

## **THE GODFATHER AND THE KING—THE MARKETING OF DON ED HARDY**

By Brad M. Bucklin

If you haven't heard of Don Ed Hardy, then you've probably been living in a cave for the past year or so. The undisputed "father of modern tattooing," or "godfather," depending on whom you talk to. Don Ed Hardy has shaped the contemporary face of an ancient art. Known for sophistication and experimentation, Don Ed is recognized around the world for his spellbinding imagery that incorporates American, Japanese, cholo, surf and pop culture influences. Now, however, his art is emblazoned on designer clothing, motorcycles, energy drinks and even dog carriers. His apparel is worn by such stars as Mariah Carey, Jamie Foxx, Madonna, Queen Latifah, Melinda Clark and many other renowned people from the entertainment and sports worlds.

The other day, while shopping, I encountered a woman wearing a jogging suit, her shoulders decorated with the distinctive Don Ed Hardy signature. I wondered about the seemingly sudden emergence of tattoos as mainstream culture and if this was what Don Ed had in mind when he agreed to license his work. An agreement that has some people within the tattoo culture raising an eyebrow or two.

"It seems that tattooing is becoming a theme park adventure for people," says Kate Hellenbrand, better known as Shanghai Kate, who has known Don Ed since 1971. "They pretend to be part of it by putting on a hat or T-shirt. The mystery is vanishing. The one thing I felt Ed stood against was name brand coolness, and now that he is the primary example of it," adds Hellenbrand, "I don't know his impetus."

"There have always been the purists," insists Matty Jankowski, a recognized tattoo archivist. "For example, the purists would throw out body piercing at tattoo conventions. Now it's accepted.

"Some may look at what Don Ed is doing and say it is a misstep," adds Chuck Eldridge, another

internationally respected tattoo artist and historian. “There have always been two camps in the tattoo world. Traditionalists see it as exploitation and commercialization, while Ed sees it as advancing the art of tattooing. Anytime one raises their visibility, people will take pot shots at you.”

But more than just a tattoo artist, Don Ed is a painter and printmaker. His dedication to other mediums besides tattooing keeps his creativity diverse and his passion intact. Creating art on cloth is nothing new for him, he started painting and stenciling on clothing a long time ago.

The idea itself has a long history. For many years, Sailor Jerry, Lyle Tuttle and others marketed their designs, making them available on clothes, and many tattoo purists became upset. But that didn't stop the popularity of the designs and their increasing value in the marketplace.

In the early days, before 1970, tattoos were relegated to backroom anti-establishment characters. They came with a stigma that was hard to overcome, so the marketing of tattoo related designs was limited.

The first international tattoo convention was held in Houston Texas in 1976 and drew only 100 or so artists. The *Chicago Tribune* said the whole affair was tacky. However, the popularity of tattooing grew, partly due to increased visibility in advertising (the Marlboro's man's tattooed hand), movies such as 1969's "The Illustrated Man" with Rod Steiger and rock & rollers like Janis Joplin and the Stones. But a good deal of the interest could be attributed to Don Ed Hardy. He was the primary force behind the tattoo renaissance.

What used to be word of mouth was finding a voice through advertising and promotion. “Having a tattoo became less of a mark of identity and more an expression of personality,” points out Jankowski. “By that time, Don Ed was already archiving images and had pioneered tattoo publications with his *TattooTime* magazine, which utilized high-quality articles and pictures to document the unique tattoo

experience.

Tattooing in the United States was being brought out of the dark ages. While other cultures had rich histories of using tattoos as talismans, including Japanese firemen wearing them as protection from fire and ancient Chinese creating them as signs of prestige and power, the American experience was often unstructured and disconnected.

As a classically trained artist at the San Francisco Art Institute, Don Ed connected with the visual creativity that flourished in California, and with such influences and mentors as Gordon Cook, Joan Brown and Phil Sparrow, he was encouraged to utilize a sense of craft, art history and a profound spirituality, while still being grounded in the blue collar ethic.

In 1973, Don Ed made his first trip to Japan, and revisited often during the '80s and '90s to study with some of Japan's finest tattoo masters. While he wasn't the first to use the Japanese or Asian influence in tattooing, his work with the native artists gave him a profound understanding of symbolism, body placement and how to transform a tattoo into something beyond a basic image. More than any other artist, Don Ed Hardy influenced the use of Japanese style in American tattoos.

Hardy also has a reputation for being driven. "He adopted every style, by grabbing and running with it, inundating himself into the various cultures. He becomes it until he works through it," notes Kate Hellenbrand. "This way, he has been able to pull from real life experiences to meld various iconographies into the American tattoo culture. More than that, however, is Don Ed's personal work ethic and focus."

"Clients would always be blown away by his ability to tap into personal images and take them to another level. He would get the idea a person had in their mind's eye and execute them intuitively," says Chuck

Eldridge, who often traveled with Don Ed and had first-hand experience of his creative drive. “I would get up at nine and he would have been up for three hours and completed two or three drawings already.” This unique sensibility, range and depth of his work confirmed for many that tattooing could be more than a craft. It could be an art form.

“Don Ed has had an ongoing legacy of generosity to other tattoo artists and innovators, which has given him a lot of goodwill in the business,” confides Eldridge. But he continues, with no pun intended, “Tattooists are really thin-skinned, and they take things personally.” With all the years Don Ed has been involved in the business, it is only logical that he has ruffled some feathers. He epitomizes the notion that tattooing is holy work, that it changes lives forever and that, like every good mentor, he passes on his knowledge to others. That is why, for some whose feathers are easily ruffled, the mass marketing of his images offends them.

“Tattooing is changing from the ground up,” acknowledges Hellenbrand. “I believe that tattooists are the shamans of our culture. In primitive times, the better a person treated the tattoo artist the better the tattoo. But, in one short generation, I have seen this art form turn into a discount mentality. It is becoming a theme park adventure for people. They can now pretend to be a part of it by putting on a hat or T-shirt. The mystery is vanishing. Quite simply, the more common, the less magical.”

“Most of the people out there do paint-by-numbers with pre-soldiered needles, pre-prepared inks, mass produced designs,” says Henry Goldfield of Goldfield Tattoo in San Francisco. “It’s a supermarket of tattoo supplies. The market is flooded with equipment being sold by tattooists. Today, it’s more about marketing than nurturing artists through apprenticeships.”

But why is this? It seems more a result of a changing environment than the mass marketing of Don Ed’s images on power drinks and sneakers. In a way, the writing was on the wall when Shotsie Gorman sold

rugs, Lyle Tuttle marketed cigars and Betsy Johnson put dragon designs on high-end velvet blouses.

Mari Kono, who accompanied Don Ed on many of his trips to Japan states, “We live in a hybrid culture, transferring ideas from one form to another. If one appreciates tattoo art, then they can appreciate it in other media.”

Still, the question remains, why did the most influential innovator, the figure that brought tattooing out of the dark ages, decide to put his work on T-shirts, caps, motorcycles and a seemingly infinite list of other merchandise? Was it really for the advancement of the art form? Or strictly for monetary gain? And, who is behind this mass marketing phenomenon?

Don Ed was the logical person to answer these questions, but my timing was off. After calling Tattoo City, his shop in San Francisco, I discovered that he was in Hawaii, where he spends an ever-increasing amount of time, and that he wouldn't be back for three or four weeks.

All right, but could you leave a message that I called?

“Sure,” said the friendly voice on the other end. “But, when he does get back into town, he is having a hip operation. He'll probably be laid up for a month or so.”

My timing was going from bad to worse. So, in order to make the best of things, I decided to address the other side of the equation. I contacted the man responsible for the mass marketing of Don Ed Hardy branded products, Christian Audigier.

In order to get to the Christian himself, I had to go through Nathan Fuja, the Vice President of Marketing for Don Ed Hardy, who gave me a rundown on the genesis of the endeavor.

Christian, by the way, was dubbed the “King of Jeans,” by age 19, and had developed his distinctive style at Levis, Fiorucci, Diesel, Bisou Bisou, Lee and many others, until he landed at Von Dutch.

Utilizing celebrities and creating innovative designs, he built Von Dutch to the international brand name it is today. But the pressure was too much and, at age 45, Christian suffered a heart attack.

Recuperating and, finally, regaining his seemingly boundless energy, Christian was looking for something to do. Ku USA was licensing Don Ed Hardy’s artwork and had developed a fledgling clothing line. Christian happened by the shop and liked what he saw. He bought some of the clothes and was interested in distributing them to his friends, but soon decided he wanted the licensing rights. So the “Godfather of Tattooing” went into business with the “King of Jeans.”

“Christian understands that this is a lifestyle and markets to that,” explains Fuja. “Fashion is a language and Don Ed Hardy is a vernacular of the culture. Christian’s goal is to make it a big company, but stay true to Don Ed Hardy’s art.”

Christian chimes in, speaking through his thick Euro accent. “I have tattoos myself. I talked with Ed about fashion and, in two weeks, put the deal together and, then, in eight months, we put the clothes together. Now we have 14 distributors around the world.”

A five-year contract was signed and, while Don Ed had a large amount of existing material, Christian needed to license more to add power to the brand.

“I have final approval of the business side of things,” says Christian. “While I do consult with Ed, he has the final decision on the art that we use. I have 10,000 images from Don Ed and I intend to use all of them.”

I asked Christian if he was aware some tattoo artists concerns about his use of Don Ed's designs for mass marketing.

"I am not aware of the sentiment," he responds, emphatically. "We are talking about art. I have a lot of friends in the tattoo world and 50 percent of my customers are in the tattoo world. All I know is, Ed is happy about what is going on and proud of it."

Nathan continues to talk about the philosophy behind the Don Ed Hardy line. "We want to change people's perspective on tattoos. We want to elevate tattoo designs to fine art by designing clothing that is a true reflection of them. It's a marriage of the two worlds, fashion and tattoo."

It is obvious that Christian and company have their act together and are in it for the long haul. "We intend to evolve with the consumer and constantly respond to the public. Sometimes, we'll miss, but fashion is cyclical," adds Nathan.

But no matter how diligent they are at marketing, who is to say that Kate Hellenbrand's fears won't be realized and those unique Don Ed Hardy designs end up in the bargain bin at the 99-cent store?

Christian responds. "Because it is more of a lifestyle, it will have a long life. I won't let it go to the bargain bin. The styles are too upscale for that."

Counting on his marketing prowess, Christian anticipated that the increasing popularity of tattoos would create exposure, and exposure would mean sales. It appears he was right.

There is evidence, however, that some people don't have a clue what the whole tattoos on clothing

hubbub is all about. I ran into an acquaintance who was wearing a Don Ed Hardy T-shirt. Excited about my asking his opinion of the artist and how he liked the design, he told me that he had gotten the shirt from his hair stylist and had no idea who Don Ed Hardy was. He was equally surprised when I told him the design emblazoned on the front was a tattoo.

Fully recovered from his hip operation and sounding well rested, Don Ed Hardy finally had a chance to talk with me. With passion and intelligence, he immediately confirmed the Audigier story of how Christian came into the Ku shop, bought a few pieces, became enamored with them and made the deal.

“I still control the rights to the images,” Hardy confirmed. “The reality is that they are classic tattoo images and I have no huge emotional investment in them. Christian’s take on the art is fun, all fun, and that is fine. Way too many people in the tattoo field take themselves too seriously. There is a certain mystery about tattooing. It is not logical. It deals with creative impulses and I wanted to transform it. It adds something positive to people’s lives. If they see them on public figures, then they are opened up to the possibilities. These days, the tattoo culture is over the top, ruined because it has gotten too popular. There are incredibly talented people out there, but, on the whole, it is a mess. It has become lowbrow stuff. To me, it lost it’s mystique about 20 years ago.”

Hold on, 20 years ago? Wasn’t that when Don Ed Hardy was first becoming influential in the tattoo world? Was Don Ed, then, at least partly responsible for the loss of that mystique?

He explains. “I am happy that it has opened up as a cultural option. When I first started, tattooing was a niche market. Now, whether it’s real tattoos or ready-to-wear, there is no end in sight. People realize that what they do to adorn their bodies is their own business. It’s not for everyone. But, if it makes someone feel better about themselves, great.”

Don Ed acknowledges that he is a roving anthropologist and that tattooing is just art, just part of the culture, and it doesn't exist in rarified air. We all know that Picasso and other artists have utilized their art in other mediums. In the end, Don Ed Hardy, like Picasso, is an artist first. "Even if the fashion thing blew up or failed," he says, "it wouldn't make a big difference to me."

So, what now for Don Ed Hardy? Surprisingly, because of arthritis and his recent hip replacement, he is talking about retirement. "I have been painting on clothing and stenciling for a long time. I am more interested now than ever in the development of personalized images, especially the Asian ones. I plan to keep painting, collaborate on projects with my wife (Francesca Passalacqua), travel more and, basically, see places we haven't seen."

Marisa DiMattia of [needle.com](http://needle.com), however, points out that Hardy was recently convinced to come out of retirement to create a unique Japanese-themed tattoo for the comedian and actress, Margaret Cho. So, for those who still yearn to be a canvass for one of Don Ed's tats, there may be a glimmer of hope.

And what about Don Ed Hardy, the marketing phenomenon? Recently, a preliminary injunction was filed against JJJ, Inc. and other defendants for alleged trademark and copyright infringements related to counterfeit Ed Hardy apparel. Christian Audigier and company are expected to seek significant monetary damages from a settlement. According to a news report, Mr. Audigier stated that the company takes counterfeiting most seriously and has initiated a number of domestic and international lawsuits, in response to an increase in imitation Ed Hardy products appearing in the marketplace.

Perhaps, it was Kismet that Don Ed Hardy and Christian Audigier found each other; two men of stature in their own right sharing a common dream of transforming the tattoo world. But, in the end, they both remain true to who they are, the artist and the promoter. The artist wants to transform the art form creatively and, the promoter, to produce profitable lifestyle images. A perfect win-win situation?

Marisa DiMattia sums up the feelings of a majority of people in the tattoo field: “There’s a lot of trash-talking over the art of Ed Hardy and Sailor Jerry being worn by Paris Hilton and Sean Combs. Some say they are sell outs, but I am happy to see a real tattoo artist enjoying at least some of the spoils of their artwork.”

So, did Don Ed Hardy sell his images for the advancement of the art form or monetary gain? Everyone has their own opinion. But as Don Ed Hardy says, “If it adds something positive to their lives, what difference does it make?”