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Ink on Ink



Photo: Mary Bowers

By *Mary Bowers*

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From the trunk of his 1963 Buick Skylark parked outside Coney Island's Sideshow by the Seashore, Jon Jon, a body artist from Sunset Park, sat with his tattoo gun poised over a newly-shaved arm, swigging his third beer of the evening. His customer, Chewy, the Incredible Wolfman from New Mexico, wore a grimace just visible on his unusually hairy face.

"Tattooing called me!" shouted Jon Jon above the whirl of his electric needle.

Coney Island's 22nd annual Motorcycle and Tattoo Festival, held September 23 this year, was many miles — and an entire era — away from Jon Jon's day job at Cutting Edge Body Art, situated above the designer cupcake cafes and European handbag boutiques just off Fifth Avenue. There, quivering students from NYU line up for Tweety-Bird on their ankle, as small as possible.

On Coney Island, Kitty Karloff, a guest visitor from Florida (special skills: climbing a ladder of machetes and putting her hand in an animal trap) looked around at the crowd and their wrinkled inscriptions.

"I have never *seen* so many tattoos!" she giggled flirtatiously.

As a 1966 El Dorado flashed by, Little Jimmy, "the smallest and best MC in Brooklyn" at four feet tall, broke from displaying his uncanny knack of guessing women's bra sizes to announce the grand tattoo contest inside the sideshow. Yet the enthusiasm compensated for the fact that the festival itself had been forced into considerable downsizing in recent years. Previously consisting of three stages with tech crews and a melee of different tattoo artists, this year a group of thirty or so squeezed into the dingy auditorium of Sideshows by the Seashore to watch the contest.

On one Internet messageboard the next day it appeared that the festival was so unusually small, some blinked and missed it altogether, "I knew that something was wrong as there usually is a stage set-up for the contest," posted one user, fearing the festival had been called off. "I found no contest." And no balloons outside, presumably, to show where the party was.

"It was not as big or as well-attended as they usually are," admitted Chuck Reichenthal, Community Board 13 District

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Brooklynners, however, like to have a weird good time.

Manager, who helped organize the festival with the Arts Council until recent years. “It used to be a lot bigger, There used to be restaurant tours and stuff.”

The Coney Island Tattoo festival began in 1985, when tattoos were still illegal in the state of New York. To get a tattoo, it was necessary to be well connected, or else willing to respond to the unlicensed advertisements in the back pages of free newspapers. Once licensing became available in 1999, tattooing turned from the preserve of a hard core of individuals into big business. The American Academy of Dermatologists reported in a 2004 survey that an estimated 24 percent of 18-50 year-olds had tattoos of some kind. “Tattoo regret” has become a common idiom among young people, and the price of laser removal has plummeted in recent years as demand has risen. Tattooing, it seems, has become another commodity to purchase and discard.

The age group at the tattoo festival this year were generally of a older demographic and a stronger commitment. Dick Zigun, the festival’s organizer, was more than enthusiastic.

“Great art is often really dumb,” he said, chuckling. “I got my first tattoo right here on the street.”

“We may not be the biggest tattoo festival in the world,” Zigun explained. “We may not be the richest. The wealthiest charge people so they stay inside and they make a lot of money. But we certainly are the coolest tattoo festival in the world.”

Zigun said he thought about getting a tattoo for ten years before finally giving in. He rolled up his sleeves and shows three of four tattooed limbs — themed “Air”, “Fire”, “Water” and “Earth.” “The Earth side I haven’t really started yet,” he said, pointing to his blank left leg and promising that this would be the year.

Three days later, in his studio, Jon Jon said that amidst the revelry, he never did get around to Zigun’s leg that night. Here in the East Village, everything shone clean, from the antique dentist’s chairs, to the local art on the walls. Gone were the rolls of cling wrap used to bind Coney Islanders’ swollen and bulbous fresh tattoos, gone were the queues of empty beer bottles. They were replaced by shelves of aftercare lotion, walls lined with City of New York Official Licenses, carefully gathered and photocopied IDs, and paperwork. The customers who left had their arms carefully bound with medical gauze, and were instructed not to drink alcohol or bathe their tattoos for 24 hours. The young girls waiting on the couch peered wide-eyed over their magazines.

“Everyone is getting a tattoo these days because of the movies,” Jon Jon said, after completing seven hour’s worth of work on a long pair of pink wings on the back of one young female customer. “Stars are getting tattoos. Cool people have tattoos.”

He said he gets a lot of students at the beginning and the end of the year, and all sorts in between.

“I’ve tattooed a transsexual and an 87 year-old man,” he said.

Yet Coney Island, the cling-wrap and the Buick Skylark still hold a place in his heart. “It’s the second year I’ve done it.”

Yet its current rate of shrinkage, it may have been the last.

There is no use telling this to Dave Earle of Long Island as, back at the contest, he grabbed the trophy for Best Color. It was difficult to know who was being applauded more – Earle, or the portrait on his right shin of Topsy, the elephant famously electrocuted in Coney Island in 1903.

“I feel like I really accomplished something,” he said, beaming as he surveyed the competition he so valiantly fought off that evening: Dotty from Brooklyn and the double helix which stretched down her spine; Dana from Queens’ and her Cheshire Cat; Vladimir from 12th street and his plate-sized, full color portrait of Deno’s Wonder Wheel.

“I can die on the way home now.”

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