

Ray Youngman has tattooed for over forty years, but he still doesn't sport tattooed hands or neck. In street clothes, you'd never suspect he's totally inked, inside and out.

Ray was born in Spokane, Washington in the fifties. "My first moment of awareness was my fixation on my father's military tattoos from his service in World War II," says Ray. Even as a boy Youngman was motivated to transfer those designs into his own artistic expression, so, at eight years old, Ray's self-portrait was published in the local newspaper. "It was a painting of a beatnik sort of guy wearing a smock, a beret and dark glasses. I was holding a palette in one hand and a paintbrush in the other. Funny, I look pretty much like that today."

Ray's early teenage years were spent in Omaha, Nebraska, where his dad was a teamster, working under Jimmy Hoffa. "It seemed normal to be escorted to and from school in a limo with tinted windows rolled up tight," remembers Ray. Moving to Chicago in 1966 made for real culture shock. "The Chicago scene was really flipped out," he says. "There were real motorcycle clubs, really greasy hair, really heavily tattooed, white Dago-Ts and baggy greys. Bigger guitars, cooler cars and more grease." Then, reflecting a second or two, he adds, "Wow, man, this is really happening now."

Ray's teenage years were spent hanging out with an older crowd and their crazy shenanigans. "These guys were rolling under boxcars while the cars were still moving." *The new rebel was born.*



BIG 10 QUESTIONS WITH RAY YOUNGMAN

BY MARY GARDNER



"By 1968, tattoos had become a huge part of my life," recalls Ray. "It was politically and socially the time to be a tattoo artist, and what a backyard I had for customers—I mean greasers, circus, carnival cats, tramps and transients. I've tattooed the rail-riding bums for decades. In the seventies, those guys that didn't know how to use a phone, couldn't read or write would show up at my door. They rode a train from New Jersey or Montana after seeing my work on a fellow traveler."

In the late seventies, Ray worked not just as a tattooer but a graphic artist splitting his time between pinstripping cool cars and sign painting. He described his tattooing as more of a back alley activity. "I kept improving my skills and at the same time not thinking I was good enough." Even today, Ray sees being able to reproduce a piece of wall flash we'll again and again as an important aspect of tattooing.

Although he tattooed full time in the company of Cliff Raven and Greg May, Ray still never had a true apprenticeship. His dad's association with tattoo artists like Jack Armstrong, a carnie tattooer who followed the circuit working behind chicken wire, kept him immersed in the lifestyle. "Armstrong told me not to pursue tattooing," says Ray. "He told me that I'd never have a girlfriend or be able to wear a bathing suit because I'd have my hands and neck tattooed. 'And when you can't tattoo anymore,' he told me, 'you'll be picking up behind the elephants.'"

Despite the dire warnings, Ray opened his first shop in 1985 as a licensed tattoo artist in Downer's Grove, Illinois. That's where you can find him working alongside his son, Jeremy.

"To me, ta-toos are magic," says Ray. "It's synchronicity. It's the magic of the opportunities that are out there. Doors just ready to open. But, you've got to stay aware."

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1. **What is your favorite word?**
"Wow." I like to hear that word.
2. **What is your least favorite word?**
Scratcher. That one makes my hair on the back of my neck stand on end.
3. **What phrase do you say too much?**
"Don't worry about it."
4. **What is the most important aspect of your job?**
The spirituality. The contact I have with people.
5. **What are you afraid of?**
Living.
6. **Whom do you most admire?**
My son, Jeremy.
7. **What music do you like to listen to when you work?**
Fusion and smooth jazz.
8. **What do you do for fun?**
Man, I tattoo! I'm also a collector of odd and unusual items, especially World War II militaria.
9. **If you couldn't be a tattoo artist, what would you be?**
A bum.
10. **What would you say to someone who wants to be a tattoo artist?**
You're too late.