

Stoner Ink

As tattooing seeps deeper into the skin of mainstream America, more and more people are pushing the limits when choosing an epidermal manifesto. It stands to reason that pot tattooing has also become increasingly popular. Whether you're the inker or the inked, pot tats are more than a statement—they're a commitment. **By Justin Hampton**

Part surgical chamber, part hipster atelier, this slickly furnished tattoo shop appears dead to any potential business that may wander in from Hollywood's foot traffic. Of course, all one has to do is to smell the burning resin mixed in like an added texture to recognize why: Inside, there's not just one, but two clients of LA-based tattoo artist and medical-marijuana patient Landon Heying locking their respect for marijuana into their skin.

Seated in a dentist's chair is Chris, a burly, shorthaired punk whose previous tats—like the Arabic script that translates into "Booty King"—display his irreverent nature. He's getting a huge blunt draped with pot leaves on his upper bicep. In between cigarette breaks, Chris says he's been pretty firm on the look for a while now. "You have to be," he admits. "After all, you're branded for life."

Lying on a patient's bench is Leah, who's getting a procession of flowers interspersed with hemp leaves down the left side of her back. She describes this tattoo as a dedication to her late father, a horticulturalist whose favorite flower was cannabis. "I don't smoke it myself, but he did every day," she recalls. "So this is to show how much he stays with me."

Whatever the rationale, in Western culture, pot and tattoo artists and aficionados have gone hand-in-latex-glove with each other since the countercultural boom of the late '60s, when hippies, radicals and other non-denizens of the mainstream began appropriating the tradition. "They wound up getting peace signs, pot leaves, Zig-Zag Man—whereas servicemen were getting eagles and 'USN' or 'USMC' or something like that," recalls Lyle Tuttle, who tattooed Janis Joplin, Grateful Dead tour manager Sam Cutler and Peter Fonda during his 41-year career as an ink slinger in San Francisco. "You had Black Panthers coming in getting tattooed, hippies coming in and getting tattooed, all these servicemen in the shop—a whirlpool is the best way you could explain it."

Of course, the tattoo tradition goes back even further, cutting deeply across race, time and societal configuration. The Maoris of New Zealand and the Haida of Western Canada received gorgeous, finely contoured arabesques on their chests, hands and face as a rite of passage, which would



"Straight people don't know / What you're about ..."

serve as grist for the "tribal" tattoo trends of the '90s. The Japanese developed—and arguably appropriated from the Chinese—images of dragons, carp, and other symbols of honor and fertility into a distinctively integrated style that transformed the entire body into an elegant canvas. And in Thailand, tattoo magi created ink-sealed, pointilist tatismans designed to bring wealth, love and luck to their wearers. But all this was lost upon 20th-century Western society, where misinformation and fear drove the practice underground and made it illegal to perform in many cities and states until as recently as *this decade*, when South Carolina and Oklahoma were the last to abolish their anti-tattooing laws. Sound familiar?

Nowadays, thanks to the example set by rock stars, pro athletes and TV reality shows such as *LA Ink*, people from all walks of life get them. Celebrity tattoo artists like *LA Ink*'s Kat Von D, who attended a Marijuana Policy Project

fundraiser in 2007, and the retired (for now) Don Ed Hardy, whose work and *Tattootime* book series paved the way—along with RE/Search's *Modern Primitives*—for the acceptance of tattooing as a fine-art form, have parlayed their names into brand identities adorning T-shirts and perfumes. An extraordinary diversity exists in the tattoo workplace these days, with highly skilled artists pushing the form into heretofore-unexplored realms of photorealism and biomechanics. And the more stringent enforcement of health codes has made the experience a safer one.

Yet some bemoan the loss of the outlaw vibe, claiming that a new ambivalence towards pot use has accompanied mainstream acceptance. "In tattooing, yeah, there's a lot more people nowadays that would be against somebody that smokes pot working for them—as opposed to back in the olden days, when people wouldn't really care as much," opines OG Tatu Scooby, an 18-year tattoo veteran and medical-marijuana grower in Washington State. "Nowadays, they do in some shops, and in some shops they don't."

Even among those who smoke, this ambivalence arises from a concern that tattooing could regain the unsavory reputation it once possessed, when bikers, gang members and convicts dominated the community. These fears are unfortunately well grounded, with certain workplaces continuing to frown on body art; in fact, a poll conducted by Texas Tech University showed a rise in the number of women going to tattoo-removal clinics, citing negative societal reaction as a reason for their change of heart (and skin). This has also affected people like Louisiana-based tattoo artist Mike Graves. His outspokenness and willingness to give pot tattoos—which he considers a specialty—haven't always won him fans in the Deep South. "I've got so much flak because I'm pretty open about it," he reports. "I had some guys that worked in the same town as me saying, 'Oh, you give tattoo artists a bad name—we're not all potheads.' That just stems from the whole misrepresentation of cannabis in the first place. It's just perpetuating those stereotypes."

Even so, a pothead doesn't have to look too hard or long to find a sympathetic counterpart in

High Times
January, 2009

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The Big Rock Candy Mountain.



Good for what ails ya.



(Above) A purple haze. (Left) Negative-space tattooing in the unluckiest of places.



Guy Aitchison's vision of pot's inner world.

'THIS IS AN INDUSTRY HEAVILY SATURATED WITH DRUGS—JUST LIKE THE MUSIC INDUSTRY.'

Over the years, hemp has entered into the aftercare phase of tattooing as well, through the introduction of hemp tattoo balms. These treatments are generally marketed not as a replacement for the medical disinfectants usually provided by tattooists, but for the continued longevity of the tattoo. "Tattoos these days are expensive; you want to protect that investment," DiMattia explains. "And the best way to protect that investment is keeping it out of the sun and keeping it moisturized—and so what these hemp-based products do for tattoo aftercare is, it moisturizes the tattoo." Merry Hempsters CEO Gerry Shapiro believes that the users of his tattoo balm are attracted by its organic, animal-product-free composition. "People like the idea of the hemp, and it's vegan and it's moisturizing," he says. "Those are the three main points that are generally trotted out. There are a lot of vegans out there that are somewhat tribal, so they have a lot of marks on them."

Of course, few marks raise as many red flags as the iconic marijuana leaf that many stoners gravitate toward when it's time to pledge their dermal allegiance. Various tattoo artists contacted for this article—even those who are otherwise pot-friendly—say they routinely discourage clients from getting these sorts of tattoos, not only for the social stigma they can bestow, but because their presence immediately gives police probable cause

the elements of probable cause. It's legal, but that doesn't make it right," she says. "Therefore, those who get drug-related tattoos have to understand that they can be used against them."

Of course, some people let little stand in the way of their ambitions, no matter where they choose to get tattooed—perennial Missouri political candidate Chief Wana Dubie has run for public office twice in the past two years with a huge, ultra-crudely rendered pot leaf emblazoned on his forehead. But most tattooists will stop short of placing such a polarizing symbol on readily visible areas like the face, hands or neck. For while a pot leaf is hardly as inflammatory as a swastika, it's a symbol that the authorities are still prejudiced against—and one that many people choose to remove or cover up once their priorities shift. "Tattoos remain constant, but people change," observes Tuttle, who routinely transformed *Playboy* Bunny logos into pot leaves back in the '70s. "So if they're wearing something that's not in vogue or not fitting their lifestyle at the time, then they wind up getting them covered up."

True, certain people will embrace pot tattoos as a sign of outlaw defiance—one tattooist interviewed mentioned framing the letters "FTP" (for "Fuck the Police") with a wreath of pot leaves for one client. But these days, there are a number of reasons why people get pot-leaf tattoos—commitment is the only constant. "The majority of people coming in who are going to get a tattoo that's pot-related or hemp-related, they know what they're getting," Scooby maintains. "They've got a conviction."

Many stoner artists have turned their attention to capturing the bud instead of the leaf. Mike Graves and his wife have buds tattooed on their

the field. As an independent tattoo artist and full-time stoner, LA-based tattooist Julie Becker acknowledges: "This is an industry heavily saturated with drugs—just like the music industry. So I think whether or not the quality of your work suffers is the question." DiMattia recommends making a selection based on pothead simpatico: "If you're gonna get a larger work or going to spend a lot of time with a tattoo artist, you need to have a personal connection with that person. So you tend to go for the artist that reflects your own style, your own vibe, your own values ... and because tattooing is growing, you have a greater choice."

For those tattoo artists who do smoke, pot comes in handy for everything from enhancing creativity to soothing the muscles and joints irritated by hours in static positions. "The more I do it, the more art I seem to produce," says Becker. "It keeps me very focused, and it keeps my body and my muscles relaxed—and that's important for someone who's stiff and constantly feeling the pains of the job."

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Michele Wortman's crystals-and-buds, male-and-female rendition of marijuana.



RIP: Dimebag Darrell



Come blow your horn

'THE LEAF IS A SYMBOL. NOT JUST A PICTURE—IT'S "HI! I SMOKE MARIJUANA!"

hands, and he reports that oftentimes, people who are not longtime tokers barely recognize them, which suits him fine. And high-end artists such as Guy Aitchison, who's gained world renown for his psychedelic-visionary approach to the form, prefer a more creative and impressionistic interpretation of the subject matter. "The leaf is a symbol. It's not just a picture—it's 'Hi! I smoke marijuana!'" Aitchison theorizes. "And something a lot more artistic and with more substance to it as a picture isn't gonna immediately jump out in that same way."

Indeed, few people are as devoted to the cause as those who choose to get large-scale work etched on their bodies. Canadian pot activist Loretta Clark recently documented her bud-tattoo experience on her online TV show *Cannabis Closet*, explaining to HIGH TIMES that she saw it as an outward depiction of her own hard work for pot's legalization. "This is a lesson I learned from gay and lesbian battles in Canada, and that is to face the fucking stigma face on and be empowered and strong by doing so," she says.

Scotty, a hot-tub salesman from Wisconsin, has commissioned Milwaukee-based tattooist Dan Hazelton to cover his body with a fully integrated dark-art-themed rumination on pot, starting with a photorealistic depiction of a plant on his back ensnaring his legs, plus a brooding black-and-gray depiction of a *Matrix*-style industrial pot field where cranes pluck the waiting buds and place them in a chimney-like pipe smoked by a solemn visage erupting from an eternally hazy sky. His back will eventually show an entire world overrun by marijuana plants, with the planet Earth visible in its skies. A victim of the War on Drugs, with two felonies for growing and conspiracy and a grueling stay at boot camp in his past, Scotty has commissioned the tattoos as a coming to terms with—and

a loving embrace of—the plant he's sacrificed so much for. "I'm trying to give myself to it. It's brought me through a lot of rough times in my life, so I thought: Why not show it?" he says. "A lot of my rights have been taken away over it, so I might as well live it and show it proud."

So for those about to get tattooed for the right reason, your compatriots salute you. "You gotta stand up for what you believe in," Scooby insists. "It would help more patients lead better, healthier lives—and if people could show it on their skin, that's even better."

Back in the days of the tattoo industry's infancy in the US, what was possible was constrained by societal taboos and stylistic conventions. Nowadays, enthusiasts can receive work that was unthinkable decades ago. "People used to come into my tattoo studio and wanted to get photorealistic tattoos, like portraits. And I would tell them that that was impossible. But they're doing them today," notes Tuttle. Therefore, customers should now see their imagination as their only constraint. DiMattia advises: "Don't limit yourself. Think of how you wanna represent yourself to the world visually, and you're gonna find a tattoo artist that can do the job."

Back at his shop, Heying considers the work he's done today. He fully acknowledges the benefits



(Above) Hazelton's projected vision for Scotty's back. (Below) Scotty's current back design.



Matching father/daughter tattoos.



he's enjoyed from the acceptance of both pot and tattooing in modern society. He knows that criminals get tattoos, but so do doctors and lawyers—and they smoke pot, too. Like any good work of art, societal mores can only be perfected through time and perseverance. But it's all in a day's—or a life's—work. "It goes hand in hand with the marijuana thing as well, the tattooing," Heying observes. "Pot's so much less taboo than it used to be, and it's really because people are getting more knowledge about it. When people get educated, then that's when the stigmas that are attached to it start to get released a little." *

HIGH TIMES TATTOO CONTEST Show Us Some Skin

We know there's a legion of stoners out there sporting sensi skin art and HIGH TIMES wants to reward those brave individuals who have declared their love for the herb indelibly upon their flesh with fabulous prizes! That's right, show us your marijuana-themed tattoos and maybe you will be the lucky winner!

First Prize: Jorge Cervantes ULTIMATE GROW Complete Box Set, a 12-month subscription to HIGH TIMES and a 2009 Ultimate Grow Tips Calendar.

Second Prize: A 12-month subscription to HIGH TIMES and a 2009 Ultimate Grow Tips Calendar.

Third Prize: HIGH TIMES' 20th Anniversary Cannabis Cup DVD and a 2009 Ultimate Grow Tips calendar.

Email photos to contest@hightimes.com.
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All contestants must be over 18.