



October 14, 2010/Command PR

## Ink, inc.

### Is the tattoo industry sacrificing its soul for mainstream success?

by AMY KINGSLEY : [AKINGSLEY@LVCITYLIFE.COM](mailto:AKINGSLEY@LVCITYLIFE.COM)

Tattoo shops don't hum with activity; they buzz -- the drone of bad wiring or electro-shock therapy.

Multiply that a hundred times over, and you've got The Biggest Tattoo Show on Earth, a buzzing bunch of skin-tinting artists led by ink kingpin Mario Barth during the first weekend in October. They divided the south wing of the Mandalay Bay Convention Center into dozens of tiny tattoo studios that sounded like a swarm of locusts.

Between the working shops sat booths devoted to ink sales, aftercare products and tattoo-themed merchandise. And in the middle, stood Barth's booth -- emblazoned with the names of his two Las Vegas shops, Starlight Tattoo and King Ink.

It was doing no tattoo business the afternoon of Oct. 2. Racks of T-shirts and other apparel occupied most of the space. Barth showed up for an interview wearing one of his own T-shirts and forearms full of tattoos.

Barth, who is a native of Austria, moved his convention from New Jersey to Las Vegas two years ago, following the launch of his first shop, Starlight Tattoos, in Mandalay Bay. He followed it earlier this year with King Ink, an upscale hydra of a lifestyle brand that squeezes a tattoo studio and piercing shop into a Rococo-style ultra-lounge and performance space.

Barth is something of the rock star in the tattoo world. His own shops feature his portrait, with placid blue eyes and shaggy hair staring down at the activity below. As tattoos moved from the margins to the mainstream, his name became as synonymous with body modification as Louis Vuitton is to handbags.

Barth has had enough success to go around. During the convention, he led a seminar on marketing and branding your tattoo business. For \$500, he also helped individual artists hone their tattooing skills.

The self-described "King of Ink" is one of the best examples of a trend that's transforming the ancient art of tattoo. It's happening all over the world, but especially in Las Vegas, where tattoo shops have gone upscale, moving from gritty city streets to the glitzy casinos of the Las Vegas Strip. Tattoos used to scream, "Fuck you, polite society!" Now they're another consumer product, peddled alongside brand name booze and designer clothes.

Some tattoo artists believe the business has lost something along the way -- call it soul or integrity. Tattoos used to mean something: membership in a tribe, or a motorcycle gang or a band of outlaws. Now it's decoration, like a shirt, necklace or a novelty hat.



PHOTO: BILL HUGHES  
Mario Barth, owner of King Ink and Starlight Tattoo



PHOTO: BILL HUGHES  
Eddie Funk, aka Crazy Philadelphia Eddie, signs copies of his book.

Eddie Funk, also known as Crazy Philadelphia Eddie, got into the business in 1952. He retired from tattooing and now works full-time hawking his memoirs at conventions like this one. When he sees what's happened to the business during the last few decades, he shudders.

"I think it's insanity," he said. "I think the world has gone insane. I don't pay no attention to the business. Tattooing don't exist anymore. It's a whole different ball game, and I'm not interested in playing."

Nowhere is that more obvious than Las Vegas. In 2001, the tattoo magazine *Skin & Ink* wrote a feature about the tattoo scene in Las Vegas. It didn't include a single tattoo shop located inside a casino. Now, if you ask anyone outside the city about the tattoo scene here, they'd probably mention Barth's shops, Hart & Huntington inside the Hard Rock and Vince Neil Ink.

Shops in casinos, and the sheer number of shops that have cropped up in the valley during the last decade or so, would have been inconceivable to the first artists who set up shop here. Back in 1976, tattoo shops were illegal because the state and county hadn't bothered figuring out how to license and regulate them. That changed when Doc Dog and Smilin' Paul opened the Las Vegas Tattoo Company with the consent of the county, which worked hand-in-hand with the business to work out the regulations.

After the Las Vegas Tattoo Company opened for business, the shop went to work. Not only did Dog and Paul intend to bring tattoo artistry to the ink-starved masses, they also set out to destroy the competition. Literally. According to legend, competing tattoo shops often found their windows broken and bullet holes in the walls. None of the vandalism was ever officially tied to Las Vegas Tattoo Company.

Mari Gonzales, who owns Koolsville Tattoo, said she opened her first shop in 1987 near the intersection of Main Street and Charleston Avenue. Soon after, she had her windows broken. So she moved across the street. The next time the vandals hit, they broke her windows and flooded her shop. Carey Hart and Barth never had to put up with anything like that.

"It took all that time to get into the industry," Gonzales said. "Now we've got all these young guys who just fell into it or jumped on the bandwagon."

Gonzales said she's amazed at some of the prices the high-end casino shops charge for their work. Many have a \$150 minimum. Her shop offers \$10 tattoos, many to young neighborhood women who want their children's names.

"I'm not in this business to take every dollar they have," she said.

Even though the corporatization of tattoos might be squeezing some shops, it's also opening opportunities for talented young artists who might not have considered entering a field relegated to outcasts. Barth said tattoo artistry is experiencing a Golden Age -- similar to rock 'n' roll in the '60s. Both passed through a primitive stage into an era of mainstream acceptance and artistic excellence.

"The bad side taste, the stigma of tattooing has disappeared," Barth said. "And the void is filled with art."

Any customer who walks into a licensed shop on or off the Strip can be reasonably sure they won't get hepatitis from a tattoo or piercing. They've also got a pretty good chance of picking up some fine artwork, whether they go with a chain shop or an independent.

That's quite a change from the sanitation practices of the 1950s and 1960s, when Funk had his shop.

"Sanitation? There was none," Funk said. "You had blood and guts all over your hands, and you were eating a sandwich!"



PHOTO:MAUREEN ADAMO

In addition to tattoos, booths sold designer contact lenses and clothing. Artists also did plenty of skin business.



PHOTO:MAUREEN ADAMO



PHOTO:MAUREEN ADAMO



PHOTO:MAUREEN ADAMO

Now, college kids give tattoos. Since the business became a respectable one, serious artists with degrees have entered the field, swapping canvas for skin. And most people in the business, even the old timers, say it's elevated the quality of the work.

And young tattoo artists have opportunities now they never would have dreamed of before. In addition to owning and operating a successful shop, they might be able to franchise, have a clothing line and maybe even a reality television show. The possibilities are endless.

As career opportunities increase, so does the customer base. Gone are the lines of sailors and throngs of motorcycle gangs. These days, middle-aged suburban women constitute the fastest-growing market sector. Barth said 72 million Americans have tattoos. As many as 30 million will consider getting one this year.

This sudden embrace by polite society has led to some changes in the business of tattooing. Back in Funk's day, customer service meant keeping a hammer nearby, to keep the customer in line. These days, artists are expected to be as bubbly and polite as a restaurant hostess.

Jime Litwalk is an artist at Hart & Huntington. He was recruited to the shop based on his portfolio and his personality, he said.

"It's more than being a good artist," he said. "It's about being a good person and making sure you fit really well with the vibe of the shop."

Thanks to reality television, the intimidation factor has all but disappeared from the tattoo industry. People who become familiar with the tattoo shops on their televisions have certain expectations when it comes to the real world. And if your customer service is not up to par, your Yelp rating will suffer.

Barth said this year's convention featured more vendors hawking office products, such as accounting software and scheduling programs. The seminar series included a session on bookkeeping for tattoo businesses, which is as sure a sign of going straight as anything.

Professionalism is good for the business. The more people feel comfortable getting tattoos, the more customers will walk into shops. And if artists know they are going to get paid, they are more likely to stick with the profession.

"This used to be a profession for people who didn't want to take a regular job," Barth said. "Now we have so many talented artists who are so versatile. They can do traditional tattoos or portraits. They can do anything."

Nes Andrión has a tattoo shop in Reno and would like to open another in Las Vegas. He'd like a neighborhood space that caters to locals. After 17 years in the business, he's thrilled by the sudden popularity of his art form.

"It's a lot safer and more respectable. Tattoos are a much better business than they used to be," he said. "It makes a lot more people want to get tattooed. And it gives kids who want to learn how to do something a trade that they can learn."

Andrión is a fan of Barth's, and other big-name tattooists. He said artists such as Barth and Ed Hardy of the infamous T-shirts give younger people something to aspire to. Of course, by this time next year, Andrión and Barth might be competitors several times over. King Ink would like to open a third shop in town. By then, Vegas may have more than 200 shops, and all of them might be finding the limits of mainstream acceptance.



PHOTO:MAUREEN ADAMO  
Mari Gonzales (bottom) displayed her portfolio and waited for customers.



PHOTO:MAUREEN ADAMO