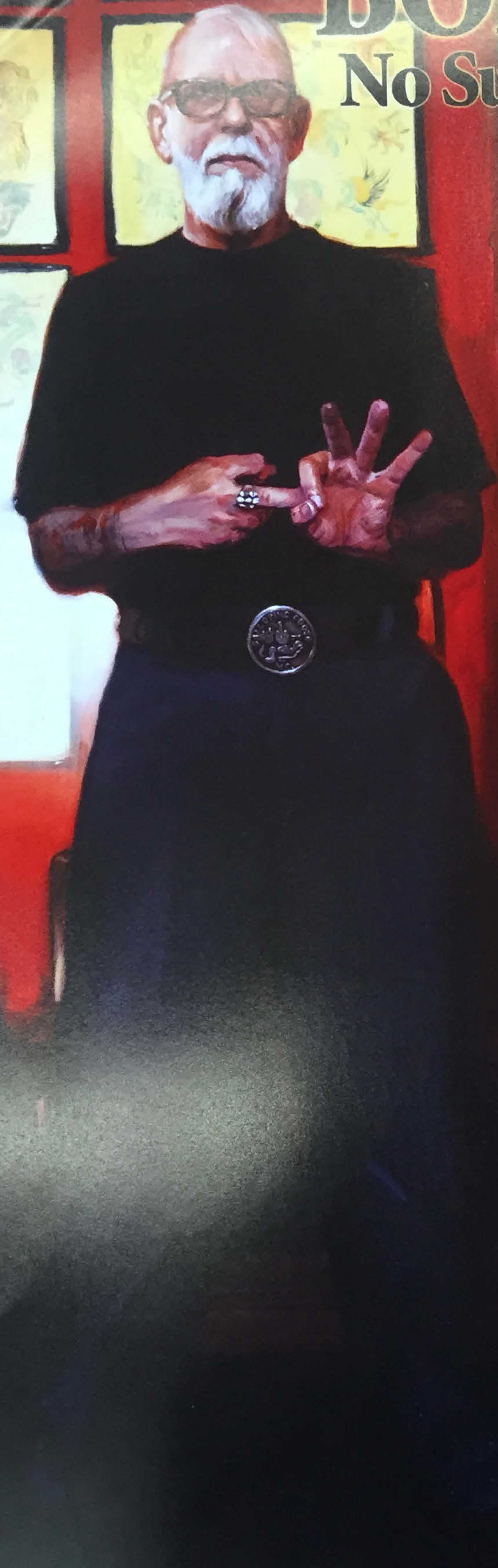


BOB ROBERTS

No Superfluous Flummery

by: Shane Enholm



I am gonna keep this intro shorter than usual....Bob almost needs no introduction. It would be hard to be a tattooer in the last 30 years and not know of Bob and his work.. He is the last of the mohicans

You can trace a lot of us late 20th century southern California tattooers to one spot. That is Col. Todd and Bob Shaw. One way or another we all have roots that lead back to them. That is no different with Bob. I am not a mind reader so I do not know what Col. Todd and Bob Shaw saw in the young Bob Roberts when he would go down there and show them his art, but whatever it was we are blessed that they recognized him and his talent. Bob's tattooing has been a major influence on all of us, and without him a lot of what we are as a whole, WHAT WE TRULY ARE, would have been lost 25 years ago.

Bob, in my opinion, is the greatest living American tattoo artist. But that is only one facet of Bob; he is so much more than that. He is in fact one of the greatest living American artists period. His intelligence, raw energy and astute vision shine through in every thing he does. Bob has us all beat, blindfolded. I always knew Bob was great. A lot of my friends and I had been tattooed by him 25 years ago...at least... but I never really understood (and perhaps I still do not) how much of his entire being goes into his work and how great he truly is until I embarked on this article with him. It is utterly overwhelming, that's it, that's the word. It is impossible to see his work and not be overwhelmed. Utterly and completely overwhelmed.

-Shane

Bob expressed his wishes to have the people he tattooed in the pictures for this article named...He feels he owes them that. However it was impossible to name everyone as the pictures cover a 37 year career. So even those that we could not name we still wish to express Bob's thanks and respect for allowing them to show and wear his art. And special thanks to Shawn Barber for the use of his portrait of Bob.

Okay, ready Bob?

All right. Can you hear me all right out there? Test. Test. Can you hear me all right?

Were you born here in L.A.?

Yeah, I was born here in L.A. in 1946.

And you were raised here, huh? When's the first time you saw anyone tattooing? You told me this story and I want to hear it again.

Well, I used to work for my dad. At the time, I was about 13 or 14 years old. Before that he used to take me downtown to his store on Main and Broadway. I liked to be with my dad. He would take me down there to his store and I got old enough to where he would let me walk around on my own down there. There was a music store across the street, there was a pawnshop and there was a tattoo shop. First I would go to the music store and beat on the conga drums until they threw me out. There was this guy that would go, "Hey!" (Simulates beating

on the drums with hands) Years later I talked to Zeke Owens, he told me about that same guy and the music store, he knew him too. He used to go there when he used to work downtown and I used to go from there to the pawnshops where they had switchblade knives starting out from about half an inch to over six feet. I used to love that. I used to look at those, and I used to go to the tattoo shops until I got thrown out of 'em. I remember there was one that was in the back of an arcade. I remember going back there and seeing my first tattoo being put on. I think I was probably about nine. They were all sitting on orange crates and this guy was getting this eagle on his back. The guy was running this flat shader over this guy's back and I mean after every pass, blood was just dripping down this guy's back, and they didn't throw me out of there. I remember asking the guy what that felt like. He was a good ol' southern boy, you know? And he goes, "It feels just like somebody's running a piece of ice across your back." I'll never forget that. But then I used to go from there to... They had all these live burlesque shows down there. I couldn't get in so I just used to look at the posters. I found one where I could peek in the back door and see the stage.

(Laughs) Okay, what about music? That played a big role, right?

Well yeah. I pretty much played music all my life, man. I used to play percussion—conga, the bongos, you know, I used to

take LSD and go up on these mountains and play music all night. Before that, like when I was 16, 17, 18, I used to put my drums in the car and go to all these clubs and whoever would let me play... I'd go, "Let me play drums during the intermission." And they'd go, "Okay." I'd go and smoke a bunch of pot and just go nuts on these drums—whatever would let me do it. I just did that. Then, I went on to being in a lot of bands for about 30 years.

Right. But before you started tattooing a lot, that was your gig, kind of?

I didn't make any money but I did it, you know. I just had a real thirst for music. I saw all the music I could, every week. I saw practically every jazz musician... There used to be a club up on Cahuenga here called Shelly's Manne-hole. I was probably there twice a week for a year. And I used to go to all the shows, the R&B shows—Bobby Blue Bland, Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, all those shows, all that stuff, all those people. I probably heard Sam Cooke at least ten times.

Really?

I mean you think his voice sounds good on record? You should hear that guy live. They always had—not a real big band but they always had a horn section, really good musicians with those guys. I mean there would be like 2000 people and you could

hear a pin drop. Oh man, I get chills just thinking about it. I've never—seen very few people embrace an audience like that... Except I saw Cab Calloway once in New York City. Oh my God! That was just fantastic. That guy was unbelievable.

He had 'em? He had the audience?

Yeah. You know, a lot of great singers come out and they sing at you. They do their thing and it's good—you know what I mean? But it's like you're kind of not included. Cab Calloway just had everybody in there in the palm of his hand. It was just like everybody was a part of the show. I think I waited like two hours backstage to get an autograph, him and Doc Cheatham.

Really?

Yeah, really.

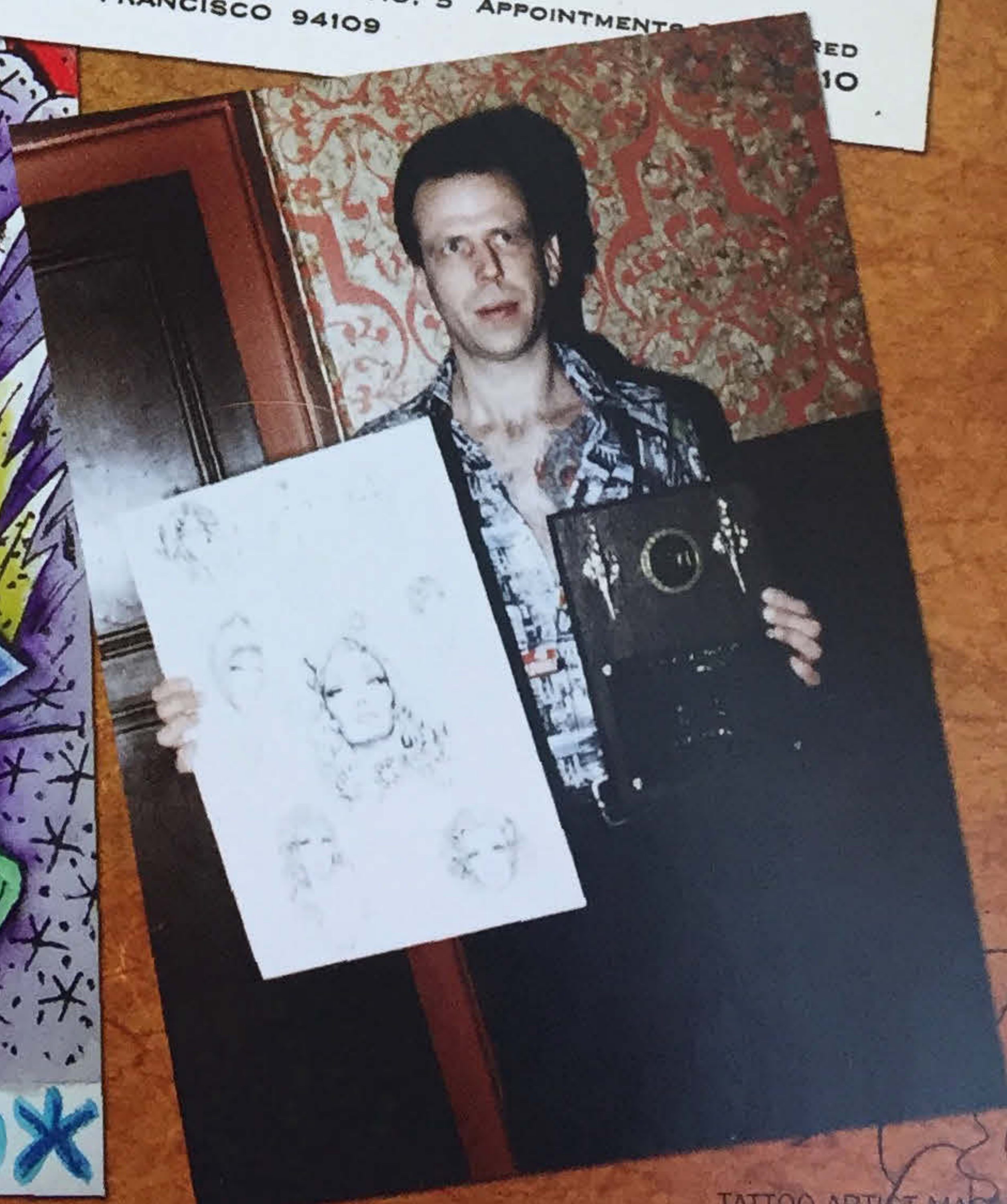
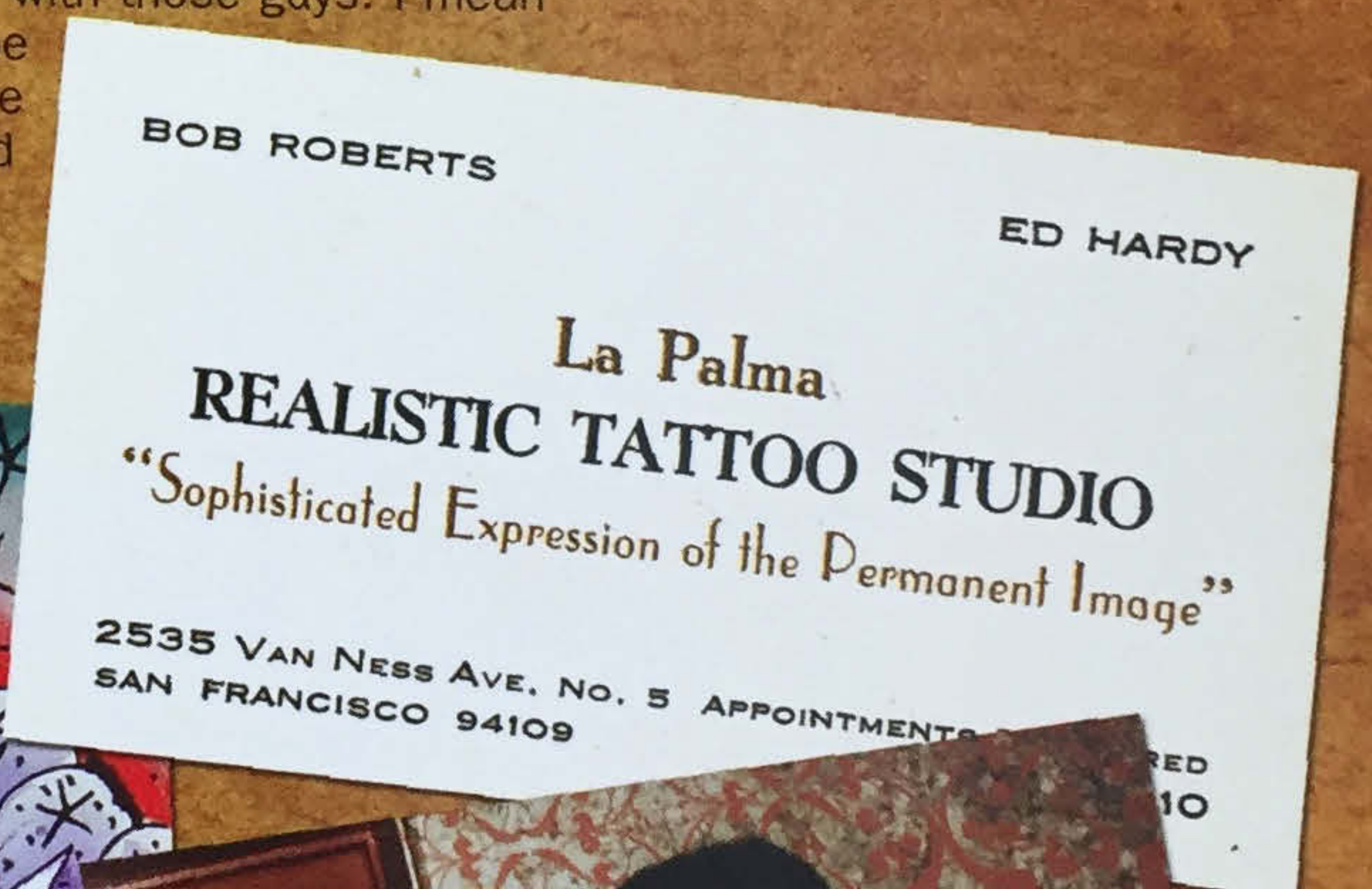
And you got it?

Yeah, I got it.

Good for you. Wow. Well, what year do you think that was?

I'll tell you exactly what year that was—it was probably 1980.

Oh, okay. All right. And Sam Cooke?



business card courtesy of Paul Rogers' Tattoo Research Center

Oh, Christ... that stuff was like 45 years ago?

Early 60s then?

Right, yeah, I would say like maybe '62 or '63? Back in those days, you had a dress code in high school. Girls couldn't wear pants; they had to wear skirts or dresses so they would tend to dress up in high heels. Likewise with the boys, you know. We wore suits and ties to school and all of us had *Sebring* haircuts. I was dressed up and I would go to these clubs and they would let me in, you know. Once I got in, they knew who I was and I would keep going back so they didn't forget. I was like 16 getting into these places where you had to be 21.

Sure. Like the Chitlin' Circuit -I know that's in the South but those guys coming out here, right?

Yeah, everybody -James Brown, Ray Charles, Bobby Blue Bland, all of those. I didn't miss one -the Shrine Auditorium, the Hollywood Palladium, a few other places. They would have these all night -from two to six in the morning they would have a couple of theaters where you could go and hear jazz all night. You could hear Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley, all those people at Shelly's and at...

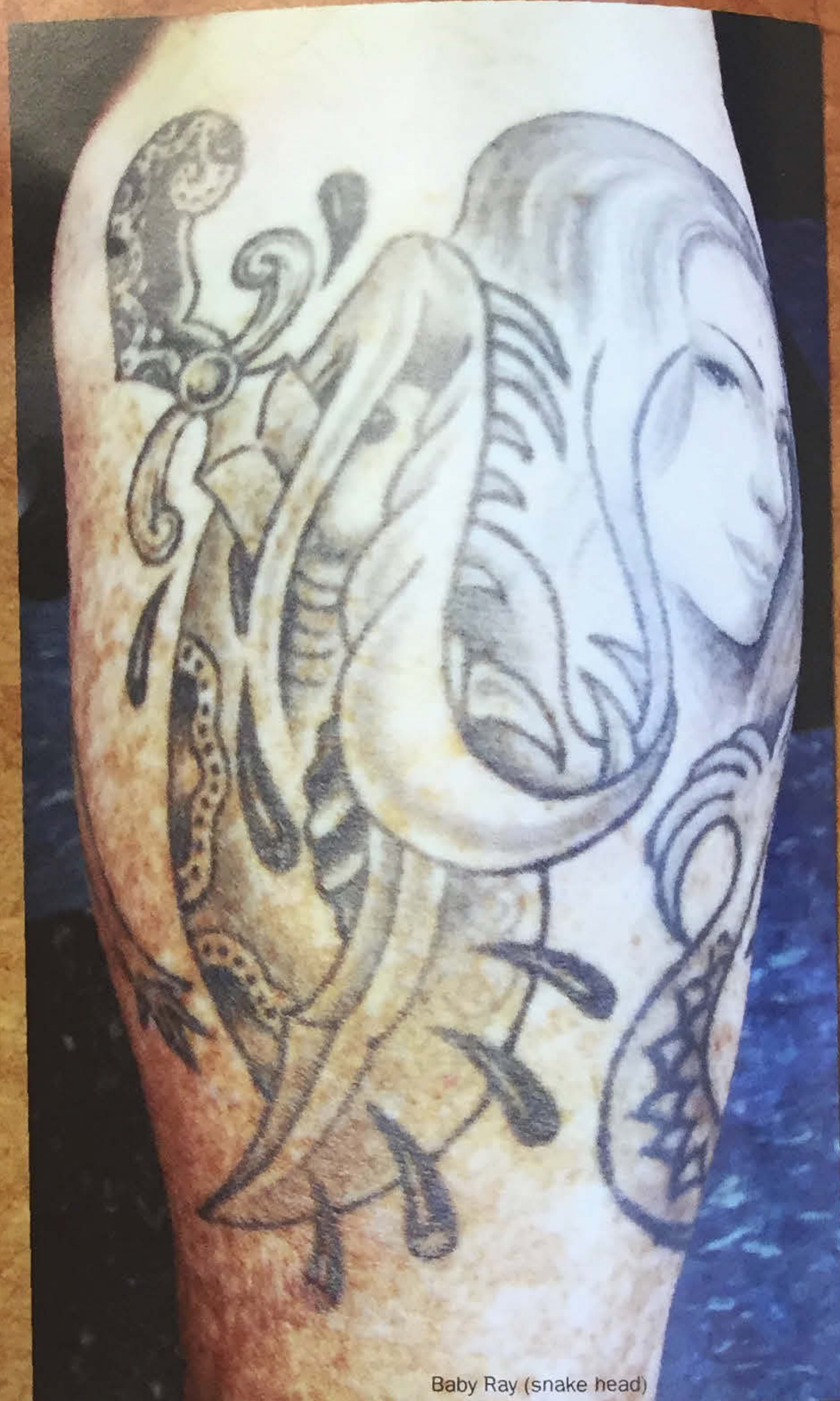
And Miles, I never saw Miles but they say his horn was like a voice?

Yeah.

Okay, so when... Did you paint before you tattooed?

Yeah.

So you always did art?



Baby Ray (snake head)

Always. I did a lot of oil painting before I started tattooing. I sold most of it.

Oh, you did?

Yeah, actually Bob Denver, who played Gilligan on *Gilligan's Island*, well I used to hang around with the band the Byrds. One of the girls that hung around, she wasn't a groupie but she just hung around, her name was Butchie and she was married to Bob Denver. So he bought practically all of my paintings for a few years.

Did you paint landscapes or portraits, or what type of painting were you doing?

Yeah, all kinds of stuff -like surrealism. That's what I did. Then I busted it out and it was more like psychedelic, dual imagery type stuff and all kinds of crazy stuff. I probably have a few photographs somewhere.

That was the 60s too, right? I mean you're talking about the Byrds, then you're talking about '66?

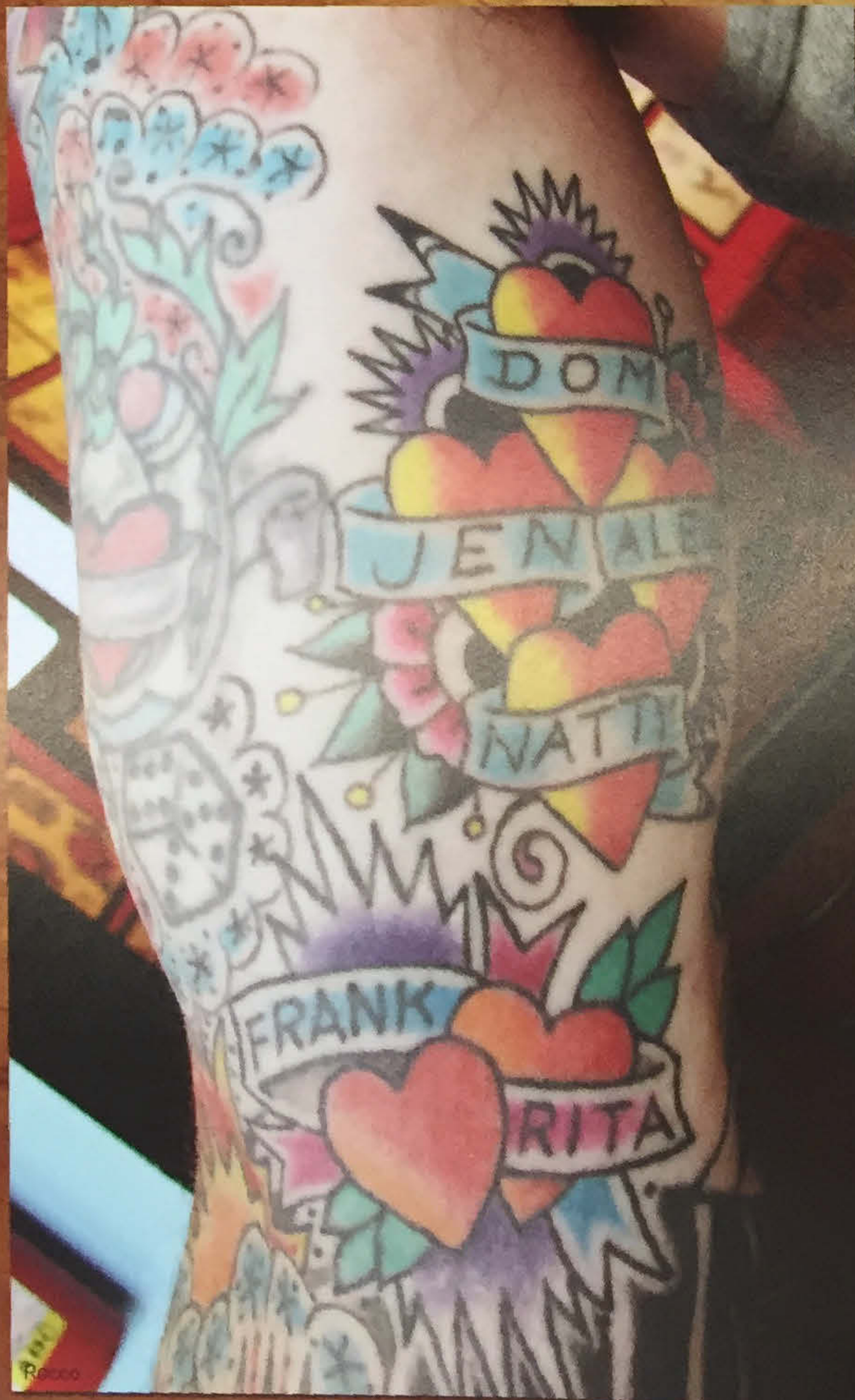
Yeah, that was probably the 60s, yeah.

Psychedelic stuff was coming into being then?

Yeah.

Did you settle on the sax?

Yeah, well I wanted to play rock 'n' roll and I couldn't play guitar. But yeah, I was in a band you know. I was in bands off and on for a long time. Up until then, Ruben and the Jets, you know.



Frank Zappa put it together. That was a good band I was kickin' around with. The bass player was a good friend, his name was Bill Wild, he -he's passed away now but we were good friends and we started a band called Hot Mayo, like *hot mayonnaise*. I tell ya, we had a gig where we would play four half-hour sets a night. We would get \$15 bucks a night and we worked there four nights a week. This was the best paying music job I ever had. If I saved that \$60 bucks a week and I didn't spend it, I could pay my rent, which was \$250. That was the most consistent money that I ever had in 35 years of playing music -no joke.

So what about tattooing?

So at this time I needed a job and I just thought, "God, what the fuck can I do?" You know? I thought I could always get a job on an assembly line gluing the heads on French ticklers, you know? (Laughs) I thought I might be good at that because I kind of know what women like. I might have a flair for that, you know? I had been in the mail order business and we used to make a product called the *Freeman Bovine Artificial Vagina* and we sold quite a few of those. Then we had another thing called the *Aqualator*. It was a water device for men and we sold about 15,000 of those. You would hook it up to the spigot and it would spray water on you. Of course, it came with a warning, *DANGER! Might cause ejaculation*. But then I got the idea of, "Geez, if I have to do something to make money here, I could work for my dad at the swap meet." I hated that.

I thought, "I've seen some stuff in magazines about tattoos." I think Cliff Raven had an article in *Playboy* or something like that and a picture of Crazy Eddie was in there too... I thought, "Jesus, tattoos, you know, I think I might be good at that?" So I went around and I would go to tattoo shops and I would look at their stuff like, "Fuck, I could do better than this, huh?" I'd go, "How much you want for that eagle?" They'd go, "\$150." I thought, "\$150? Jesus-fucking-Christ!" I knew I could draw better than that, you know? "How much for some inks?" And they would go, "Get the fuck outta here. What the fuck's the matter with you? You ever go to the Pentagon and ask 'em for the fuckin' plans for the atom bomb? That's what you might as well be asking for." And it was just -I don't know man, all I could do was draw tattoos at this particular time.

So I lived in Laurel Canyon and I was driving down the hill towards Hollywood one day and I saw a friend of mine hitchhiking. I picked him up and there was a girl with him who had a leather fringe jacket that was beaded with a very elaborate Japanese-style dragon. I got to talkin' to her and I said, "Wow, that looks like a tattoo design. Did you do that on there? Did you put beads on there?" She said, "Yeah and by the way, I'm a tattoo artist also." I slammed on the breaks, "Oh, really? I want to be a tattoo artist; I've been trying to buy machines." She said, "Man, I've got a whole tattoo outfit I'll sell ya." I said, "Really?" I got my first machines and all this flash that's on the wall -I got that from her. Her name was Truly.

Jonesy flash! That's the set Bill Jones used to sell. Whoa!

She gave me all of that flash.

Whoa, there's the rest of it! The whole set, whoa!

It's still here on the wall. Yep, so that was my very first flash that I got and very first machines and I

owe my whole start to her. Her name was Truly and if she's out there someplace, I salute you.

What a great set to start with! Yeah, that's unbelievable.

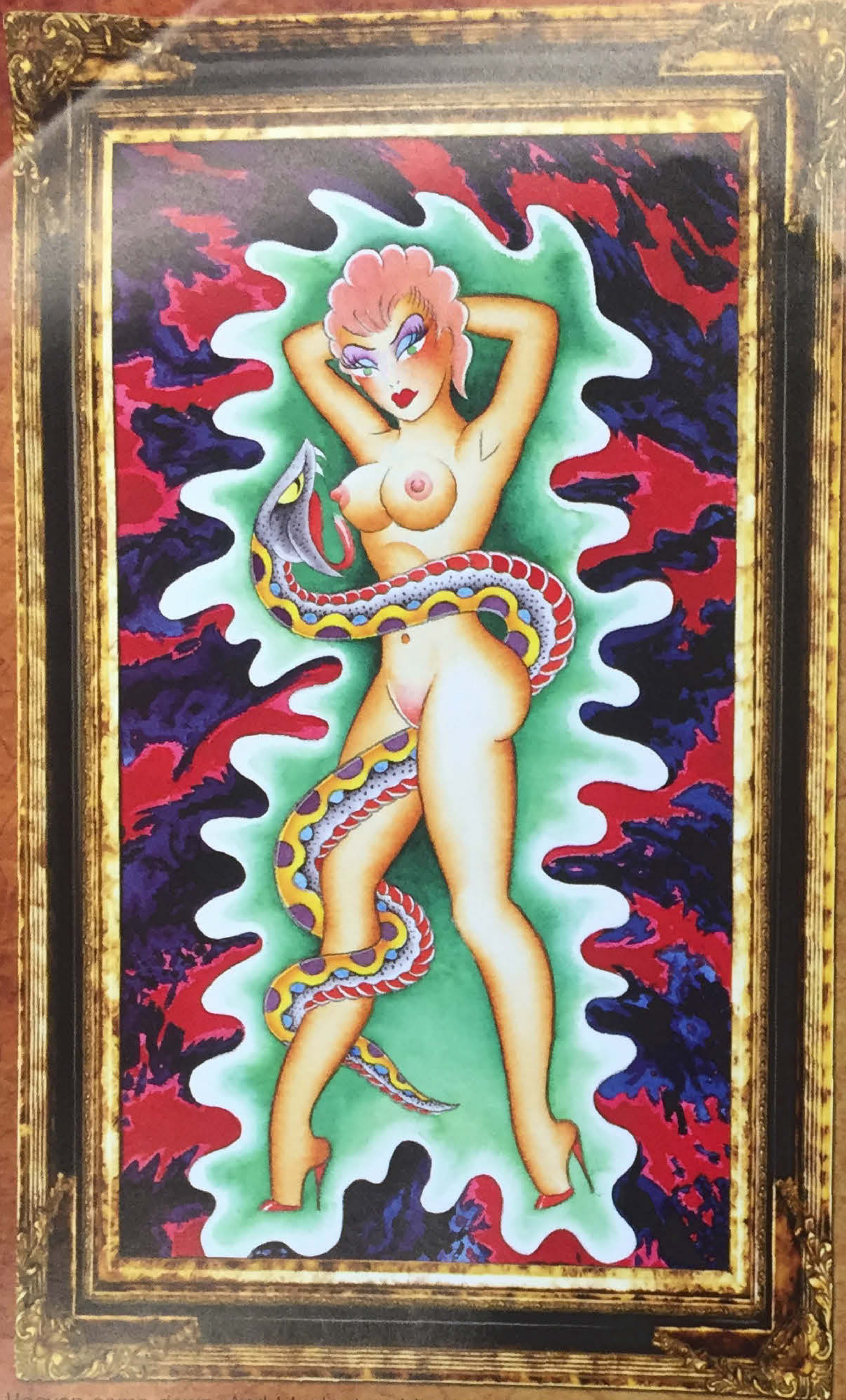
Well, I thank my lucky stars to this day that I started this way. I started at the Pike, you know. I mean I feel sorry for people that didn't start that way, you know? I mean they can put on an elaborate tattoo with 20,000 limp-ass loop-de-loops in it... But they don't know how to put on a correct shop eagle? They don't know how to put on a correct panther. They don't know how to shade that shit correctly.

So one thing led to another and I started putting a few tattoos on people. That machine she sold me got stolen. I think I know who did it. They didn't want me tattooing...

They didn't want you doing it?

Yeah. But then I ordered some stuff from Spaulding. I wasn't giving up. I still worked at the swap meet back then, so during the summer every person that had a tattoo that walked by, I'd ask them where they got it? I kept hearing the name Bob Shaw at the Pike, you know. God, I remember I had just smoked a bunch of marijuana and I saw this jewel coming at me from about 50 yards away. And it was just glowing like an angel from





Heaven came down. And I looked and it was this peacock that Bob Shaw had done. I said, "Who did that?" They said, "Bob Shaw." And the next thing I knew, I was down at the Pike and I got a few tattoos from Bob Shaw. I started bringing him my drawings and I told him I wanted to get in and start doing this. This was about 1974 - '73 maybe? He kind of laughed at me but I went down there every other week to get tattooed or show him my stuff. Finally, he agreed to break me in and he said, "Try to get somebody that'll let you put a tattoo on 'em." Luckily, at this time I was in a band also with Bill Wild, the bass player. These guys knew I could draw so I was taking two carloads of guys down there a week and putting on tattoos, man. I would say, "Free tattoos. Just come with me. I'm learning. Come down to the Pike." After about a month of that, I guess they figured they were going to have to give this asshole a job - and they did.

When you were doing those ones, were they over your shoulder? Would they help?

Yeah. Colonel Bill Todd was really the one that got on my ass and really stood over my shoulder and told me what to do. He stood right there with me and Bob Shaw, you know?

Yeah, so then finally they gave you the job, huh?

Well, yeah. They had another shop called Mr. B's in Santa Ana, right across from the bus station. Bob Shaw and Bert Grimm were working there. Bert

Grimm didn't want... It was too slow for him and he wanted to come back and work at the Pike. So, I had the honor of my very first official tattoo job was taking over Bert Grimm's chair. True story, and the flash in the shop was all Bert Grimm's flash and Colonel Todd's paratrooper flash. There were boxes of Bert Grimm stencils on acetate, on celluloid. Many of them had never been used, you know - there was just a treasure trove. Of course, I was too scared to make rub offs. I didn't wanna get caught, you know what I mean?

Sure.

I just kind of looked at 'em all. Just to have access to 'em...

Absolutely. What do you think, "not busy enough" for Bert Grimm?

Well, I mean that shop wasn't very busy; we would get, at the most, a couple of jobs a day if we were lucky. And then you would get Marine Corp payday where you would get a lot of Marines that were coming through there from Oceanside. We would get a few of them. That's where I started seeing other tattoo work besides what was being done at the Pike. I used to see a lot of Maurice Lynchs' stuff come through. You know, when I first saw one of his pieces - that shit just blew me out of the water, you know. I saw a tattoo other than the Pike - it was a whole different concept of doing tattoos.

Sure.

Maurice Lynch was at the convention, by the way. Nobody knew who he was. He's like 75 now though.

Yeah, I hear the shop's still open down there. He has a brother too; his brother's name is Hiro Lynch... They were Tahiti Felix's kids.

Yeah, I think so?

So were you going up to the Pike then? You were working at Mr. B's right?

Yeah.

And it's a satellite; it's one of their shops? Didn't they own a bunch of 'em? They had a few, right?

Well, I think at the time it was just the two.

Right, right. How long did Mr. B's last?

Well, I don't know. After I left... I got in a little bit of trouble and I totaled my car one day on the way home from there. So, I got to go on a little vacation for a while, you know?

Yeah. (Laughs)

So, I was probably gone for six or seven months. Bob Shaw had been asking me where they should open a shop and I told 'em Hollywood Boulevard. When I got back I drove down Hollywood Boulevard and saw there was a new tattoo shop. So I called Col. Todd and I said, "Hey man, do you need somebody to work at that shop in Hollywood?" Col.

Todd said "Yes." So I started working on Hollywood Boulevard.

How long were you there? A while?

Yeah, close to four years off and on. I mean I just worked there for a couple years then they switched me and Mark Reynolds to the Pike. Then I ended up being permanently on at the Pike. Then after a while of that, I wasn't making enough money and that was the first and only time I quit tattooing and I went to work with my father for four months. That's the longest time I was ever away from tattooing in like what -36 years?

Yeah.

And I started a little business with my father but after a while, I couldn't do that anymore. After this four months, I heard about Cliff Raven, so I went up to him to ask him for a job. And they were kind of busy -he was on Sunset there. I'm standing there and I'm waiting to get a chance to talk with him, and who walks

in? Ringo Starr. I'm like, "He's next." And they didn't know who the fuck he was. I'm talking to him and I'm trying to act like I work there, you know what I mean? And I'm like, "Come on, this guy's next." I just assumed they knew who he was? Being who he was I didn't wanna be like, "HEY! It's Ringo!" I didn't want to do that in front of everybody. I wasn't going to do that to him. So I'm like, "Cliff, this guy's next." He goes, "Oh, you gotta make an appointment. What's your name?" He wrote, *Richard Starkey*. They didn't know who the fuck Richard Starkey is. So he made the appointment and he was out. He had the limousine waiting for him? I go, "Man, why didn't you tattoo him? You didn't know who that was?" I'm like, that's Ringo Starr, man." He goes, "Oh my God! Go get him." So I ran out there and he was gone already. But he did come back and he got tattooed -and they gave me a job.

When you went, did you have a portfolio?

Oh yeah.

But I mean, were they Polaroids?

I don't remember what the hell I had, a bunch of drawings? They knew who I was.

It was such a small community.

Well, yeah. We're talking like what -1976 or '78, something like that, '77? They knew who I was.

Didn't you tell me at the Hollywood shop that they were trying to get the guys who came in after you to say they were Buffalo? (Bob was known as *Buffalo Bob* when he worked for Bob Shaw and Col. Todd... It was a classic example of having too many people with the same first name: Bob Shaw, Bobby Shaw and Bob Roberts. So 'Buffalo' was kind of a nickname Bob had then and they asked him to use it. Due to his prowess in tattooing a lot of guys who worked in shops, he got that nickname in hopes to keep business up.)

Well they did.

They did.

Yeah.

Okay, so Cliff, you're working for Cliff. It was a lot different than working the Pike, right?

Well, yeah. Cliff was doing mostly custom work. He wanted to draw everything on. I mean it was a song and dance, man. I mean, really if someone came in and wanted a standard old school panther, do you know how fucking hard that is to pick up and draw on? I mean all

"So one day when Bob was working in the museum, he was sweet talking this really young girl that was working there. I mean she was really young. I come in and see this so I say to Bob, "Hey, Bob, you know, you can't do this; she's a minor" and he says "Miners, farmers, what difference does it make?"

-Hanky Panky



you're gonna do is fuck it up. Why fuck that thing up? It's all ready... it's a symbol. It's got nothing to do with correct anatomy or anything like that. I mean that's the great thing about so many tattoo designs is that they're symbols, rather than anything that's anatomically correct. I mean, if you took a rose and took a photograph of it and trace it exactly; it looks like a fucking cabbage or something. But if you take a tattoo shop rose that has nothing to do with the anatomical complications of real flowers, but it looks more like a rose than a real rose - same thing with a panther.

Right.

So I used to fight with him about it. I would go, "Man, why do you want to crap this thing up? You're just going to crap it up." But they wanted it that way.

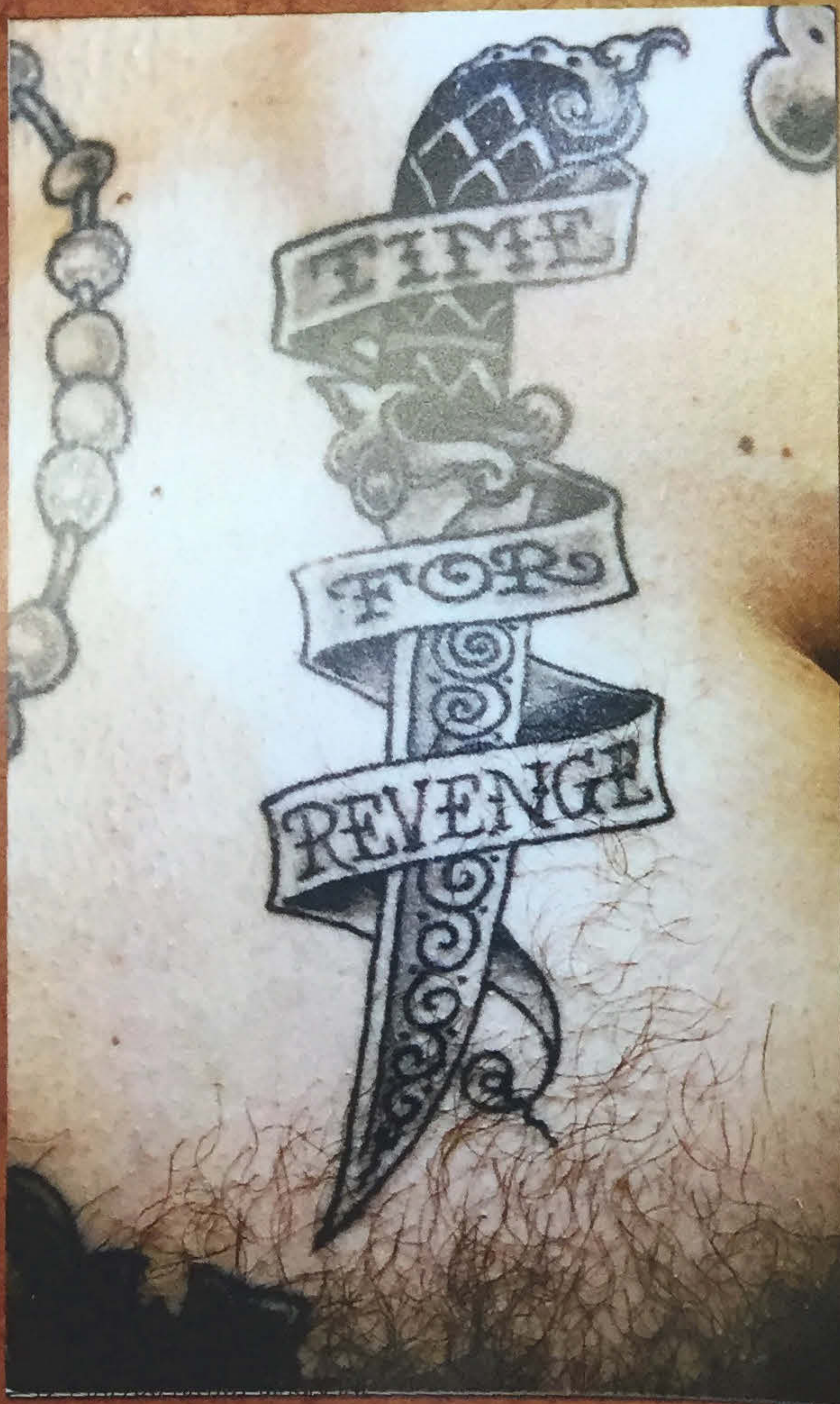
Was the money different than the Pike?

Oh yeah. I'll tell you what, man back then I was giving them 50 percent and taking home \$400-\$500 bucks a day. This was like the only tattoo shop on Sunset at that particular time. And so everybody that wanted a tattoo, that's where they went. And the people up there had money.

Where did you first see Japanese work?

When I first saw it - they had black and white pictures of Horiyoshi that were in *Life Magazine* years ago. Well, they had those pictures of Horiyoshi I at the Pike. I used to look at that stuff. There were no tattoo magazines back then. You would have to go to the library or something to see pictures.

Sure. Well wasn't Cliff trying to get that Eastern thing going with that custom stuff, a little bit?



Yeah, he was. And he was, for the most part, very successful at it. He was one of the few people besides Ed Hardy that was doing one-of-a-kind custom work at that time.

Right, and pulling it off. I've always heard he was a great tattooer.

Yeah.

Really great. What about Ed Hardy? When did you first hear about him?

Well, I had seen some of Ed's work come through when I was still working on Hollywood Boulevard. You talk about a beacon of light - I saw some early work that he did that just blew me away, man. It was incredible, the color, the application. I was working with Cliff and I went up and got some chest pieces from Ed. I got my whole arm and chest done. He just had a private studio, nothing in the window. One thing lead to another and then after a while I asked him for a job and he said, "Well, if you're willing to come up to San Francisco..." I said, "Yeah, man. I'm willing to come up there."

I had been in a little trouble and I had my driver's license taken away for five years. (Laughs) So that's when I left there. I went to San Francisco and worked with Ed Hardy for about three and a half years. I just started drawing a lot of Japanese stuff from being around Cliff. And I figured working for Ed; I'd really get my face into this stuff. So I went to work for Ed and shortly after that - I don't know, about four or five months, he opened the Tattoo City shop. So, it went from Japanese to single-needle black and gray?

Right. What started that? How did he get hip to that? I've heard the story about Jack but from where were you sitting?

Well what happened, when I first started working there, Goodtime Charlie's... what happened there? They wanted to sell the shop to Ed, the first one they had on Whittier Boulevard. So Ed, of course, it was a big fucking secret, "Oh, I gotta do down to L.A. for awhile."



I gotta take care of something. Watch the place and I'll see you in a week." I was like, "Okay." So he comes back, "Guess what?" I go, "What?" He says, "Well, I just bought Goodtime Charlie's." I went, "Really? That's great." But Ed lost the lease to Capt. Jim. He did all this stuff through Charlie. He gave Charlie a bunch of money, 'X' amount of dollars for the place and, "Okay, here -it's yours." But he didn't okay it with the landlord. So they threw him out of there and he opened up the other Tattooland down the street, the used car lot, you know. Shortly after all this, Ed wanted to open up a shop in San Francisco doing that type of work.

Right.

It was called Tattoo City. So we opened that and we had a bunch of people breaking-in there. I was working there, Kate Hellenbrand was working there, Jamie Summers was working there,

Psycho Joe, Chuck Eldridge, John Sandler, Mr. Horse (who was fresh out of San Quentin) worked there cause he knew how to do single-needle work and powder shading. It was a real fun place. Of course, it was like we were saying before; it was at the bottom of a four-story apartment building... Chuck Eldridge was working there. Somebody got mad at their girlfriend and poured gasoline all down the hallways there and all down the back stairway, which was wooden. The rest of it -there was a drain right by our back door and thank God most of the gasoline went down the drain. And he lit it up. Chuck Eldridge used to sleep there, he had like a loft bed back there 'cause he lived in Berkeley, so he used sleep there when he didn't want to go all the way home. Luckily, that night he wasn't there otherwise he wouldn't have been *here*. It burned the whole apartment and it killed like five people. Our shop mostly had smoke damage, you know.

I got the flash and you can see the smoke on the back of it -that was the end of that place.

With the switch, so you're working the Pike and Cliff's, the single-needle... I mean I know you can do it. I've seen beautiful portraits you've done and we'll get to that whole '80's thing because that was the big here at that time... You know, here in L.A. the big thing was between who was doing black and gray and who was doing color. I mean that just came by through Ed seeing that type of work...?

Well, no. The people at Goodtime Charlie's, they were the first like professional shop that was doing it. It was basically from jailhouse work. That's where it started.

Okay. Was Horse writing Ed from San Quentin?

Yeah.

And Ed just took a liking to him?

Yeah.

Okay, so the shop burns down and then what?

Well, then I just basically went back to Realistic and I just had to start right back into the Japanese stuff again.

And you were making a name for doing that? A lot of people coming in for that Japanese stuff?

Well, yeah. But I was real, real raw at it then. Ed was doing most of that and I was just pretty much basically copying Ed's work. I still didn't know how to draw water, or stuff like that. I mean, I was trying to draw stuff and a few things I could draw -mostly copied out of Japanese books or copy Ed's designs or do what I could with 'em. I didn't understand it. So I kept on trying and Ed kept on pushing me. I did what I could there. I was in a punk rock band called the Offs and we got set-up on tour. We got a drummer, Bob Steeler, he used to be with Hot Tuna and we had a good bass player. We got pretty good, man.

Yeah.

So went out on tour and we sold-out a few places in Austin, Texas. We were all fired up. We had all these gigs set up on the East Coast. But the singer, Don Vinil, he didn't like to fly so he decided to ride in the van with all the roadies and all the equipment. They got into an accident. They spun out on some black ice and he broke the top of his

"Bob is a true renaissance man. An expert at any medium he puts his hand to. He would make an exceptional role model for any artist, musician, or free-thinker, let alone a street-shop copy-cat like myself. Much love and respect for Bob Roberts and the rest of the Spotlight Family."

-Steve Boltz



“Buffalo Bob” Hand Car stencils from the collection of Shane Eubelm

leg, he broke his femur. So we had to cancel all these gigs in New York City. You know, we did a few of 'em without him. Then, at one of these gigs, it was at the Mudd Club or something like that - I met my future wife, Pam Brown. So I was up to my neck with her. I didn't really wanna leave. So I had some appointments, some guy had to fly out from Arizona or something for me to finish a tattoo and I wasn't there so Ed had to finish it - so he fired me. So that was the end of that job. I decided I'm going to move to New York City and open a shop.

Now, shops were illegal at the time?

Shops were illegal at the time.

Well what did that entail?

Well before this, let me tell you something... After I lost my job and I went back to San Francisco, I was there for about maybe a month or two before I moved to New York City. At this particular time, there was a guy named Greg Irons.

Right, right.

He was getting tattooed by Ed and he was inquiring about getting into the business. I don't think Ed knew who he was so Ed kind of gave him the high-hat. And I heard from Psycho Joe, or somebody like that, Greg Irons was in there getting tattooed. I was like, "Really man? God, I've followed all of his underground comics." I mean I was there at the newsstand waiting for

them to come out. So I knew who he was. "Fuck, Greg Irons." I wanted to meet him. And he wanted to learn how to tattoo? I mean, I'd never broke anybody in but I was like, "Fuck, I'll tell him anything he wants to know." So I got a hold of him and I told him, "What do you want to know? I'll tell you where to get supplies, how to set up your machines, anything you want." I helped him learn the machines and he put a few tattoos on. He goes, "Well what do you want for this?" I said, "Just make me a sheet of designs." So I got one of Greg Irons very first sheets of flash.

Well, he was good right away, right?

Well, yeah. He just had to learn how to use the machine, Jesus Christ, it took him about two weeks. He was just putting on fantastic stuff. He set up a whole new graphic school of design - the Greg Irons look. I mean, he was doing something nobody was doing and nobody can do to this day. He had his own unique style. The guy was just so good he could draw anything. I mean he would put these sailing ships on these guys... He had been tattooing two or three months and he blew everybody out of the water. His precision and his application and his knowledge, and what he could do with those things... He was incredible, man.

Yeah, do you think tattooing would have been different, had he lived longer?

I think it's been different ever since the short time he was with us.

He left his influence, yeah.

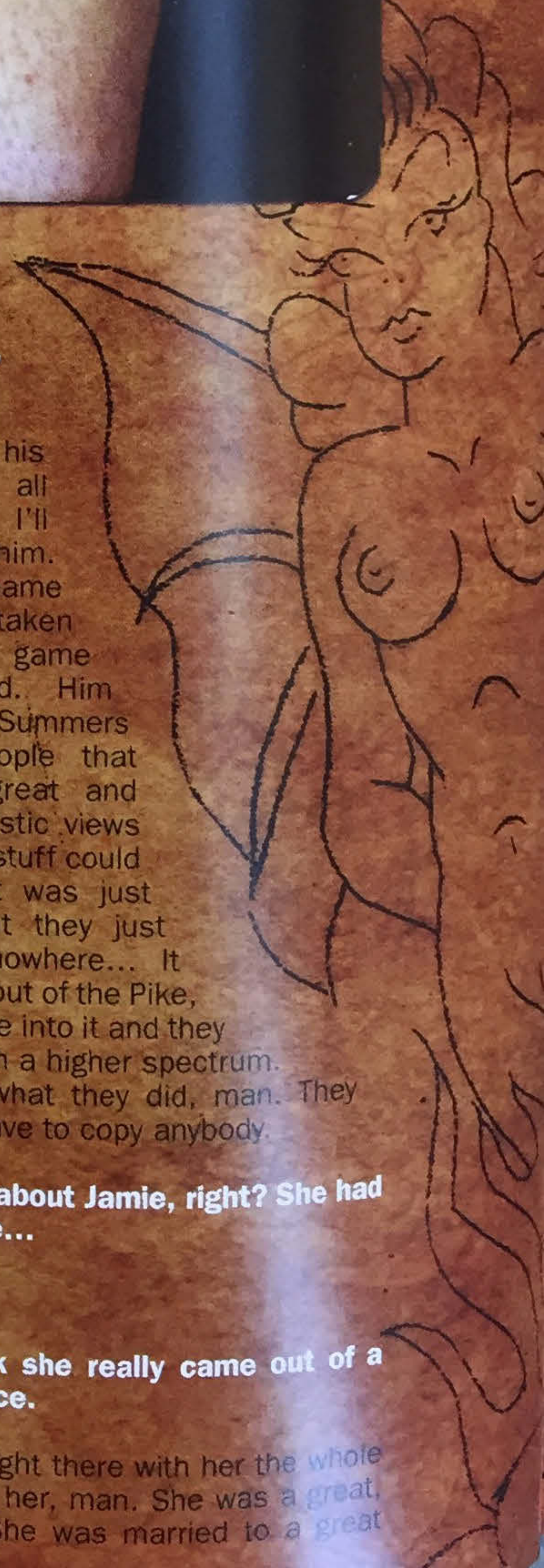
He left his impact on all of us, man. I'll never forget him. It's just a shame that he got taken out of the game like he did. Him and Jamie Summers are the people that had such great and different artistic views of what this stuff could be about. It was just real different they just came out nowhere... It didn't come out of the Pike, but they came into it and they took to it with a higher spectrum. That's just what they did, man. They just didn't have to copy anybody.

I heard that about Jamie, right? She had a real unique...

Right

Yeah, I think she really came out of a different place.

Well, I was right there with her the whole time. I loved her, man. She was a great, great lady. She was married to a great



artist named Redd Eks, who was a ceramicist back then—he still is, I guess? She really tried to do what we did, Americana-type stuff, she couldn't get it. She would cry—she couldn't grasp that type of imagery. So she just started doing her own stuff, which was fantastic.

Right, necessity is the mother of invention. Okay, so then you left?

So then I moved to New York City.

You met Pam.

Well, I met Pam. I had been seeing Pam for about three months and she came out to San Francisco. I was like, "Well, I don't know. I ain't got a job here. Where am I gonna go?" So I said, "Well, New York City. We'll see what happens." So I got a loft there and for a 2,500 square foot loft, I think I wound up paying \$500 a month, which went up to \$550 by the time I left. It was a little slow for a few months but once people found out I was there business got better. I put an ad in the back of the *Village Voice*, which Tom DeVita got mad about...

Really?

Yeah. And I started doing great there, it was a funny thing. Of all things, Manhattan, of all places. I had a shop at 295 3rd Avenue, 3rd Avenue. If you kept going downtown—turned into the Bowery.

Right.

I would get people ringing my bell and they didn't have an appointment. I would go, "Yeah?" They would go, "Is this a tattoo shop?" I'd go, "Yeah." They'd say, "Well, where's Mike?" I'd say, "There's no Mike here. This is Bob Roberts." They'd say, "Okay." I'd bring these people up and tattoo 'em and they'd go,



"Oh, I thought you were Mike." And I'd say, "No, there's no Mike here." A couple of months later I figured out that Mike Bakaty had a shop at 295 Bowery.

Ah.

It was the same street, the same address. You know, you move to New York City to open up a tattoo shop and there's another tattoo shop on the same street with the same address—now how's that for being scary? Who could ever set anything like that up? That's scary stuff, man. So I was there for like three and a half years. I did very well there. Nobody really knew who I was. The first *National Newsletter* started coming out. And I always liked Chinese tigers so I thought, "Well, I'm gonna work on these tigers—focus in on something and see if I can do it maybe a little bit better than other people." I always liked tigers so I started doing those. I found some animal books and I started doing tigers busting out of the skin and I put a few of those in the newsletter. Oh my God, the next thing I knew... I mean I had people coming from Kentucky. And all I did was tigers. That's what really kind of got me out there—doing that, doing tigers. The thing was in New York City, I mean all that single-needle stuff, you couldn't give that stuff away. These guys would walk in and go, (speaks with New York accent) "I don't care which tattoo I get. I just want the one with the most colors." And that's all they wanted, man. That's all you got to do there.

So did you make a decision to come out here after that?

No, I didn't make a decision, it made a decision for me. I finally lost my lease on that place. I either had to stay in New York or... I wasn't gonna have a place where I lived and worked again. That was the first and last time I was ever gonna do that.

People banging on your door all the time.

I've looked up to Bob for way longer than I've known him. To me his style is comparable to none. I respect how hard he still works after all these years of tattooing. It is a great honor to me to have Bob as a friend and I really appreciate the opportunities I've had to get tattooed by him and work with him at Spotlight.

-Bert Krak

Well, yeah. And then they'd call up, "Hey, can we come by?" You know, you got 14 guys a day pissing on the floor. Then you got the people who wanna go in your icebox. Then they'd go, "Can we go in there with your old lady and watch TV?" I'm like, "No." You know, all of a sudden... I tell you what man, people come in your shop and you know its business. They act a certain way. But when they come into your house it's like all of a sudden, I'm the asshole. "What? You wanna go take a shower too? Make yourself a sandwich." You know what I mean? So I would never do that again.

Sure, so you lost the lease and...

Well, I lost the lease and I didn't have anywhere to go. I went and moved back in with my mommy and daddy, you know? I was broke and I said, "Well, I guess I'm gonna buy a shop here." I went around everyday for like six months and I couldn't find a place... I mean that was when Melrose was in its heyday. I mean you couldn't rent a toilet for under \$8000 a month.

Right.

So man, I was out everyday looking for place, calling up, writing down every store for rent. And you would ask them, "Well how much do you want for the place?" And they would go, "Wait! What do you want to put in there?" That's the first thing they wanted to know. And I'd say, "Well, a tattoo shop." And they'd say, "A tattoo shop? Oh, well the *Hell's Angels*, that ain't gonna work." And I'm calling these people and I'm afraid to say a *tattoo shop*. "What do you want? A pate shop? Oh, cheese too?" (Laughs) That would be delightful." They'd ask, "What do you wanna put in there?" I'd say, "Well, I wanna put in an art studio." They'd ask, "Art studio? What kind of art?" I'd say, "Well, t-shirts, and this and that. We might do a few tattoos." The minute they'd hear 'tattoos', it was like, "No." And I finally got this place, this little garage next door. It was like somebody had dropped a bomb in the place. They finally let me in there and I was in that garage for nine and a half years before I got this place.

And that's where it started. You weren't thinking of going back to working for anyone else after?

No. I worked with everybody else for close to nine years. I just didn't want to take the gamble of opening my own shop and fucking growing cobwebs in here, and find me fucking dried up and dead in the backroom there, you know what I mean? Lack of business, you know? I was scared to death of it. I had no name. I did in New York City, but not out here. But it got to a point where I had to open my own shop. I wanted to stay here and it was time for me to step up to the plate, you know? So I opened up over here and it was like, "Holy Christ, man." You know, I went from tattooing six or seven people a day to two people a week. You know, I was dying over here.

When you first got here?

When I first got here, yeah. That went on that way for a year and a half. I was flippin' out, man. I was having serious mental dysfunction from just showing up to work and no one there. It was really bad, man. It was terrible. A good week was if I did two or three tattoos—that was a good week. Thank God the rent was only \$250 bucks at the time.

I gotta change the tape here. We're at 56 minutes. Anything you wanna say?

