

# Inked

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L.A. issue

**WITH:**  
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Kristanna Loken  
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Mark Mahoney  
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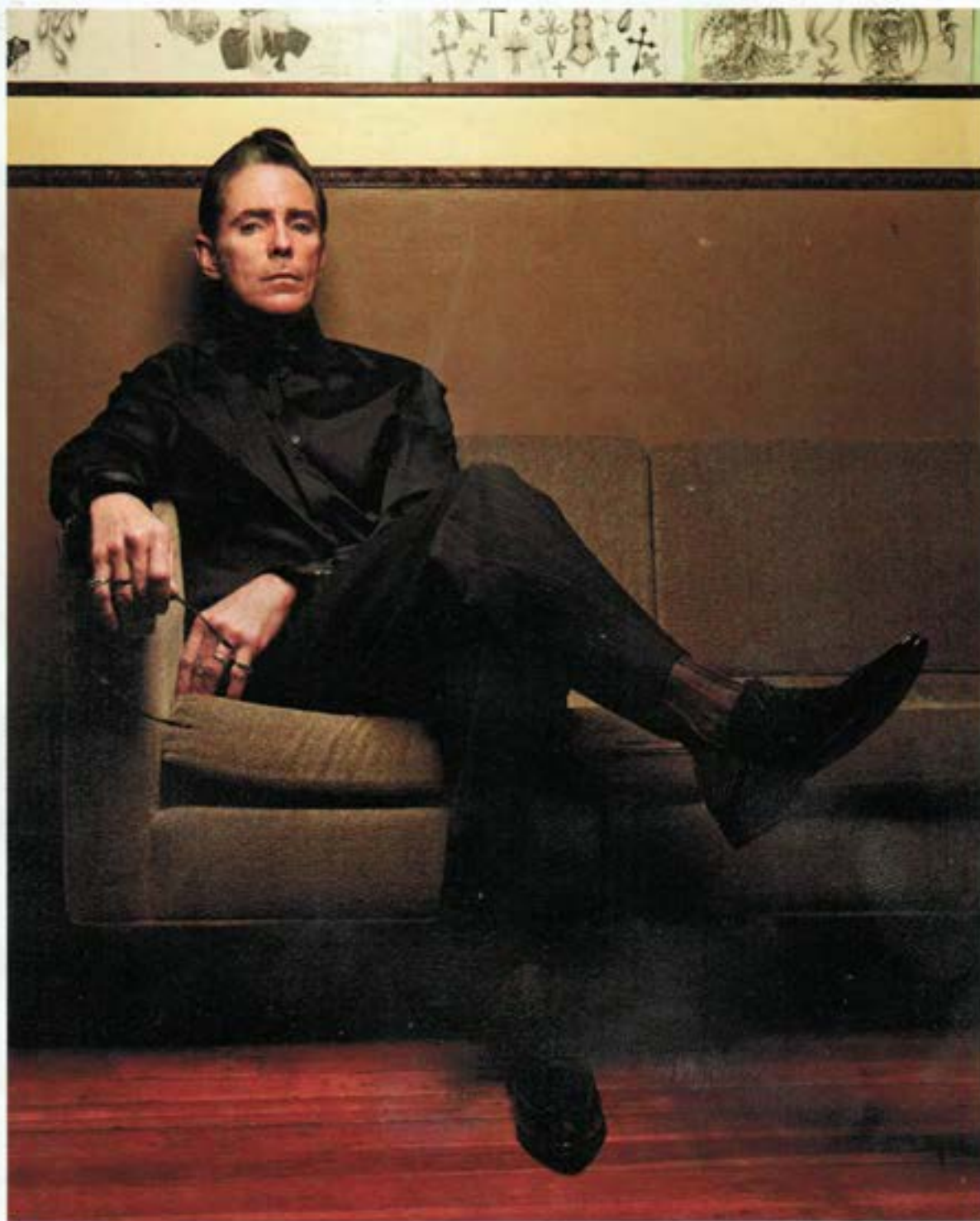


A man with short dark hair, wearing dark sunglasses, a black long-sleeved button-down shirt, black trousers, and black dress shoes, stands in front of a white wall and a window. The window has neon signs, including a green heart and the word 'TAIN' in orange. The text 'INKED SCENE' is overlaid in large white letters on the right side of the image.

# INKED SCENE

"I kind of liked [tattooing] when it was small and underground. The person who came in to get tattooed probably had a rap sheet. At least they were taking some chances in life." —Mark Mahoney





## MARK MAHONEY

**Shamrock Social Club**  
9026 W. Sunset Blvd.  
Hollywood, CA  
310-271-9664  
shamrocktattoo.com

**INKED: How did tattooing become a part of your life?**

**MARK MAHONEY:** I used to hang around with a greaser gang in my neighborhood. We were in Massachusetts so tattooing was illegal, and the guys would go to Rhode Island to get tattooed. I was maybe 14 and going down there with the older guys.

**Was it love at first sight?** As soon as I walked into Buddy Mott's tattoo shop in Rhode Island I knew that was what I needed to do. It was like an

epiphany. I could always draw, you know, and I knew I was going to end up doing something with art and shit, but not until I walked in there did I know for sure. It took me a while to get somebody to give me a machine, but the seed was planted right then and there. It never wavered. I never wanted to be a rock star or anything after that. I wanted to be a tattooer.

**Who gave you that first machine?** One of the older guys from the neighborhood, Mark Herlehy, had joined the Navy. He was a great artist. He'd picked up some equipment and knowledge in his travels. He came back and had me do a back piece on him for my first tattoo. Now he has a tattoo shop in New Hampshire. He's run it by himself for about 30 years, drawing every tattoo on freehand.

**A back piece is pretty ambitious for a first tattoo.** It was really more like half a back piece. [Laughs.] I just wanted it so bad. At the time I was like, "What the fuck?" I'm not that bold an individual. When I think about the stuff that I did that early, it scares me now. I just wanted it so bad that common sense shit never occurred to me.

**So was that the official start to your career?** I started professionally in, like, '77, tattooing full-time in the motorcycle clubhouses in Boston. Then I went to New York and worked out of a little pad on Elizabeth Street on the Lower East Side. I was hanging around with the CBGB's set. Then I came out here to the West Coast in about 1980.



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From far left: Valhalla Norseman T-shirt by Mark Mahoney; James Brown tattoo by Mahoney; Marilyn Monroe tattoo by Mahoney.

**Was it a drastic change moving from the East Coast to out west?** It was, you know. I remember, when I was working for the bikers, that every time I saw a really beautiful tattoo with bright colors and all that stuff it was always from The Pike in Long Beach. I wanted to improve my skills so I figured that's where I needed to go. And you know, I was hanging out with Johnny Thunders and Sid Vicious and those guys on the Lower East Side, as well as my biker friend from Massachusetts, so when I got to Long Beach, my friends were kind of the same thing—the outlaws, the L.A. punk rockers, and the old, gray-beard motorcycle guys. I guess in some ways it was different and in some ways it was the same.

**What was the biggest difference?** It was really the first time I saw the fine-line, black-and-gray tattoo stuff. I think I had seen, like, one fine-line tattoo that Johnny Thunders had. It was just some initials that I think Bob Roberts did on him. I had never seen any of that east L.A. black-and-gray shading until I got here in 1980. I flipped my wig when I saw that.

**Did you know right then that was going to be your trademark style?** Since I was a kid, when I'd get a box of crayons, the black one would be gone before I'd even touch the colored ones. I wanted to figure that into tattooing.

**What's the main difference you see in tattooing since you got started?** The main differ-

ence is the motherfuckin' magnitude of it. In Long Beach, the police department would come in with a picture of a cadaver and they could pretty much tell what tattoo shop they got tattooed at. There was maybe a half a dozen of them between South Orange County and Ventura. The old-timers could look at it and say, "Oh yeah, that was old Scurvy Joe up in Ventura." That seems like the Stone Age compared to now. Now there are a thousand guys just in Hollywood, probably.

**How do you feel when you look back at your own stuff from back then?** It's really hard for me to draw on paper or paint because I'm never happy with the finished outcome. At least with a tattoo the customers are decent enough to leave so I don't have to torture myself looking at it, you know? But even if I wasn't totally happy with the outcome, at least I could tell I was trying. I never shortcut nothing or started worrying about the next job so I did this one really fast. I always try to pour my heart into it. I hate looking at it, but I try to get something positive out of it.

**How did you get into designing for fashion?** I can't remember how Betsey Johnson got connected with me. I like to dress sharp. I must have met some people along the line, shopping for vintage clothes or whatever. But I was contacted by Betsey Johnson back in the '80s to do some design work for her, and it was probably one of the very first times fashion and tattooing came together. She made

three styles and it sold really huge. I got paid nothing. Then she had a retrospective of her work last year, and when that stuff came down the runway people went crazy for it and she ended up redoing it. She called me up and was super-cool and she ended up paying me a little better this time. She probably didn't even have to do that.

**Is it tough to adapt your style from tattooing to T-shirts?** I have a little thing of my own going now with Valhalla clothing. That's just a response to the brightly colored, garish tattoo T-shirts that we've been overexposed to. I just wanted to bring something for people who like black and gray tattoos. It's a little more understated aesthetic, you know? They got some of the greats of black and gray, like me and Freddy Negrete, to draw some stuff.

**What goes through your head when you see some square walking around with a tattoo-themed jumpsuit on?** That's kind of symbolic of what's happened to tattooing in general. It has become this mass-produced, supersized, money-making monolith. I kind of liked it when it was small and underground. The person who came in to get tattooed probably had a rap sheet. At least they were willing to take some chances in life. They had some kind of outlaw mentality, which is really one of the things that drew me to it in the first place. It was underground and it was outlaw. And just the out-front-ness of that other stuff? I'd rather do my style of stuff—it's on the understated side.





From left: Los Angeles tattoo by Mahoney; praying hands tattoo by Mahoney; Valhalla T-shirt by Mahoney.



**That understated style has really attracted a list of celebrities, though. Can you name a few of the famous people you've worked on?** Mickey Rourke, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie—just about anybody with a tattoo that's in the public eye, at one point in time I probably tattooed them. Even Notorious B.I.G., Puffy.

**Is the pressure worse when you're tattooing someone like Brad Pitt?** The pressure is always for me to do my best. That's unwavering. I want to make people feel comfortable. There are some tattooers who have the attitude that a customer is lucky to be around his artistic presence. But I look at it as your tattoo. You're coming to me. I'm a glorified plumber and I'm here to do the best I can for you, no matter who's in the chair. You're paying, so the customer is right. You gotta have fun at the Shamrock Social Club. That's why we call it that.

**Your building has a history of good times.** It was Bing Crosby's building. Legend has it that he bought a building right there on the Strip and made himself a nice apartment in the penthouse, where he could overlook L.A. He liked to hang out with the black jazz guys, like Louis Armstrong, and he couldn't take them to the nightclubs during those times. So he'd take them up to the top floor and blow weed and look down at L.A. I try to continue on the atmosphere of the building.

**Who was the first famous person ever to sit in your chair?** It was probably Johnny Thunders

in New York. I tattooed Sid Vicious a few times before he got sidetracked. When I got out here, I tattooed Johnny Depp on one of his first nights in L.A., but at the time he wasn't famous. Mickey Rourke was instrumental. He started coming to the old Shamrock on Third Street. He was a fixture there. He brought a lot of people to me. That was really the beginning of the celebrity thing.

**Do you still talk to Mickey now that he's back in the spotlight?** I hang out with him all the time. He's gotten three or four tattoos since the award season, as good luck charms. I'm so fucking proud and happy for him.

**Would you be as proud of your daughters if they got into tattooing?** Nuns don't need to get tattooed, right? They're going to join the nunnery, I hope. [Laughs.] My oldest daughter is 15 and she's a great artist. She says she wants to tattoo, and I know she'd be great at it. The deal is that I'd teach her if she uses it to work her way through college. She might try to renegotiate, but that's how the deal stands now.

**Do you get people other than your daughters asking you to teach them your craft?** I think the word is out that I don't really do that too much. There's only a few guys that I have brought up like that. I do it in the old-school apprenticeship manner. You have to do it for a couple of years before you even get to touch a tattoo machine, and nobody wants to wait that long anymore. Everybody

wants what they want immediately, you know?

**Do you like getting tattoos as much as you like giving them?** I can definitely tell you that I don't. I have great experiences, and I like getting tattooed to be an event. I probably have less tattoos than a lot of guys who have been doing this as long as I have. A New York photographer friend of mine, Nan Goldin, has some pictures that she's publishing from a night when we stole a car to go down to Rhode Island to get tattooed. It's cool to have tattoos with such specific memories. I can dish it out a lot better than I can take it.

**You have drawn a lot of tattoo designs for movies, too. How did that start?** I've been doing Tony Scott movies for years. Since *True Romance*, any time he has needed a tattoo design, I've been doing it for him. I did *Domino* and we have just been working on *The Taking of Pelham 1 2 3* that's coming out this summer. [He's] such a cool, passionate guy. He's so into every single aspect of his movie-making. He can draw and make a little sketch of how he wants a tattoo. He's, like, the perfect customer. I've done it other times and it's not so easy. Other people don't have the across-the-board, myopic attention to detail that he has.

**Do you still have to live up to your reputation as one of the few remaining old-school tough guys in the business?** We were at this convention out in Long Island about 10 years ago. One of the Moskowitz brothers was walking around saying, "There's no tough guy tattooers no more. Nobody gets in no fights. What's goin' on?" So, he came over to me and told me that he heard we were still doing it. I told him that we were on the Sunset Strip and sometimes people come in drunk. He wanted to know all about it. He started asking me, "What are you hitting 'em with? Is it a hammer? Do you stab 'em with a scissor?" It was great. We don't like to do nothing like that, but if it has to happen, it has to happen. It's that connection to the old school that will probably always be, you know? It's not a dentist's office. We want to keep it as clean as a dentist's office, but as fun as a bar room. This is the real world, and it's a street art form. The more street you take out of it, the more fucked up it is. —Stan Horaczek



# Inked

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Tattoos by

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**"I KIND OF LIKED [TATTOOING] WHEN IT WAS SMALL AND UNDERGROUND. THE PERSON WHO CAME IN TO GET TATTOOED PROBABLY HAD A RAP SHEET. AT LEAST THEY WERE TAKING SOME CHANCES IN LIFE."**

