

inked

Some of Las Vegas' most respected artists reside at Miracle Mile's Club Tattoo.

BY CHARLIE JOHNSTON

"Does that hurt?" asks *Nevada Magazine* Editor Matthew B. Brown as he watches the application of my most recent tattoo. It's a difficult question to answer. Although I wouldn't consider it painful, getting a tattoo isn't a comfortable experience. "Well," I respond, "it doesn't feel good."

The hot sting of the needle takes me by surprise—this isn't my first tattoo, but the initial shock is always the same. After a few minutes, adrenaline numbs my back to a slight warm tingling sensation, al-

most like a scratchy shirt rubbing against a sunburn. When the needle approaches my spine the pain momentarily returns.

Tattoos have been a part of cultures around the globe for more than 10,000 years. While the significance of body markings has historically varied from indications of status and rank to identification of prisoners and slaves, modern Western tattoos are generally cosmetic and denote something of personal significance.

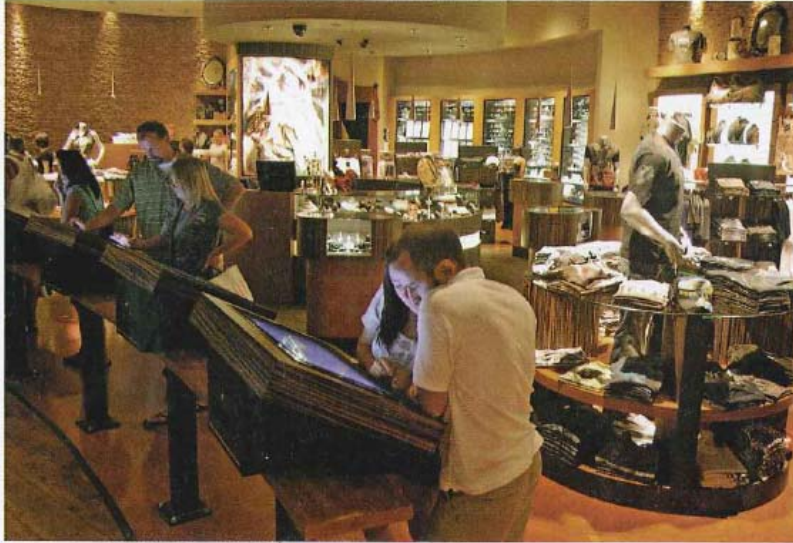
While choosing a design is paramount, it is also important to pick the right tattooist and parlor. Some of the top artists

in the country practice their craft in upscale studios on the Las Vegas Strip.

One of those artists is Joey Hamilton of Club Tattoo in Planet Hollywood's Miracle Mile Shops. Hamilton has been in the business for 14 years, and his work has been featured on A&E's hit show "Inked." The handful of talented artists who work alongside Hamilton were chosen from more than 100 applicants. Simply put, these people can do for the human body what Rembrandt and Monet did for canvases. "These are some of the best [tattoo] artists in the world," Hamilton says. "We feed off each others' talent." The studio

Nevada Magazine

January/February 2010



echoes the top-end theme with upscale décor, custom leather tattoo chairs, and five touch-screen monitors with thousands of images for potential customers to peruse. Though other tattoo studios in Las Vegas incorporate similar technology, none do it on such a large scale as Club Tattoo.

While prices reflect the top-talent artists and premium Strip location (my tattoo, about nine inches in diameter, would run about \$800), the constantly busy studio is a good indication that customers do not suffer from sticker shock. Clientele range from avid tattoo enthusiasts to college students and famous actors and musicians—Slash of Guns N' Roses recently visited the Club to get a tattoo of his own design depicting a skull wearing a top hat.

During my visit to Club Tattoo, Hamilton offers his insight to help make the compass rose design I want on the middle of my back really stand out. To follow the theme of personal significance, the tattoo is a symbol of the thirst for adventure that has been a driving force throughout my life. Hamilton appreciates a customer who has a clear idea of what he or she wants. "Don't ask us to design your tattoo," he says. "We don't know you and will probably never meet you again—this is something you're going to have the rest of your life."

Hamilton's true talent (like any tattooist) is turning his customers' visions into art—doing things with ink that most of us would never think are possible. The

intricate detail, true-to-life shadowing and highlighting, and rich color palate have to be seen to be believed.

While Hamilton works on my back, about a dozen potential customers browse the studio—Club Tattoo also offers piercing and brand clothing—some watch the progress of my tattoo, and others search the seemingly endless database of tattoos. One thing they share in common is they don't fit any inked-up, tough-guy stereotype; they are average people, many considering their first tattoo. This speaks to the goal of co-owners Sean and Thora Dowdell (Linkin Park frontman Chester Bennington is also a co-owner) to elevate the image of the tattoo industry.

After more than two hours under the needle, my adrenaline is ebbing, and the pain is slowly increasing. I'm relieved when Hamilton tells me he is going to look over it a final time for any spots he's not satisfied with—tattooists take their work doubly seriously. It's not only their art, but it will be on their customers' bodies forever.

He meticulously bandages my back and goes through a detailed list of instructions to care for the healing tattoo. By the time I am healed and ready to share my new adornment with the world, Hamilton will likely have tattooed dozens more people and may well have all but forgotten my compass rose, but I will always be a canvas for his work, my message, and their artful intersection.

CONTACT

Club Tattoo
Miracle Mile Shops
at Planet Hollywood
clubtattoo.com
702-363-2582

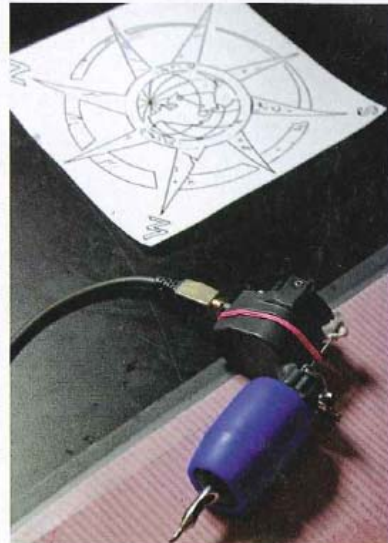
WORTH A VISIT

Hart & Huntington Tattoo Co.
Hard Rock Hotel & Casino
hartandhuntingtontattoo.com

Mario Barth Starlight Tattoo
Mandalay Bay
starlighttattoolasvegas.com

Vince Neil Ink
(two locations)
O'Sheas & Rio All-Suite
vinceneilink.com
vniegas.com

3 Lions Tattoo
(two locations)
Riviera & Sahara
3lionstattoo.com



Opposite page: Tattoo artist Joey Hamilton works on Associate Editor Charlie Johnston's tattoo. Customers peruse the touch screens (top left) at Club Tattoo. Bottom right: A stencil of Johnston's tattoo next to a tattoo gun.

PHOTOS: MATTHEW B. BROWN (TOP), CHARLIE JOHNSTON (BOTTOM RIGHT)