was the people who worked in the publishing office were a lot of people who don't have tattoos and wouldn't get tattoos because it's against their religion and stuff like that. Then, next thing ya know *they're* writing the rules and cramming it down *our* throats. And they never even *been* there. They live in offices, in computer worlds ... I go on.

**SECONDS:** *What's your biggest complaint about the tattoo culture?*

**SHAW:** I don't want to complain because there is no Complaint Department that can change anything. Complaints are farts in the wind. Tattooing as I learned it was an old-school thing when it was practiced by pirates and ne'er-do-wells and traveling men. It was a very low-brow gutter-type thing. I came into it as a humanistic art form. I was attracted more to the lifestyle than I was to the artistic possibilities, but I've always been an artist. I got into tattooing with a reverence to the old school traditions of the old-timers that brought me in. That reverence is very important to me; it's as important to me as **John Lee Hooker** and **Robert Johnson** probably are to somebody like **Keith Richards**. Today, what you have coming into the tattoo field are a lot of kids fresh out of art school.

**SECONDS:** *Is it a problem that people are illustrators first, and then become tattoo artists?*

**SHAW:** It's not a problem. It's probably good for tattooing but everything's happening haphazardly ... people aren't apprenticing, people aren't taking the time to research and live what they're getting involved with. The mediocrity shows through.

**SECONDS:** *Is there a lack of craftsmanship in tattooing?*



**SHAW:** There's a lack of craftsmanship that's astounding on a mass scale. There's a lack of gut understanding, there's a lack of reverence and comprehension. There's a cluelessness about so many aspects of tattooing that has been infused into the tattoo community ... that's a result of people going too far too fast. Most people tattooing today don't know how to spell the word. There's a lot of people thinking, "I can make a few bucks in this thing, I can get to have my picture taken with **Axl Rose** ..." Whatever the fuck they're thinking, they're getting into tattooing and most of them are just kids and don't want to invest time into the thing they expect to propel them into "greatness."

**SECONDS:** *People must ask you for advice when they're starting off. What's the first thing you tell them?*

**SHAW:** It totally depends on who they are. If they want to be a tattooer, I tell them, "Learn about the history of tattooing. Sit at the foot of somebody who's been doing it thirty years and pay your fuckin' dues." I would tell them they have a long hard road ahead and they better sharpen their senses. Don't copy. Don't be a fucking copycat. Most of them I would tell, "Turn back. Do not enter. Wrong way. Don't come in here. You haven't got it."

**SECONDS:** *What's "it"?*

**SHAW:** Innovation, class, humility, dedication, respect ...

**SECONDS:** *Craftsmanship?*

**SHAW:** Yeah ... patience. Who has that anymore?

**SECONDS:** *How have you changed since you started?*

**SHAW:** I still sit in my chair and tattoo little pictures on people, just like I did twenty years ago. My tattooing has gotten better and sharper. I'm much better at what I do. I'm constantly evolving and changing as a craftsperson.

**SECONDS:** *How much input does the recipient have?*

**SHAW:** It varies from client to client. A lot of what I do now is straight walk-ins. Several years ago, I wouldn't take walk-ins. I had a long waiting list and screened every client because I wanted every tattoo to be a perfect collaboration. Now I've chilled out some. Now somebody

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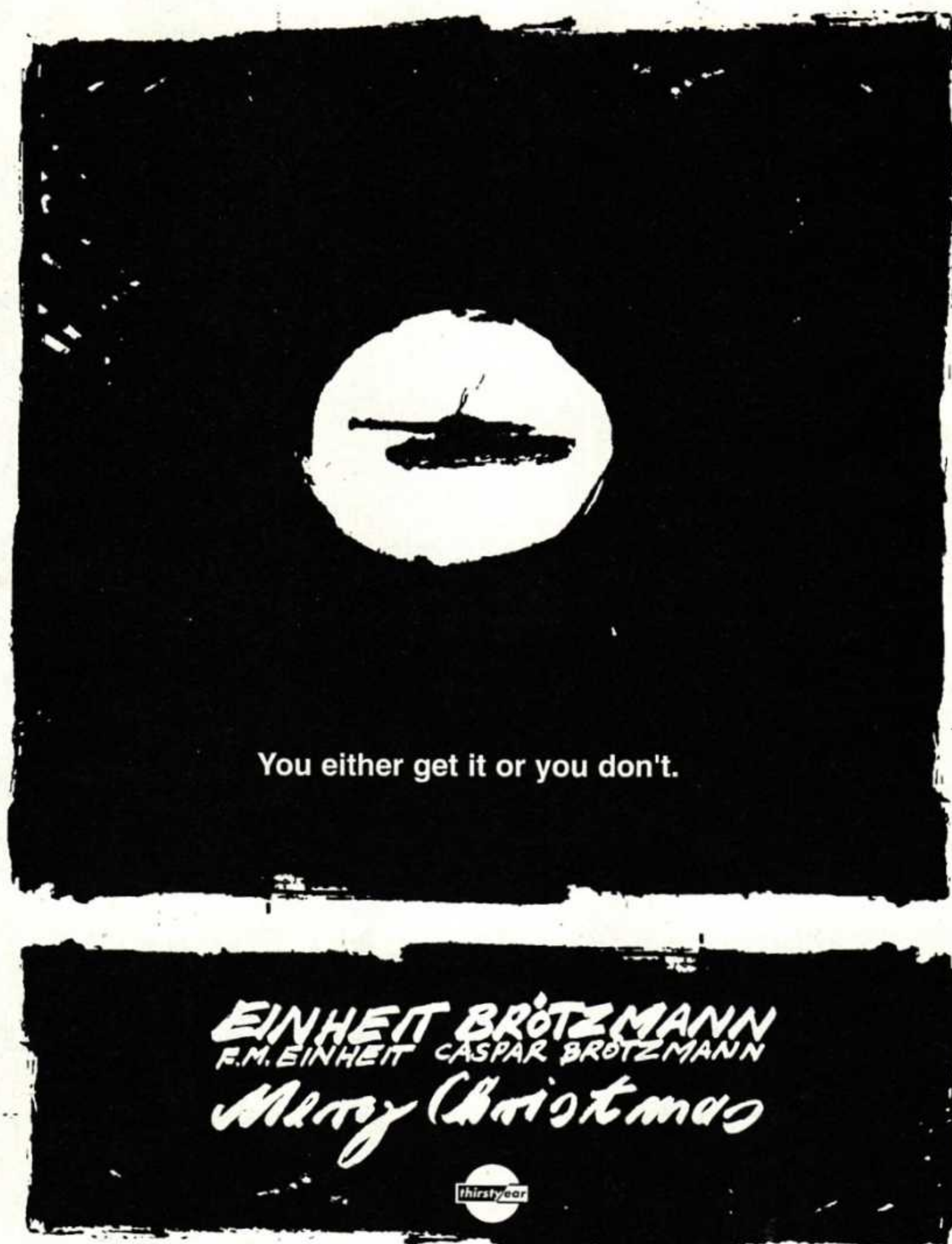
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can walk in and I won't give them any input unless they seem open to it. People often come in with their own ideas of what they want and what it's supposed to mean and what it's supposed to say. They leave with a good tattoo but ... I don't know. The work is generally better when a client asks me for some input. Since I'm supposed to be the professional, I'd assume that my aesthetic or creative input should count for something. But either way it's all good.

**“There’s no loyalty anywhere. Not in the tattoo field, not in the publishing field, not in the streets — nowhere.”**

**SECONDS:** *How has the subject matter of the tattoos changed since you started?*

**SHAW:** It hasn't. The more it changes, the more it stays the same. Now you've got twenty-year-old Skate Punk kids getting demon refrigerators tattooed on their arm. Who the fuck wants a refrigerator humping a toaster oven tattooed on their arm? What the fuck? There's a whole generation running around trying to outdo each other with the most shocking, ridiculous tattoo they can possibly conjure up. It's the rebellious kid syndrome taken to an extreme. Tattoos are custom made to make mom shit her pants and that's an important rite of passage in itself. But it's going to go back to a simple old heart with a banner and mom's name. A simple pin-up girl or an eagle. That's ninety percent of what we do today — what we did last year, twenty years ago and probably twenty years from now. Hopefully, the art end of it will improve, but when it comes right down to it, a lot of this ridiculous imagery is *not* going to stand the test of time.

**SECONDS:** *Is there anything you won't tattoo on someone?*

**SHAW:** I'll tattoo anything on anybody, any place, anytime, anywhere.

**SECONDS:** *How about the type of person who thinks it over carefully, the informed consumer ...*

**SHAW:** The informed consumer is not John Q. Public when it comes to getting tattooed. Most people stumble about in a comical bumbling fashion and wear that mark for the rest of their lives. The elite tattoo "collector" is like one out of a hundred. He's not your average jimook walkin' in off the street. He's the guy who's done his homework and has a pretty good idea of what this whole thing is about.

**SECONDS:** *Tell me about the erotic nature of tattooing.*

**SHAW:** The erotic nature of tattooing is like the erotic nature of wearing clothes, it's like the erotic nature of applying makeup, it's only as erotic as you perceive it to be. Somebody might have a thing for high-heeled shoes or black trench coats. Or tattoos.

**SECONDS:** *What about the physical act of tattooing?*

**SHAW:** It's no more erotic than the act of performing minor surgery. On a day-to-day level, a tattoo is a procedure that, as a practitioner, I do. There's nothing particularly erotic to me about my work.

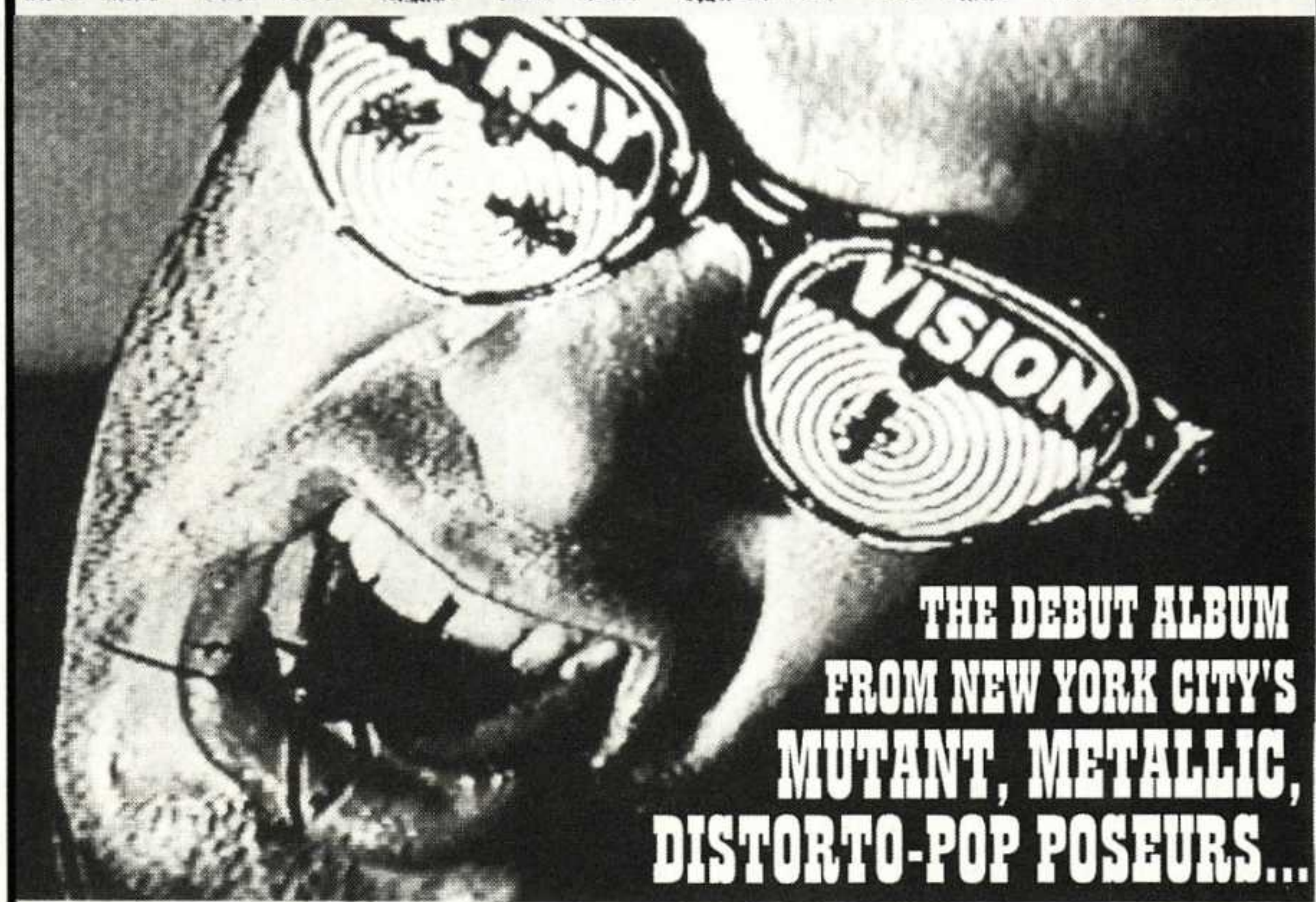
**SECONDS:** *Is there a difference between tattooing a guy and a girl?*

**SHAW:** Well, nothing more than the obvious.

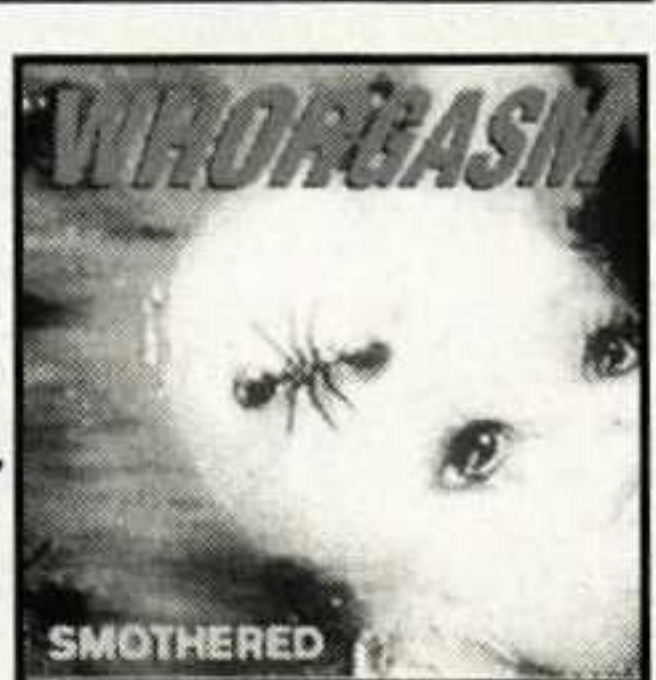
**SECONDS:** *With a woman, you're working on parts of them that not every guy gets to see. There has to be an element of trust on their part.*

**SHAW:** As much as there would have to be when they go

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see a doctor or anything like that. I'm not some guy in the subway going, "Hey baby, show me your tits." I'm not going to sit there fondling somebody's titty while I'm tattooing them. It's *work* for me. I'm a professional, and I conduct myself accordingly in my "bedside manner" — no pun intended.

**SECONDS:** *Are the boyfriends there?*

**SHAW:** I don't let anybody sit in on the tattoo process. If your boyfriend's getting a tattoo and you're not, then you could have a seat and read a magazine just like you would at the dentist's office.

**SECONDS:** *Did you ever tattoo any penises?*

**SHAW:** No! It's of no particular interest to me. People getting their peckers tattooed is not the bread and butter of the tattoo field.

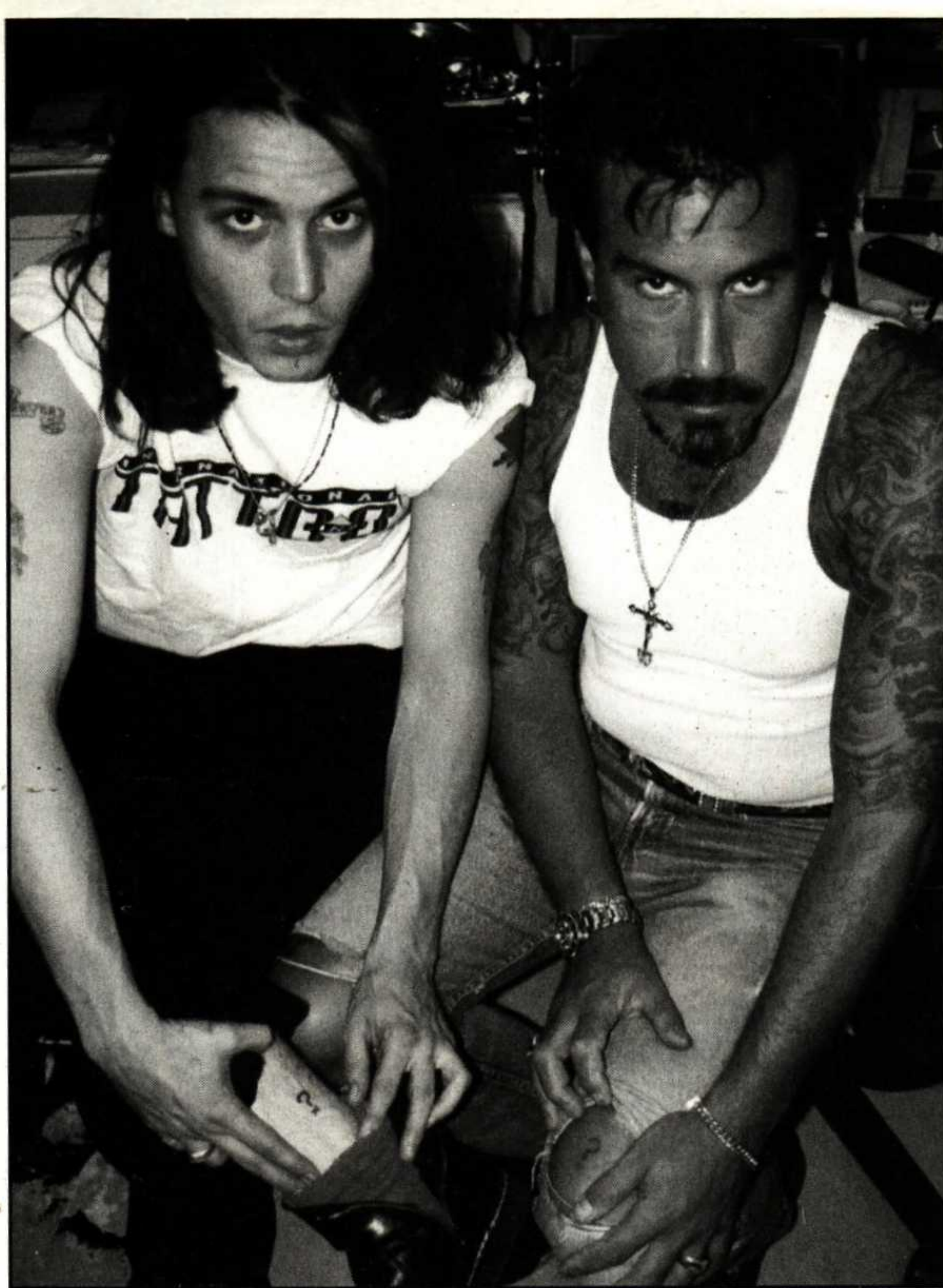
**SECONDS:** *Are there parts of the body you recommend not tattooing?*

**SHAW:** I always suggest things, but I can't dictate to people what they want to do with their own bodies. If somebody wants to have hot rod flames coming out their asshole, all I can do as a professional is tell them it might sting a little more there. If that's what you want to do, here's how much it's going to cost.

**SECONDS:** *What's the most painful place to be tattooed?*

**SHAW:** Pain is a relative thing. When you're going to experience self-inflicted pain — which is basically what tattooing amounts to — then you are pretty much in control of your response to that pain. It's not like you're going to have your leg amputated in an emergency room without anesthesia. It's a tiny little scratching sensation that people can choose to make as painful or as unpainful as they wish. It's a slight uncomfortableness that people can react to badly or stoically as they see fit. It's not a big deal, but people — depending on their psychological makeup — are known to make it into a big deal, or just kick back and go with it ...

**SECONDS:** *For some people the pain is a rite of passage.*



Johnny Depp and Jonathan Shaw, 1993



EXIT THE DRAGON

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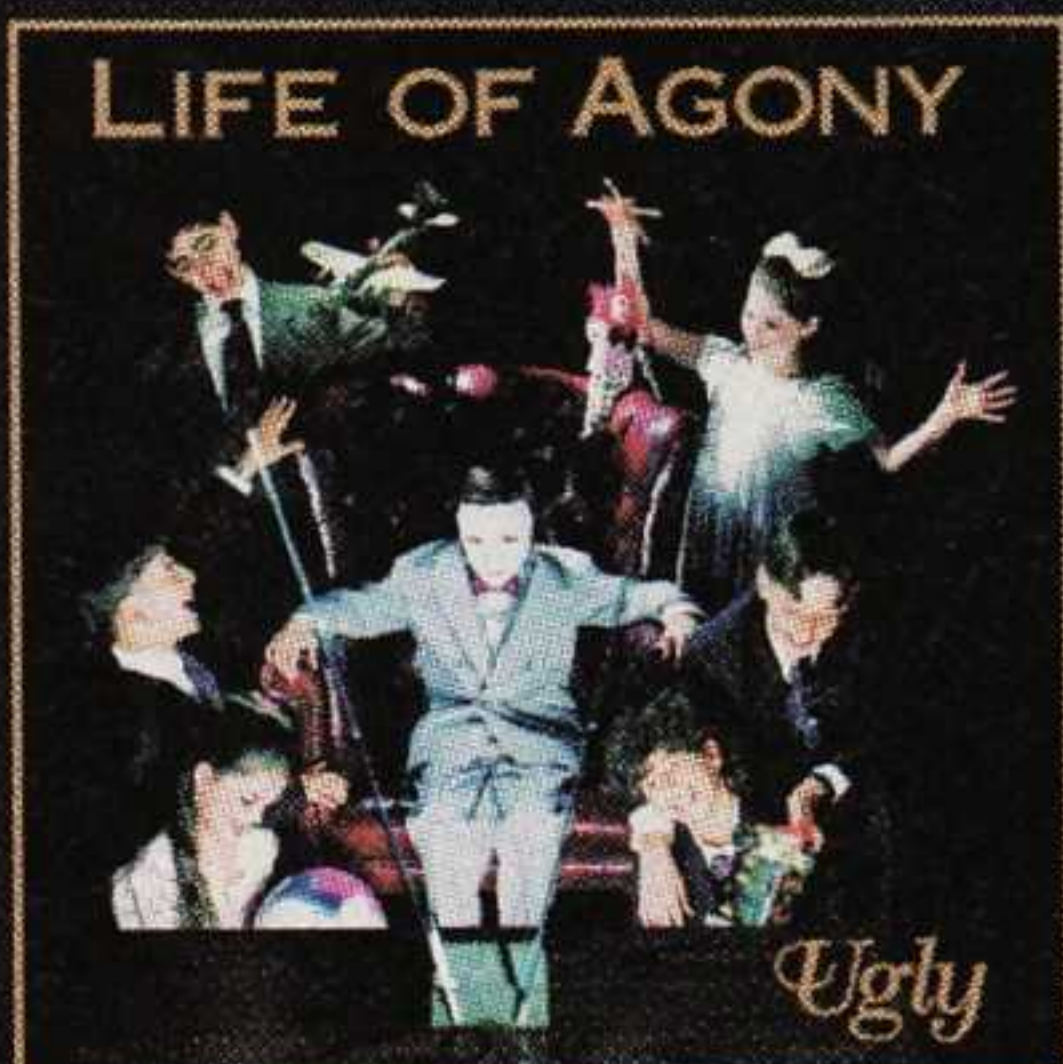
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**SHAW:** That's part of the ritual, too. If it didn't hurt a little bit then there wouldn't be that "shut up and take it like a man" thing that people have to do to get spiritually through the whole process of tattoo.

**SECONDS:** *Am I right in saying you're one of the best known tattoo artists of our era?*

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

**SECONDS:** *Obviously your work is very good, but there had to be some other magic ingredient that elevated you above other tattoo artists.*

**SHAW:** I don't know about that. I'm good at what I do. And try to innovate and keep it fresh.

**SECONDS:** *Your connection with **Johnny Depp** is well-known. Did he come to you?*

**SHAW:** Tattooing aside, he's an old friend of mine. And he's got a bunch of tattoos from me. But there's a lot more to be said for word-of-mouth and a happy client with a good-looking tattoo than there is for all the media exposure in the world.

**SECONDS:** *Tell me some of the other celebrities you've done.*

**SHAW:** I've tattooed tons of people. I was sitting around the other day trying to imagine how many people I could have tattooed over the last two decades and it might be enough people to populate a small city. It's possible that one out of fifty people in New York City is wearing a tattoo by me or someone working with me.

**SECONDS:** *You did **Vanilla Ice**?*

**SHAW:** Yeah, I did Vanilla Ice ... are you trying to embarrass me, man? I mean, he's a good kid but every time his name comes up people seem to scoff.

**SECONDS:** *According to your bio, you've tattooed, "Johnny Depp, Vanilla Ice, MTV's **Rikki Rachtman** and music groups including **Sepultura**, **Joe Public** and **The Cure**."*

**SHAW:** And a lot of others too. I tattoo a lot of people and a lot of them are celebrities. **Kate Moss** I did a tattoo on recently ...

**SECONDS:** *Anybody you'd like to do?*

**SHAW:** No.

**SECONDS:** *You were one of the first artists noted for tattooing higher-visibility individuals. You take icons and change them ...*

**SHAW:** I bring them down to the level of living, breathing, piss-and-shitting, cigarette smoking, tattoo wearing human beings, which is how God made them. Johnny Depp is not an icon, he's a guy. He might be a genius, but he's still just a guy. We're all just people and no matter how Elvis-ized the whole thing becomes, if you stand next to **Michael Jackson** in an elevator and he farts it's going to smell. If he gets tattooed — it's going to bleed.

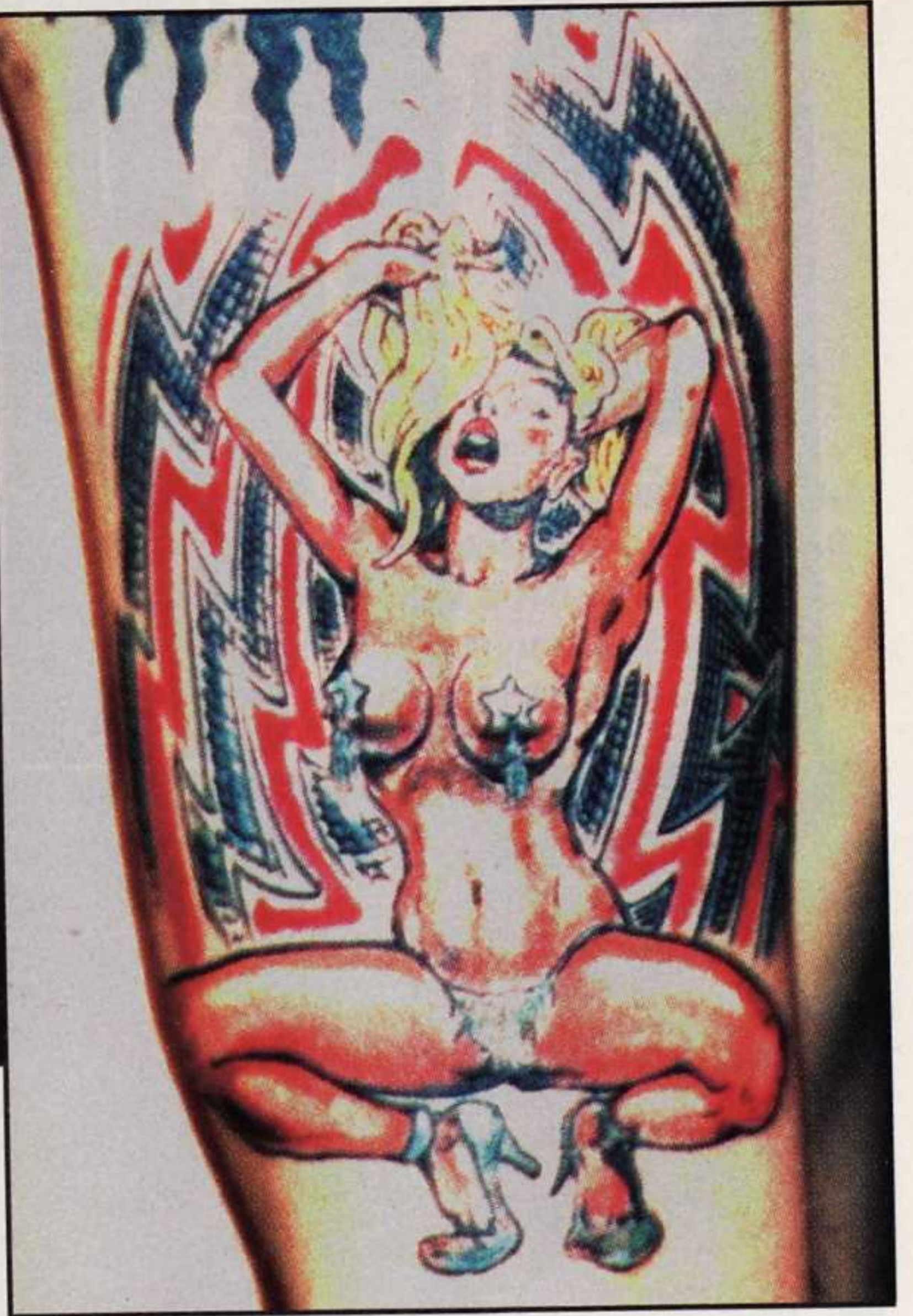
**SECONDS:** *Ever see another tattooist's work and feel like you could have done better?*

**SHAW:** All the time. As I walk down the street and see tattoos on people, whether they're done by me or anybody else — I probably only see two or three tattoos a year that I consider fucking great. Most of the tattoos I see, including my own, don't really do it for me.

**SECONDS:** *Are you just jaded?*

**SHAW:** Not at all. Every tattoo that I do, whether I'm in love with the imagery or not, I do with great precision, as well as I possibly can. That doesn't mean I like it. I don't have to like it, all I have to do is do it and do it well. Once in a while, somebody comes to me and says, "What do you like? I've got a whole arm, just let the imagery flow from your mind and do it as if you were doing it on your own skin." Those are the kind of people that make my job worth doing. Then, I can try and do something really great, as opposed to something good. I'm not looking to do anything less than good, ever. I have to create something that makes a visual statement and most stuff you look at just doesn't — whether it's tattooing, advertising, book covers, whatever ... you want to look at something and have it shout out to you visually. A tattoo is supposed to





have a bold visual impact that can be summed up by the mind's eye and the soul's reaction in a split second. If you have to say, "Come here, buddy, and let me look at that" and look deep into the tattoo for five minutes to try and figure out what the fuck's going on, that's *not* what a tattoo is about. A tattoo is supposed to speak loud, clear, and the whole zen of the *simplicity* of a tattoo is what makes a tattoo great. If a tattoo says it all real fast and sums it right up in one indelible image, then it's a good tattoo. If the tattoo requires a master's degree to understand and a twenty-power magnifying glass to read, then it's not a fucking tattoo, it's an exercise in self-gratification for the tattoo artist. I'm not saying tattoos with detail are shit; I'm saying the tattoo has to have a strong construction, just like any piece of art.

**SECONDS:** A lot of times I'll ask a person, "Why don't you get a tattoo?" and they'll say, "I don't want a clearly discernible identifying mark on me."

**SHAW:** Everything somebody says has a translation in

**"If a tattoo says it all real fast and sums it right up in one indelible image, then it's a good tattoo."**



reality. What that translates into, for me — observer of human nature that I am — is that they're saying, "I don't want to make a commitment to any particular statement." It has nothing to do with the fucking cops. You get a tattoo on your left shoulder blade — what are the cops going to do, write that down? It's ridiculous. What it really translates to is, "I am a young American fast food fashion victim who doesn't know his ass from his elbow and there's nothing so important to me in this life that I would want to carve it into my own skin. That's what it says to me. Fear of permanent commitment to *anything*. Fuckin' pathetic, isn't it?"

**SECONDS:** As the Alternative Rock culture dies down, will the tattooing craze do the same?

**SHAW:** Tattooing will always be around. You might have a certain group of people that wake up one morning and go, "We got all these tattoos because we thought **Anthony Kiedis** was cool. Now we don't think he's so cool anymore and we wish we'd never gotten these damn things." Oh well ...

**SECONDS:** How would you like to be remembered in a tattoo encyclopedia?

**SHAW:** I guess that I tattooed for a certain number of years ... I've pioneered some very popular styles. I hopefully might have done something to elevate the standards ... I don't know. My work is just something I've done, I've stuck with it — I've done quality tattooing on a shit-load of people for a lot of years. That's all.

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