



WORDS BARBARA PAVONE IMAGES MARIO BARTH

THE KING OF INK

Here's a question: If you, yes you, could spend one hour talking to anyone, yes anyone, in the tattoo industry, who would you choose? I'll give you a second to ponder this proposition, but if the name Mario Barth isn't coming into your mind right about now - stop. You're making the wrong decision.

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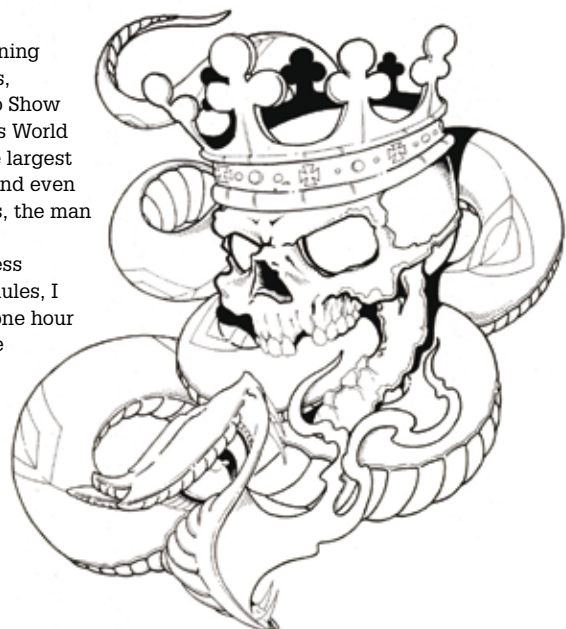
Growing up in Austria, Barth began setting his tattoo roots at a time when tattooing was illegal in his home country and turf wars between tattoo artists were rampant. The scene was dangerous and it wasn't always about getting the best looking artwork possible rather, it was about being rebellious.

Over the past few decades, Barth has come a long way from doing his first tattoo with homemade tools at the age of 12 (which his friend refuses to have covered up to this day, but can you really blame him?) to winning over

200 international awards, opening up numerous successful shops, organizing The Biggest Tattoo Show on Earth (which was Guinness World Record certified in 2009 as the largest tattoo convention in history) and even creating Intenze Products. Yes, the man is brilliant.

Following a couple of fruitless attempts at syncing our schedules, I was finally able to spend my one hour talking with Mario Barth as he called me from Las Vegas.

HAVING STARTED OUT AT A TIME WHEN TATTOOING WAS OUTRIGHT ILLEGAL IN AUSTRIA, WHAT DREW YOU TO THE ART FORM IN





BACK IN THE DAY, THERE WAS SO MANY LITTLE THINGS LIKE, IF YOU DON'T GET TATTOOED, YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED IN THE SHOP. IF YOU CAME IN WITH YOUR GIRLFRIEND, SHE HAS TO WAIT OUTSIDE BECAUSE YOU GET TATTOOED AND SHE DOESN'T.

to do it, so let me do it.' I did it right on top of his hand, between the thumb and the other finger, and it was a little skull which I put on there. That's how it actually started."

DO YOU REMEMBER HOW YOU FELT WHEN YOU WERE ABOUT TO ATTEMPT THAT FIRST SKULL? ANY NERVES?

"Not really, it was such an exciting thing to actually do. It was just a natural thing to actually start working on it; you didn't think what you really did. I mean, the tattoos at that time didn't have such a significance, it was just another mark. You weren't thinking like oh, you're gonna create this art piece.☺

MARIO ON... KING INK

"It's an ultra lounge and then at midnight it turns into a nightclub, and at three it's an after hours club. We're doing like 1,000 or 1,500 people a night there [and] those 1,500 people get educated during the night. We have the history of tattooing in the bar tops, we're playing Japanese tattooing movies on the television screens, there's so much stuff in there!"

THE FIRST PLACE?

"What basically happened is we had a little group of friends, which we called each other like a little street gang. Nothing like what you would see here in the States; it was just hanging out on the corner and being cool, and doing stupid stuff. One night, one of my friends said, 'Hey, we should get a tattoo' and then it was just like nobody wanted to do it.

"I had it explained one time by my father, he had a tattoo on his forearm, which he got in the military, and he was explaining to me how they did that with a little pen, like a ballpoint pen, and put needles in front of it and sewing thread and they used India ink, so I was like, 'Hey, I know how



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you were just like, 'Let me do it!' It wouldn't have mattered if there would have been three dots and everything else would have fallen out of the skin, nobody would have cared, so it was a different attitude. And the guy still has the tattoo, by the way, so it's not like he covered it up. I tried to cover it up, but he doesn't let me."

SO THE WHOLE ATTITUDE TOWARDS TATTOOING WAS VERY DIFFERENT BACK THEN?

"It was a real rebellion thing, you know? It was like we wanted to be tattooed so people wouldn't talk to us. Not like right now, you're tattooed then everybody approaches you and talks to you about how great your tattoos are. We wanted to be tattooed so people crossed the street. This is why we were basically outcasts, you know, we made ourselves this and it



was good that way, it was our way of life.

It was illegal to get them in my country, there was no legal tattoo studio, so it means anybody who had tattoos was automatically being stamped as an outlaw."

Having completed his first tattoo, Barth continued to offer the occasional ink when asked, but a few years later, another rebellious scene drew him even farther into the tattoo world.

"When I was about 17, I got really caught up in the motorcycle scene and then it really flared up. It was like everybody had tattoos and I got really interested in it, and I became very good

friends with my tattoo artist at that time, his name is Conny, and he actually tattooed me first. He gave me a half a sleeve as a first tattoo, and all from there is history."

Tattooing out of his house with homemade equipment, Barth's only exposure to tattooing was anything he could glimpse in the underground. "We had no tattoo magazines, we had no information, we had no wholesalers, no retailers, couldn't get any supplies, so we had to manufacture everything that we worked with. It was really, really primitive." And the situations artists were faced with on a regular basis weren't any better.





TEN YEARS AGO, THE GENERAL PUBLIC STILL DIDN'T SUPPORT TATTOOING AS MUCH AS IT DOES NOW. EVERY TATTOO SHOW WAS HELD IN A HOTEL IN A BALLROOM, IT WAS STILL THAT CLICHÉ, SO WE RENTED THE MEADOWLANDS EXPO CENTER. PEOPLE WERE THINKING WE WERE CRAZY...



MARIO ON... EDUCATING THE PUBLIC

"It's not about the 70 million people which have a tattoo [in America], it's about the 230 million which don't. And it's not that they should get one, but it should be that they will be educated who we are."

And the first lesson they should all learn? "We're regular human beings; we love what we do; we love our art form; we love to modify our body. We're in the year 2011, we all don't have to wear a Burberry suit anymore to be successful in business."

SEEING AS TATTOOING WAS ILLEGAL, DID YOU EVER ENCOUNTER ANY REAL DANGER?

"At that time, there was a huge turf war between tattoo artists. It was a totally underground scene ... If somebody found out that you tattoo, you had to be ready that this guy is gonna show up in your apartment or show up in your place, or walk in on you when you tattoo somebody somewhere, and you get into a fistfight. There was a lot of that stuff. It was just a real different situation."

"There were like four tattoo artists in the whole country and they knew of each other, and even those four were eyeing each other up. It was almost like you were always ready to fight anywhere you go. If you were a tattoo artist, you're digging into that other person's territory automatically. You had to stand your ground to actually do it and keep going, and try to get more clients because your clients were also in that field, so it was like they went always with the stronger guy. Nobody wanted to get tattooed by a weak tattoo artist."

Around 1987, Barth took his first trip over to the United States. A trip that would literally change the entire course of his future tattoo life. At that time, there wasn't the slightest indication of the five extremely successful American shops he would go on to own, in fact, he had no idea legal tattoo studios even existed until he set foot on American soil, in the city he describes as the obvious choice.

"When I travelled to the States, I went to Orlando. Like any European, we come over, we go to New York first and then we go to Orlando. I opened up the phonebook and I was like, what is this? Is there tattoo places here? So I check it out in the phonebook and I find American Tattoo, which is Sailor Bill Johnson, so [that's] basically the first tattoo shop I really know." The first, and the most influential on his career:

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU VISITED SAILOR BILL JOHNSON?

"I walked in there and I was like okay, I'm gonna go in and I'm gonna ask him some questions, but I was ready to get into a full-blown war in there, thinking if I go in and say 'Hey, I'm a tattoo artist from Austria, how you guys doing?' and then those guys go up and pull a shotgun out and we're gonna be fighting in there. This is what I expected because in Europe there was a couple shops in Germany and they had huge signs in the front window that said, 'If you're a tattoo artist, fuck off.' If you're a tattoo artist and you walk in, you will be bleeding."

"So I walk in and there's this big guy, Sailor Bill Johnson ... I had a translator with me at that time, which was my dad, and he said like, 'Listen, my son is a tattoo artist in Austria' and I was like okay, there we go, it's all gonna go downhill from here. And he's like, 'Oh, that's great, how you doing? How long have you been tattooing?' and I was

like what the fuck is this? I was totally thrown back and then I was hanging there for about four hours.

"I really was totally amazed by him. He was so friendly, he was so out there, so open with answering questions and I was like, that's different, so he left a lasting impression. I walked out of the shop and I said I'm going back to my country and opening up a legal tattoo studio. And I basically did."

WHAT WAS THAT FIRST STUDIO LIKE?

"It took me a year and half to turn over the ordinances and laws and I opened the first legal tattoo studio in 1989 in Austria. It was a very, very small studio, was maybe 350 square feet, but it had →



THE KING OF INK



MARIO ON... TATTOO MAGAZINES

"I can't wait every day when I open up a magazine to see the new talent that's in there. People that nobody's heard of; people that have been tattooing six months, which outperform people working 25 years. Not only in the art piece, but also in the technique ... and it's only possible because of the freedom of the Internet and the exchange of information we all get now."

a very friendly approach. It was really Americanized, it had all American flags in it and steer skulls, and what we thought is really cool.

"Back in the day, there was so many little things like, if you don't get tattooed, you're not allowed in the shop. If you came in with your girlfriend, she had to wait outside because you get tattooed and she doesn't. It's like barbaric laws. Like, this is my cave, don't come in."

As business grew thanks to the shop's welcoming atmosphere, Barth began immersing himself more and more in the history and culture of tattooing. "I just got obsessed with travelling and meeting tattoo artists all over the world, and I was really starting to get into the educational part. That was really always my driving force because I was like, how come everybody tries to keep this so secluded from everybody else? I started to form organizations in Austria, rally the tattoo artists together, even the ones which were at first fighting me, like 'Listen, we're together in this, there's enough people for us to tattoo.'"

Working with some of the most respected artists in the world, including the sacred Suluape Tatau family in Samoa and Japan's Horitoshi 1 (who has put a full tebori back piece on Barth), Mario Barth was triggered to continue his search for the driving forces behind tattooing by the paradox that engulfs the art form. "It was always important enough to be banned throughout history, but it was never important enough to be put in history books. It's interesting. For me, it's like, how



IT'S STILL THE SAME CONCEPT THAT SAILOR BILL JOHNSON TOLD ME A LONG TIME AGO. GET THE PEOPLE IN; BE FRIENDLY; MAKE THEM COME BACK...

come if everybody says tattooing is not worthy to be even named in an art book, then why was it so important that it was banned during our lifetime?"

YOU NOW OWN FIVE AMAZING SHOPS IN AMERICA, TELL ME ABOUT YOUR MOVE OVER...

"When I opened up the shop in South Beach with my partner, Lou Rubino,

we wanted to build the most exclusive tattoo studio to set a new level (and they certainly did with the first OSHA-approved studio in the country). Then I moved to New Jersey and built another really high-end studio, really classy ... then I took the most frequented highway in New Jersey, where nobody said you could ever survive with a tattoo studio, and we built a studio there. It was the



first \$500,000 studio and it was amazing.

"Then was a plateau for me. I was like, where am I going next? So I started the tattoo shows about ten years ago. I wanted to get a grip on the general public. Ten years ago, the general public still didn't support tattooing as much as it does now. Every tattoo show was held in a hotel in a ballroom, it was still that cliché, so we rented the Meadowlands Expo Center, which in New Jersey is the biggest exposition center. People were thinking we were crazy, but what it did, it gave the tattoo show legitimacy because the expo center was hosting the biggest home shows and the biggest trade-shows, so it was where everybody in the normal public would think oh, it's safe to go."

Having established success in New Jersey, the never-resting Barth decided to once again set the bar even higher for himself. Choosing Vegas for his next move, Barth went after the MGM Group. "That, of course, was like insanity at that time,"

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admits Barth, but as history teaches us, there is nothing Mario Barth can't do.

Following two years of negotiations with the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino, Barth opened a shop inside on February 16, 2008. "That was my next step to the mainstream because now, you go in somewhere where all America goes to, Mandalay Bay has a lot of credential to be an upscale hotel, so now people walk by and say 'Wow, there's a tattoo shop in here?' It gained legitimacy. And I can tell you still, 'till today, around 90 percent of the clients are first-timers in that store."

YOUR LATEST SHOP IS KING INK IN VEGAS, WHICH IS ALSO A BAR? HOW

DID THAT CONCEPT COME ABOUT?

"MGM Group was so impressed with [Mandalay Bay] that I got a chance to do another one at the Mirage, so now the whole thing shifted because I didn't want to build the same store again. I was sitting down and I was like, what do tattoo artists have in common? We all party hard; we all work 12 hours a day, 14 hours a day; we do what we want; we wanna listen to our music; we wanna have a drink, so I was like okay, let's do the crazy thing and build a bar in the tattoo shop.

"It's still the same concept that Sailor Bill Johnson told me a long time ago. Get the people in; be friendly; make them come back..." ★

WANT MORE...

Part two of this mammoth interview with Mario will be published next issue...