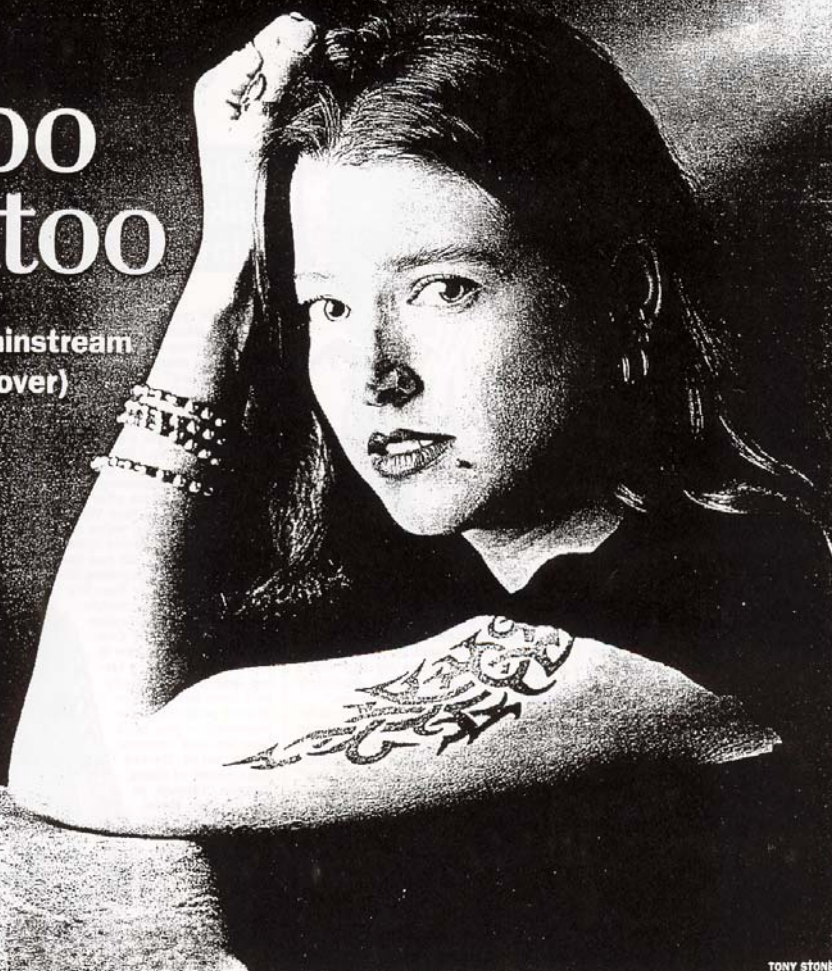


# Lifeline

## Tattoo you, too

Body art goes mainstream  
(Translation: It's over)

BY MICHELE INGRASSIA



TONY STONE

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## **Square to be hip**

By MICHELE INGRASSIA

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When Kate got her first tattoo a decade ago, it was the ultimate rebellion by the quintessential rowdy girl. Somewhere between the hot-pink hair and the assorted piercings, she discovered that ink-staining her body was the perfect up-yours to the suffocating Midwestern town where she grew up.

So she set to work: first her chest (a sun), then her arm ("I did that one the day Kurt Cobain died; the tattoo shop kept answering the phone, 'Kurt Cobain-is-dead Day'"), then a foot and finally her back — a mural so over-the-top she can't bear to see even a description of it in print.

Now, on the verge of marriage, career and a grownup life, the young New York photographer is halfway through the \$20,000 process of having her tattoos lasered off.

It's not just the prospect of joining the middle class that changed her view — having survived her punk-rock days and a period where all her closest friends were tattoo artists, there's more than a little rowdy girl left in her. But there's also a growing realization that tattoos are, well, over.

"Getting tattooed may sound rebellious, because it's permanent, but it's not really rebellious at all, because now everyone has one," said Kate, who asked that her real name not be used. "In fact, I find it unique when someone my age who's been down the same path is absolutely clean of body piercings and tattoos."

With every suburban mom or cubicle-dwelling dad sporting a 2-inch rosebud on her shoulder or a goofy cartoon across his back, tattoos have lost their rebel cachet.

Think about it: Does the "Bad Boy" etched onto Sean Combs' chest change the fact that he's become utterly Establishment? Does plastering tattoos up his arms, down his legs and across his knuckles change the fact that Ozzy Osbourne has turned into Ozzie Nelson with funky makeup? Even Omahyra, the Brazilian model with armloads of tough-girl tats, has no trouble getting major runway gigs.

## **Unique no more**

In a world where no one flinches at Christina Aguilera's "revelation" that she has 11 piercings — including a diamond in her most private domain — it's no wonder Ozzy could only sigh when his daughter Kelly got a heart-shaped tattoo on her 17th birthday. As he told his viewers in typical Ozzy-speak, "If you want any advice from me about tattoos, to be somebody unique, don't have a tattoo because everybody and their friends has got tattoos."

Sociologist Donna Gaines, a professor at New School University and author of "Teenage Wasteland," put it more simply: "It's no longer a statement of, 'I'm an outlaw. I'm hip.' Besides, once it got legal in the city, it got groovy in a way that's totally uninteresting." Indeed, five years after then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani lifted New York's 36-year-old ban on tattooing, we've reached the intersection of explosive growth and crushing boredom. On one hand, the number of people getting tattoos is rising faster than the number of rock-star wanna-bes. A survey in September by the University of Connecticut found that one in five Americans has a tattoo, and of those, nearly half have two or more. "It's the potato-chip phenomenon — you can't have just one," veteran tattoo artist Darren Rosa, owner of Rising Dragon Tattoos in the Chelsea Hotel, explained at last summer's fifth annual New York City Tattoo Convention.

But the very fact that more people are offering up their bodies as fresh canvases is leading society to say, "Who cares?"

"There's a drift in the culture to a normalization of bohemia," said Gaines, whose memoir, "A Misfit's Manifesto: The Spiritual Journey of a Rock and Roll Heart," is due out in March. "You can say that tattoos have mainstreamed, but at the same time, the suburban mother has gotten a lot more hip. A generation ago, if you double-pierced your ears, you were a freak. Now, Middle American mothers at Bible meetings have tattoos."

So, in fact, do Barbie dolls. If you're trying to understand how something so outrageous could become so unremarkable, consider this: When Melanie Griffith's 17-year-old son, Alexander, got his first tattoo this summer, People magazine reported that the actress not only tagged along for the milestone moment, but had her manicurist meet her there so she could paint her nails while it happened.

Consider, too, that the current standard-bearer of tattoo nation is former Solicitor General Kenneth Starr — yes, the same Ken Starr who investigated Bill Clinton's White House sexual escapades and business dealings a few years back. Earlier this year, Starr headed to the U.S. Supreme Court to challenge South Carolina's ban on tattooing, claiming skin artists have the same First Amendment rights to free expression as other artists. (He lost, but that's not the point.)

Then there's the epicenter of mainstream America's fantasyland — the bridal Web site theknot.com — where message boards crackle daily with debates over what to do on The Big Day with The Big Tattoo, yours or your bridesmaid's. (The No. 1 solution: When in doubt, cover up with Dermablend.)

## Changing faces

Manhattan dermatologist David Goldberg can tell which way the cultural winds are blowing by who walks through his door. "Five or seven years ago, an 18- or 19-year-old kid was dragged in by his parents because the parents didn't necessarily want the tattoo," said Goldberg, director of laser research in the Mount Sinai School of Medicine's dermatology department. "Now, we see 18- or 19-year-olds who had the tattoo put on six months ago and are coming in because they want it off. To them, it was cool for a week and not rebellious at all."

Similarly, Roy Geronemus, a Manhattan dermatologist and president-elect of the American Society of Dermatologic Surgery, estimated that in the last year, he's seen a 25% increase in the number of patients wanting tattoos removed. They're split, he says, among been-there-done-that 18- to 22-year-olds, corporate types who think their tattoos look unprofessional and young mothers who want their tattoos gone before their children are old enough to understand what they are (though, with all the stick-ons out there, it's likely kids understand before they're old enough to talk).

Jennifer has been through all the stages. She was 18 and on spring break from college when she and a band of girlfriends flew to L.A. for the weekend and decided that tattoos were the souvenir of choice.

"We weren't drunk, we weren't high, it wasn't a dare," she said. "We just figured, 'Hey, we've come this far, let's get the tattoos.'"

Eleven years later, with a husband, two toddlers, a master's degree and an upscale life, she's so over the butterfly on her back.

"My kids see it as a boo-boo and I want it off before they see it's not," said Jennifer, who's having it lasered off. "When you're 18 and going out to clubs, it's okay to show it off — maybe it was kind of cool. But when you're older and married, you don't want to walk into a black-tie function or have to answer questions about it."

Since tattoos date back to at least 2000 B.C. and the Egyptians, it may be tricky to declare them officially over, since they've never been gone and will probably never go away. Even so, the best way to look at their trendiness — or nontrendiness — is through the prism of long hair, that other symbol of midcentury rebellion. Once Dad showed up at the office trying to look like Mick Jagger or Jimi Hendrix, kids knew it was time to move on.

"Everything gets so homogenized and routinized," said Gaines. "We have an eruption of a form or a style or a sound, and it's charismatic and attracts a vanguard. Then it starts to filter into the culture. By 1979, people started cutting their hair to be rebellious. By the '80s, punks were shaving their heads. Now, anyone with long hair is considered laughable."

Which begs the question: What next? Bouffant hair? Mulletts? Or anything else so mundane that it has to be outrageous? More likely, the answer lies in all-or-nothing extremes.

"People are shocked by normal, so maybe normal is the new shocking," said Mickey Boardman, fashion director of Paper magazine, who joked that he's "almost over being over tattoos, so maybe I'm ready for them to come back."

But if the point of rebellion is to shock, the next wave could mean more pain, more gain. Think of those over-caffeinated boys on MTV's "Jackass" waxing the hair off their body parts. (Ouch!) Or "Jackass" Steve-O, who got himself arrested at a Louisiana club last summer after stapling his, um, private parts to his thigh. You could try branding — scorching yourself with a piece of metal heated to 1,800 degrees — but beware: Its time has come. And gone.

That leaves only mega-modification, the sort sported by 25-year-old Emilio Gonzales as he swept through the New York Tattoo Convention flashing tattoos from face to feet: four lip rings, silver horns implanted in his forehead, transdermal ridges in his forearms and holes the size of silver dollars in his earlobes.

You don't like? He doesn't care.

"I do it because I love my body too much," he said, noting that he owns two bod-mod shops in his homeland of Venezuela. "It's my life, and I love my body, my body art, my body modification."

But for some, too much may finally be too much. Just ask Ed Prikasky of Venus Modern Body Arts on E. Fourth St., who's been getting pierced for nine years and doing piercings for four. He's seen it all ("Christina's diamond pierce? She bought it from us," he said) and done it all ("You name the body part, I've shoved a needle through it"). He himself has a dozen piercings, full tattoos and tribal holes in both ears.

He's also done with it. "I'm sick of the way people act, even though it's so commonplace. I get stared at, I get treated differently, I go to dinner and get seated at the back of a restaurant. I have stretched earlobes, and you know, I think I'll have them sewn up next year."

**If you change your mind**

Spent too much time in tattoo land? There are ways to get rid of those dancing bears that you took months to plaster across your back. But since tattooing involves permanent marks made beneath the top layer of skin, removal requires time, money and, oh yes, pain. The options:

- **Dermabrasion** The tattooed area is frozen, then sanded with a rotary abrasive instrument that causes the skin to peel. Down side: Possible scarring. Cost for removing an average 2-by-2-inch butterfly: \$1,500-\$2,000, according to New York dermatologist David Goldberg.
- **Excision** The tattoo is surgically cut out, then skin edges are sutured together, making this a better choice for a small tattoo than a large one. The upside: It requires only one session. Cost: about \$1,000-\$2,000.
- **Laser** The most widely used technique employs three types of lasers — called Q-switched Nd:Yag; Q-switched Alexandrite, and Q-switched Ruby — to zap out pigment. The process, however, can require 5 to 20 treatments, depending on the size and color of the tattoo. As a rule, black inks respond best, followed by red, says New York dermatologist Roy Geronemus; green, yellow and neon pigments are trickiest to vaporize. Cost: from \$500 to \$750 a session, which can mean well over \$10,000 to banish a large design.
- **Infrared** Pioneered by San Antonio dermatologist Tolbert Wilkinson in his work with street gangs, the process uses an infrared coagulator to sear off tattoos. The good news: Wilkinson says removal can be done in a single session at a cost of \$7. The not-so-good news: Critics say the burn can be worse than the tattoo. "In laymen terms, it's like taking a 1,000-watt lightbulb and putting it on top of your skin," says Goldberg.
- **Dermablend** The Leg and Body Cover Crème, which comes in 11 shades, is recommended for tattoo coverup. \$16.50 for 2.25 ounces at <http://www.dermablend.com/>.