



at it. I mean what? You're gonna come in and they're gonna tell you where to get stuff and you're gonna open a tattoo shop down the street doing the tattoos for half the price they are? You know, it was all of that stuff. But if you'd come and work for 'em for five years, you might earn the right to start to know a few of those things, man. Listen, I worked at the Pike for a long time and I didn't know how to make colors. They didn't tell me how to do that, you know? They didn't want you to know. You start running off designs, you start painting flash and they wanted to know, "Well why are you doing this? You planning on opening a shop down the street? Why do you want to know how to mix colors? We do all that stuff for you. You planning on opening up on us?" You know, a lot of guys fucking did that. They'd come in there and learn everything and then they were gone.

What do you got now on Hollywood Boulevard there? There's three on every block, I mean at least?

Yeah.

You aren't doing Jap work now, right?

I recently quit doing big Japanese work. I mean I still got a few things, bodysuits I'm finishing up. I mean all the work I did, people were happy with it. But I wasn't happy with all the copying, you know? That's basically what I had had to do all that type of stuff.

Right, and it was time consuming?

Well, yeah. I mean a lot of guys that I see, like Henning Jorgensen and Trevor McStay and Bryan Burk, I mean these guys are studying the Japanese work and they've secured a posture of their own chops. They're working where they can draw that stuff their own way and it looks great, they're not just copying Horiyoshi. It looks great. I could never really attain that, you know? Every time I had to draw a dragon, I would look at Horiyoshi's and why even try to copy it? I would trace it up -you know what I mean? It just got to that point to where I was trying to do it on my own and it was just very time consuming. I would spend months drawing trying get this stuff right and to do my own thing with it. It just got to a point where I got tired of it. Then I started doing the stuff I was doing at the Pike. I was reevaluating what these designs are really about and what are they are saying, my relationship to 'em. I really felt a lot closer to them and a lot more knowledgeable of these things when I started doing them again. All of a sudden, I was like back home, man. You know, all of a sudden I knew how to do all this stuff the right way. I was familiar with it. I could do my own thing with it and I could make it look right. So that's what I'm doing now.

Right.

KAREN MITCHELL: It stands the test of time too. I think you did this ten years ago and it almost looks as good as the one you just did two weeks ago.

Yeah. See this type of stuff, I understand. I know how that goes.

KAREN MITCHELL: Yeah, and it looks great, years later, still. You look at some of the stuff that people are doing with those pneumatic machines and stuff. They look nice when they first do 'em but they're not healing very well. I mean not aging well. They healed fine but they're not aging well. They're starting to come apart.

Yeah. Well I got tired of looking at these magazines and seeing five guys with Japanese stuff and they all look like they're done by the same person. They're all the same fucking thing and it's all basically like they're trying to tattoo like Horiyoshi. That's where it comes from, you know? I just started taking a real close, hard look at myself. You know, I've done enough of it. I did a lot of it, man, for a lot of fucking years. I'm getting older and I ain't got the hand anymore to just sit there and pound that fucking shit in.

I went to be with Horiyoshi for a mutual birthday party. We had a little party together on our 60th birthdays and I got a tattoo from Horiyoshi. I was in the shop and this big Yakuza guy comes in. He had a lot of Horiyoshi's old hand poke work on him; he had been getting tattooed for a long time. Horiyoshi lays this guy down and he just draws a line on this guy's thigh, picks up a tattoo machine and commences to do highly ornate chrysanthemums and water. It was something that would take me two weeks to draw. He just put it on this guy



ne Enholm



Karen Mitchell

without even a pen drawing no pattern at all. It blew me away, man. No wonder he can do all this. He doesn't have to think, he just does it.

Right.

I mean it's natural to him. He doesn't have to fuck around, you know? So I just said, I'm done. That's enough.

You wanted to go back to your roots more?

Well, yeah.

So about the future, Bob?

Well, like I tell ya --the future is going to be what the people walk in the door and want.

Right.

I tell ya, it's not up to me. It's up to them. I can draw and do whatever I do, you know? If they get it, great. But it's like pretty much, you know, what the customer wants. I mean you go to these tattoo conventions and you see these young girls and they don't even look like they're old enough to get in, you know? They've got tattoos on their neck; they've got tattoos on the back of their hands. They've got big daggers with skulls down the middle of their chest and they're not even old enough to get on the bus, for Christ sake. I mean they got more balls then I'll ever

fucking have. They're the ones that are going to dictate where this whole thing is going, not me. You know, when you've got people like that going in and they're wanting that type of style, I salute 'em. I take my hat off to 'em. You know, these people are wanting a style. Like these rockabilly girls out in Orange County and Long Beach, I mean they got the high heels, they got the dresses, they got the stockings, they got their garter belt, they got the make up, they got the hair right and it's absolutely fucking beautiful to look at. They're completely covered with Sailor Jerry tattoos. They don't want no Japanese work. They want American. They are what they are, man. They're not trying to be somebody else. They're American and they're proud of it. They're rockabilly dolls. They're rockabilly heroes, all of those girls. They got talent -I mean look at 'em? And I've got nothing but the highest respect for 'em because they're being who they are.

Right.

They're being who we are. You know, I'd rather be a good Bob Roberts than a bad Horiyoshi any day.

Right, sure.

I mean I love the Japanese work. I did it and I tried my hardest for a long time, man. It got to a point where I realized that I just did it as good as I could do it. It didn't get any better so I thought, why not just start a fresh new approach? You know? I just had to be a little more diverse, a little more me. That's what people want nowadays. You know, in Hollywood, there's no... they dress a different way in every club out here. In Orange County, it's rockabilly and that's what it is. They want a style and it's very vibrant to look at.

KAREN MITCHELL: Long Beach too. Long Beach and Orange County both have huge rockabilly scenes.

Yeah.

KAREN MITCHELL: San Bernardino has one too. Their girls are beautiful -a lot of style.

You said earlier that nobody wanted that big fat line stuff. But there was a point where it came back.

Well, yeah. I remember... I think I took this flash (Jonesy flash) there's a picture of me and I think it might have been the first convention on the

Queen Mary and I put all this flash up there. And people were coming up like, "What? Are you fucking nuts, man? That's the kind of crap I got 20 years ago. Why are you putting this stuff up?" Everybody thought I was fucking nuts like, "What do you got that old crap up for?" You know, I've had it in the shop here for 26 or 27 years. Now it's gone full circle. People are coming back and it's a trend that's been started for quite a few years. They want traditional. They realize that's what tattooing is about. Look at what these guys are doing -Bert Krak, Steve Boltz, Eli Quinters and Mike Wilson out there in the East. That's all anybody wants anymore. It's beautiful, absolutely fucking beautiful. It's a tattoo that's fucking saying something. It's got some fucking balls. You know, it's not a million fucking zits on a gnat's ass with, "What kind of cunt hair you want coming out of it -the African ones that curl twice to the left or once to the right? Or do you want the French ones that curl twice to the right and once to the left?" All that nonsense is going out the fucking window, man. People are finally realizing that the old stuff is really the foundation of what all this is about. You know, learn what all this is about. Learn how to do a fucking decent shop eagle. Learn how to do a fucking decent reaper. Learn how to fucking shade a panther the right way before you wanna be a fucking big shot and do Japanese.

Yeah.

You know, learn where it all came from, learn what a fucking tattoo is supposed

to be like. And 80 percent of 'em can't fucking do it. They've never done it. Well, now in the last few years -they better start to learn because that's what's coming back. That's what people are wanting.

Yeah. Well then maybe you wont get so many of those...

I mean I used to... stuff like that on the wall in the front of the shop that's all anybody wanted. That's all I did. Now I can't give a fucking design away that's out on the wall. They don't want that. So I don't put it on the wall. I keep it in the back room and then I bring it out to them like nobody's ever got that before. All of it. Now it's different. They go, "Man, let me look at that old stuff out in the back room. Yeah, give me that mermaid. I like that eagle."

KAREN MITCHELL: It could be the same sheet that's up on the wall too and because you bring it out of the back, they think it's special.

Right.

"Bob Roberts has built an amazing tattoo shop full of talented artists and incredible artwork. As soon as you walk into Spotlight you know your in a real tattoo shop and you better watch your step. I'm honored to have had the chance to get tattooed and work at Spotlight."

-Eli Quinters



Karen Mitchell



Karen Mitchell: Yeah, that stuff that we got less than ten years ago—every year or two it changes.

Yeah, it all disappears.

Yeah, amazing, amazing. Well, is there anything else, Bob?

Well, yeah. I want to address the color manufactures at this point. (Sits up closer to camera)

Okay.

Please, please, if somebody out there could make the old style PEACOCK BLUE again.

Okay.

Please! All you guys got is the red shade of blue. There are a lot of people getting mad at me because I tell them, "You got the red shade of blue—not the green shade of blue." They think I'm fucking with 'em, I'm not fucking with you. It's the honest-to-God truth. Go look at the watercolor—there's ultramarine blue, then there's the red shade of ultramarine blue and then there's also the *green* shade of ultramarine blue, which is a much brighter, much more beautiful shade of blue. And *nobody* has it. So *please*, one of you guys out there *please* make A GREEN SHADE OF BLUE! Get the old peacock blue, which is this color right here. (Points to arm) It doesn't happen with a red shade of blue. The red shade of blue turns out very steely looking when it's mixed down. It's not a brilliant blue and I haven't seen anybody that's got it. You can't do it by adding green to the blue. That makes a turquoise blue. It has to be a created, made green shade of blue. Somebody please make that. I'll buy it. I'll buy eight ounces of it. (Laughs)

Okay.

Yeah, that must be satisfying for you to see that after so many years of...

Yeah, it's great, man. I love it. You know, with the old fuck that I've gotten to be, that's all I can fucking do anymore.

Yeah, yeah. Well, I don't know. Okay.

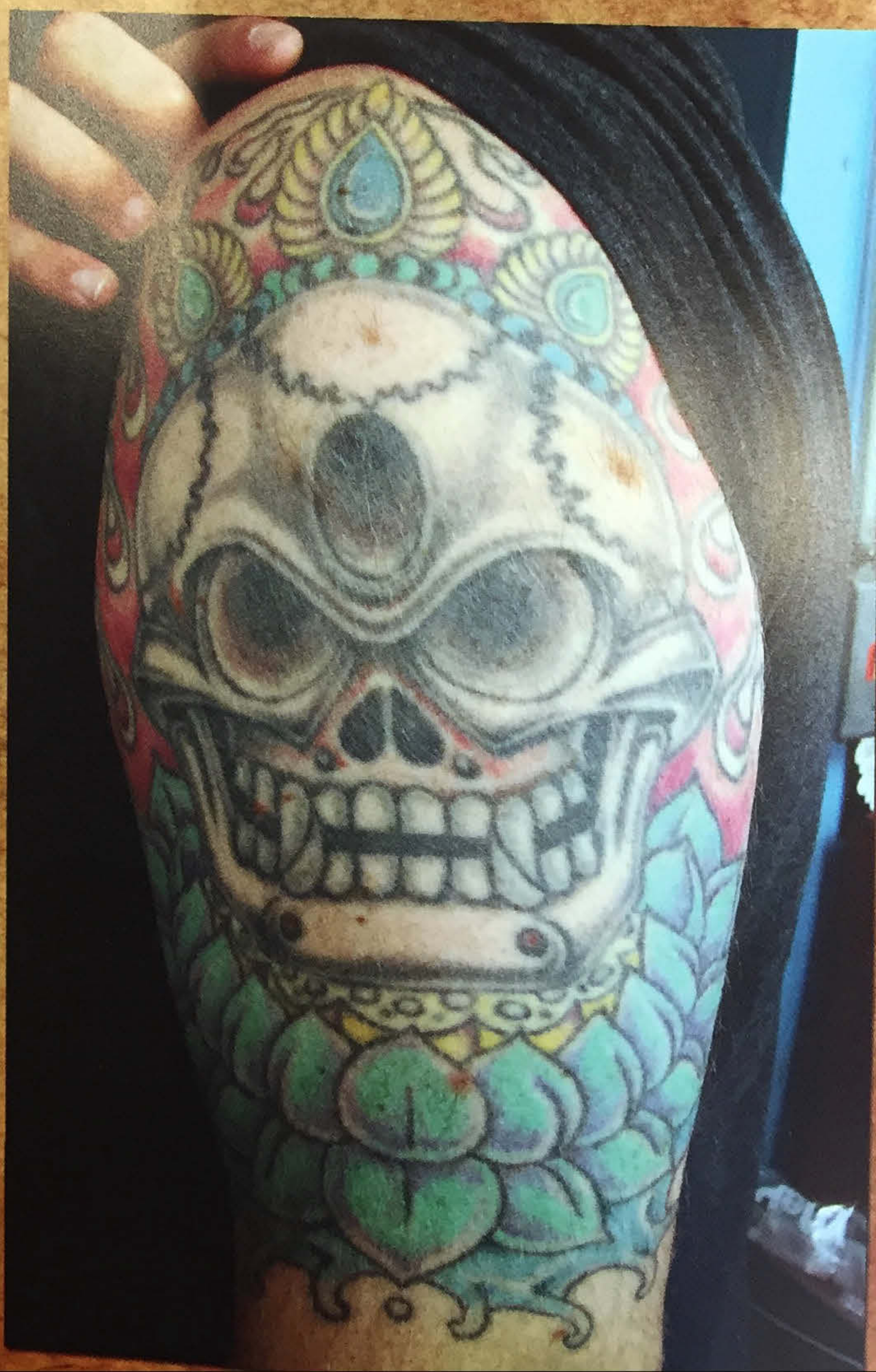
Well, it's all I wanna do, anyway. I can do anything I want.

Yeah, I know. Sure, that's real revealing, these sheets. These are the first ones you got and they're worth so much money now, these Jonesy sets. It's insane what those are worth.

Karen Mitchell: They've always been there. Ever since I've been coming here, these sheets have always been back here.

Well you know what's crazy about these things? They are still pretty bright. But the guys that colored them, they were using them old style Marks-A-Lot, you know?

You know the ones that smelled real bad? People would, either get loaded and sniff 'em or they'd draw with 'em, you know? And these colors have been on here for probably 40 fucking years and they're still just as bright. I mean look at that red. I didn't redo nothing on here. These are colored just the way I got 'em fucking 40 years ago. And all that color from them old style Marks-A-Lot are still there and they're bright as they were. It's unbelievable.



You can call it, 'Bob's Blue'.

Yeah, there's a guy up in Lancaster that has drums of...

KAREN MITCHELL: *Isn't DuPont?*

...DuPont. He has drums of this stuff from the Pike; it was the guy that was partners with Capt. Jim, that guy Jimbo. He has fucking drums and he asked me how much he should sell it for. I said, "I don't know." You know?

Was it blue?

I'm going to call him tonight.

KAREN MITCHELL: *I've got a pound of blue that I got from Ernie years ago. It's unmixed. And if it's the right color, you're more than welcome to have it. You gotta mix it yourself but you're more than welcome to have it.*

I'm gonna call him. I'll ask him tonight if he has it. He has the Pike green, the green that they used. I know he has that.

Yeah, that's still what they use. The greens are all good, it's just blue—they're making that fucked up blue. I'll get people mad at me. They go, "Oh, let me show you this blue." I go, "No, this ain't the stuff, man. This ain't the right thing." (In a mean tone) "What do you mean it's not the right thing?" I'll say, "It's a red shade of blue." They say, "What do you mean it's the red shade of blue? What are you saying, it's red-blue?" They think I'm fucking with 'em, "I suppose you want some red-green now." I go, "No, I'll see you later." I get guys genuinely fucking pissed off because they think I'm fucking with 'em, you know? I'm not fucking with them. Look up your fucking colors, man. Do your fucking research. You wanna be a big shot fucking color-maker? You know, all these guys that advertise, "These are our pre-made needles." And they're all made in China and they put a different fucking label on 'em. It's bullshit. It's all the same shit, you know? It's just that somebody finally taught 'em how to solder that shit up the right way. That's why I use 'em. It's so I didn't have to sit here and make my own after everybody wore out my jigs with their fucking... I told 'em not to use that fucking acid flux. "Oh, don't worry. We're not." You know, get your own fucking jigs if you want to do that. They used to lie to me. those little fucking pricks.

Yeah, they fucked up your jigs.

Yeah, I couldn't make a correct cluster anymore, you know? But somebody taught these people and they learned how to solder 'em the right way. I wish somebody would start making some pre-made needles out of the real carbon steel needles. They last a little bit longer. These non-tempered stainless steel needles are like using a butter knife to chop down a tree. They're probably good for about an hour and that's about it. They start to get dull, you know? They either get dull or they're too sharp.

There was something else... oh, yeah. Earlier you told me, about working at Bert Grimm's on the Pike?

Yeah. Well, you know what people don't realize is that at the Pike, you had three people on the day shift. That was Larry Shaw, Bob Shaw and Col. Todd. Then you had three people on the night shift, which was me, Bobby Shaw and Phil Simms. You know, we all tattooed 15 people every day—every day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. I think maybe Christmas Day they were closed? There were 75 people a day that got tattooed in that shop. When you're tattooing 15 people a day, you start to learn a few things, you know?

Sure.





You learn how to do 'em fast and how to do 'em right, just like it was on the wall. You know, I thank my lucky stars to this day that that's where I broke in, doing that type of work. That gave me a foundation of how to tattoo a simple tattoo and how it's supposed to look. So many people, unfortunately, have never gotten that opportunity and you can see it in their work.

Sure. The 15 machines, you talked about that, right? Didn't they set up...

Well, yeah. In the old days, before I got there, before they started using sterilizers, everybody had 15 outliners and 15 shaders that were set in a trough of Cidex or some kind of solution like that to sterilize 'em. And they were numbered. You had one number-one outliner and one number-one shader. You would use that and then the helper would take that and put it at the end of the row and then you'd use two and two. Then came the time where changing needles, after every tattoo became necessary so you couldn't do that anymore. So to start a six o' clock shift, you had to be there at three in the afternoon 'cause everybody would go and put their stuff in a giant sterilizer and they'd have an hour and a half processing time. It all had to be bagged and then you'd sterilize it and dry it. You know, then you would change needles. But we would keep the same needles and the same tubes for like a week or so. You would try and get in the same groove as before. We would use four-needle liners and seven-needle football shaders.

Football shaders? So shaped like a curved?

What they were was you would solder up seven needles round and then you'd have like a little block with a groove in the corner. You'd lay the seven needles in there and then you'd push 'em down with a piece of stencil plastic or something. Then you'd solder 'em up and

they wouldn't be flat but they had kind of a football shape.

Right, right.

If you looked at 'em straight on... We would use those. When we made tubes, we would make only outliner tubes and then we would take half of 'em and we'd grind 'em back at an angle and open 'em up and that's what we used as the shader tubes. These football shaders were kind of round on the bottom.

Did those make your work easier... you know -get the job done quicker?

They were very fast.

Well, who hipped you to magnums? Do you remember?

Ed Hardy. Cliff used to use open flat shaders... He used real open flat shaders.

He opened 'em up a bit? Yeah, the end result, that's all that matters.

Right.

All right, anything else, Bob?

No, I guess you got enough bullshit on there for now. I'd just like to thank the people at Tattoo Artist Magazine for having me in here. I think you guys got a great magazine. Thanks for having me.

I know they're real excited about it.

[End of tape 2, 50 minutes]

Going back to what you were saying about what is wrong with tattooers today. You said they have the best equipment and all that -good ink and good reference. But also, you said they fuck-up a shop panther.

Well, you know, I thank my lucky stars every day that I got to break in at the Pike with Bob Shaw, Col. Todd, Larry, Bobby... These were just down to Earth, pure-hearted tattooists, man. There was no pretense. There was no, "Who is this gonna impress?" They just did 'em the way they were supposed to be done, day after day. They weren't on television. There were no magazines. There was no reason other than just putting on good work to do this. It was totally innocent, man. You just did what you did. If it wasn't on the wall, you didn't do it. But you learned how to put on a correctly shaded black panther. You learned how to put on a correctly shaded eagle. You learned how to put on a correctly shaded reaper. You learned how to put on a correctly shaded peacock -not all this loop-de-loop, limped-up fucking new school crap. You learned first how to do it the right way. And I can see people's work, people that haven't been brought up with that kind of background.

Right, you can spot it right away?

Yeah, they get cute and they fuck it up because they don't really know how to do it the right way. They've never done it the right way so they make some cartoony fucking limped-up version of it. It's unfortunate for them. You know, I think maybe if people would have learned how to do this stuff the right way, or got some balls, just a standard fucking panther -there it is. If you can do that without fucking it up and cutesy-ing it



up –I mean that tattoo is gonna stand the test of time forever. Man, that's gonna look good forever. It ain't gonna be something you regret you got cause this guy that wanted to get all fucking fancy with it. I mean I see it over and over again. There's a lot of people that really... Not so much now, but 15 years ago, I could see that these guys were cartooning and googey-gooing this shit all up, man. You know, now these guys respect the old work. Even the fact that they didn't grow up doing that kind of stuff, they made themselves learn how to do it. And they made themselves learn how to do it the right way. A lot of this stuff that these guys are coming up with now, they might be slightly deviant, but they're deviant in a correct way, you know?

Okay, so 15 years ago, that whole period of time when everybody was doing... Well not everybody but a lot of people with that... I don't even know what they are? They're chrome? Those sleeves, you know? I don't wanna say whatever names but I know you know what I'm talking about twisted tattoo machines, limp-wristed space goop etc.

Yeah, I know what you're talking about.

Did that have any effect on your... not on your application of tattooing but on your... Did people come in here asking for those?

Yeah, that had a big effect on me. You know what it did?

What?

It showed me what *not* to do. (Laughs)

Fair enough, fair enough. So people weren't coming in here pointing and saying, I want this.

Not with that kind of stuff, no. We would get a few people in here that wanted... You know, I mean back then, it was like tribal and Celtic started coming around –that kind of stuff, and realistic stuff, you know what I mean? That fucked-up looking, horrible animal realism. You know, it's done with great talent but to me, it's no better than taxidermy. When you make a copy of a racehorse with every vein and every hair and every zit and whisker in the animal and it's not saying anything, that drawing is absolutely worthless. It's taxidermy. It has no artistic value whatsoever. It is merely a display of technique.

Right, right.

When you're not making your own rendition of it. It's like these artists that work from a photograph. You know, to me most of that stuff is absolutely fucking worthless. Why don't you draw the fucking thing? I mean when an artist takes a picture of somebody and then does a painting off of that picture, I mean it loses so much. There's so much more information that could be put in the thing by looking at the thing and drawing your own version of it, characterizing it a little, put some life into it, put something that you know about the person into it.

Then it's not taxidermy anymore. You know, it becomes your art.

Right. Okay with that point, in doing a shop panther, the shop panther still can be your own art? Even though it's the one off the wall?

Yeah. Well, up to a point. You gotta deal with size. You know what I mean?

Well people see your panthers and know they're yours. I know. I've seen people do it.

Well, yeah. I've made little changes. It's taken me years to find little changes that I thought could make it look better without destroying the integrity of what was there to begin with.