



WORDS BARBARA PAVONE IMAGES MARIO BARTH



THE KING OF INK

PART TWO

Here we go again... the second half of tattoo legend Mario Barth's extensive, intimate interview. Having already tackled his upbringing in Austria, his move to the United States and his ever-growing tattoo world domination in Part I, the King of Ink now talks about his artists, Tasmanian Devil tattoos, how he keeps motivated after 30 years in the industry and what's next on his never-ending agenda...

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ALL OF YOUR ARTISTS ARE INCREDIBLE - HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT CHOOSING THEM? DO YOU TRAIN THEM OR JUST LET THEM DO THEIR THING?

"I take them on and then train them constantly. They also have an order to train each other constantly. I have an open phone to all of my artists; every single one of my artists has my personal cell phone number and it doesn't matter where I'm at in the world, they can call me at any time they want to and I will sit down and I will check out their work."
"I check all the tattoos which have been done in my tattoo shops every single day. I get e-mails every morning - with photos - from all the work that has been done the day before and I

go through every single tattoo in the picture. I make comments, I pick them out, I mean, obviously, I'm only picking out the ones where I think we should make some changes. I'm gonna call up and say like, listen, what's going on? Why did this happen? Why did that happen? What's the situation? So it's a really interactive partnership which I hold with my tattoo artists.

With time and innovation bringing an increasing need for a growing team, Barth proclaims that one of his greatest keys to success is good old fashioned teamwork. "We're like a big family, I have like 180 kids," he laughs and continues, "I don't believe that one person can rule the world, you know?"



I BELIEVE THAT WE ALL HAVE OUR FAULTS, WE ALL HAVE OUR LITTLE EXTREMES - THAT'S THE REASON WHY WE ARE TATTOO ARTISTS AND NOT BAKERS OR HOMEBUILDERS.

I just think that one person can give instructions and then he needs an army to follow, and that's really how we build our team. We build it very, very strong, and I try to be as good of a leader as it gets."

Good indeed. Barth admits to a rather innovative approach when it comes to managing his team, which involves embracing the uniqueness of each individual, rather than trying to shape everyone so their thought processes and beliefs match his own. There's also the fact that it's rather hard to get dumped by Barth.

"In good or in bad times, I don't believe in firing people. I have people working with me 15 years now and I'm 15 years in the States, so I believe

that we all have our faults, we all have our little extremes - that's the reason why we are tattoo artists and not bakers or homebuilders. I try to mould around those little elements we all have because even if it feels for me that maybe that person is not correct, for him, it's might be. That's maybe his life; that's his way of expressing himself; that's his way of dealing with the situation."

And when it comes to working for Barth, it's not all work and no play either. "Sometimes we have some crazy ideas where we take the whole crew on a class trip like, let's all go in the mountains for a week and then we party it up there and we come back and work harder." ↻

MARIO BARTH ON ... HIS TEAM

[It's a] very, very young team. It's crazy, I have like, our color company, all my people have to work out. They go to work at nine o'clock, but instead of going to work they have to go to the gym, and they get paid for it. So we have a real different concept of building a new generation of workers, and a new generation of businessmen. All my people are trained to hopefully take over one day and be on their own.



MARIO BARTH ON... LIFE AS A TATTOO ARTIST

It's a very tough life; you do this for 30 years and every time you step into the tattoo studio, regardless of what happened in your private life, you have to be perfect. I mean it's crazy. It doesn't matter if my grandmother died, it doesn't matter if I had a fight with my wife, or whatever happened in life, I have to go in, I have to sit down and turn this off and turn on the tattoo artist. It's just a crazy job, you know?

ARE THERE ANY TATTOOS YOU PERSONALLY WON'T DO BECAUSE OF THEIR PARTICULAR DESIGN, STYLE OR SIZE?

"No, I do the little rose as happy as I would do the backpiece. It's a big surprise to a lot of people, it's like, 'Oh, Mario, you're still doing little roses for a hundred bucks?' And I'm like, 'Yes, I do, because it's my job.' I'm a tattoo artist. I understand that everybody wants to be this great Van Gogh artist, but your job is to be a tattoo artist. It means if a person gives you the honor to work on their body and make an alteration for the rest of their life, it doesn't matter what it is and how big it is, it's your duty as a tattoo artist to make this happen to your best abilities.

"I can come in and people ask me,

I DO THE LITTLE ROSE AS HAPPY AS I WOULD DO THE BACKPIECE. IT'S A BIG SURPRISE TO A LOT OF PEOPLE, IT'S LIKE, 'OH, MARIO, YOU'RE STILL DOING LITTLE ROSES FOR A HUNDRED BUCKS?' AND I'M LIKE, 'YES, I DO, BECAUSE IT'S MY JOB'.



IMAGINE YOU HAVE A FIVE MILLION DOLLAR MANSION AND YOU WALK IN AND THERE'S THIS BROKEN MOULDING, AND EVERY DAY YOU SEE THIS BROKEN MOULDING - YOU WILL NOT SEE THE FIVE MILLION DOLLAR HOME ANYMORE.

MARIO BARTH ON ... THE INDUSTRY'S RESPONSE TO SUCCESS

Over the years, I've seen so many tattoo artists [who are] very successful, but every time they get asked from outside the industry 'What are you doing for a living?' they look down and say, 'I'm a tattoo artist.' I'm like, why you looking down? The first part, that's what you are and then secondary, our own industry in itself always was a little bit biased to success. It was always oh, you can't have too much success; you can't have a nice house; you can't have a nice car. I'm like, says who?

Our own industry had to learn, and it's learning now slowly, but it still has a lot of learning to do, people can be successful in tattooing. And they will enjoy the fruit of life. But industry peers about 15 years ago were looking down upon when somebody became successful like, oh, that's not right, what is he driving? A Mercedes? Are you crazy?



'Hey, you wanna do a Tasmanian Devil?' and I'm like, 'Sit down, I'll give you the best one you ever had.' It doesn't matter to me; I have no emotions attached to the tattoo. None. Zero. My emotions are attached to the client.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD TATTOO ARTIST THEN, IN YOUR OPINION?

"I'm not discrediting anybody or crediting anybody more, but we have to be able to switch with our client because we're not working on the same canvas at all times. Every person is different - different emotion, different beliefs, different historical outcomes, where the person lives - so it's like, it changes daily, and so our art form should change daily as well.

"Because the person, if he looks in the mirror and the tattoo is only five percent off of what he ever wanted, it will come out in 25 years. Imagine you have a five million dollar mansion and you walk in and there's this broken moulding, and every day you see this broken moulding - you will not see the five million dollar home anymore. You will focus on this moulding every day you come home, and that's the same with a tattoo that's not 100 percent for the client. He will see this and sooner or later, it's gonna come out because he will have to start justifying to himself why he did what he did."

With his waiting list steadily hovering

between 18 and 22 months, and this being the case for the past eight to nine years, it is evident that there's no shortage of individuals willing to wait for Barth's perfection, and passion. With 30 years in the business under his belt, Barth admits it's not actually hard to stay motivated, as long as you're always looking to improve. "For me, the freshness is that I constantly strive to do something new and better for my industry. I think I learned over the years to really look at the bigger picture and then the payoff on that is just enormous ... I have some artists which are following my path and you can teach one person and they go for it, and they go out in the world and spread their wings - those are payments for me."

There's sure to only be more of those rewards to come, as Barth has recently recruited a 16-year-old apprentice. "I didn't have an apprentice for the last five years and before, I really only had one, who is still with me now after 12 years. That's how I keep it fresh: I have to train him, I have to be a good example in my life, and I have to be a good example as a tattoo artist every single day because that's what he's gonna learn. It's not what you teach them, it's what they learn from you when they observe you and you are not watching. That's really what's gonna shape them. You can teach them whatever you want, but if you go out



with a bottle of whiskey every single night and throw up on the front steps of your shop, he's gonna do that one day."

It doesn't seem like Barth will ever have any difficulties instilling the best of values, including hard work and perseverance - "I came from Austria, a town of 200,000 people, tattooing was illegal, my parents had nothing when I grew up, and my room was in a chicken shed" - in anyone he comes across, but one of his greatest lessons is the simplest of them all: enjoy what you do. "If somebody tells me I have to be 20

hours in a tattoo shop, I'm like, 'Yeah, let's do it!' To me, it's a party."

As Barth continues, he points out it's equally important to embrace life's opportunities and always make the best of every situation, "especially with tattooing, which is the last legal business run by outlaws. Look, we have a gift: we can go anywhere in the world at any time, at any day, and start over. Nobody in the world has this gift - nobody, besides a tattoo artist. I can pick up my shit right now and I can move to India and I'd be tattooing ☺"



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MARIO BARTH ON ... TATTOO ARTISTS ON REALITY TV SHOWS

If I can give every single one of them a hug and say "Great job," I will. Think about it, it's like, how can you reach masses and send a message? [The shows, like Miami Ink and LA Ink,] have changed the whole history of tattooing. Anybody who says different is lying to himself.

It opened our industry up to a way broader audience and not only to the audience but, our industry forgets this, it opened it up to a lot of better artists; people like the Nikkos, all those new people which are out there to make enormous work, which nobody would have touched with a stick [before].

tomorrow. On my terms. That's a gift that nobody can take away from us, so it's beautiful."

YOU'RE ALWAYS WORKING ON SOMETHING EXCITING, SO WHAT'S NEXT FOR MARIO BARTH?

"I don't know [laughs]. We just finished up the Vegas thing with King Ink and we have some very, very big offers. I have also been asked to go on television several times now and I have refused because I don't know if it's the right thing for me - yet.

"I work a lot in my colour industry; I try to create a very, very big network there and try to improve our products constantly so that's a very, very big part of what I do, and I have a very strong team there. We have a full-blown marketing team and it's all new: I really built a corporate structure with that.

"It's also a big undertaking putting the tattoo show on in New Jersey and then a week later, putting on the tattoo show in Las Vegas, so we're making it two shows in one week. Which is a crazy project. Everyone says I'm insane, but we're gonna try to do it because we have all the people here from all around the world; try to do an East Coast and a West Coast show within ten days.

"And after? We'll see. This is all I do; it's like I'm gonna fall off the chair tattooing. That's just what it is. It's my life, and I'd never want it to be different. I never went to work - how much more grateful can you be?" ★

THIS IS ALL I DO; IT'S LIKE I'M GONNA FALL OFF THE CHAIR TATTOOING. THAT'S JUST WHAT IT IS. IT'S MY LIFE, AND I'D NEVER WANT IT TO BE DIFFERENT. I NEVER WENT TO WORK - HOW MUCH MORE GRATEFUL CAN YOU BE?



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