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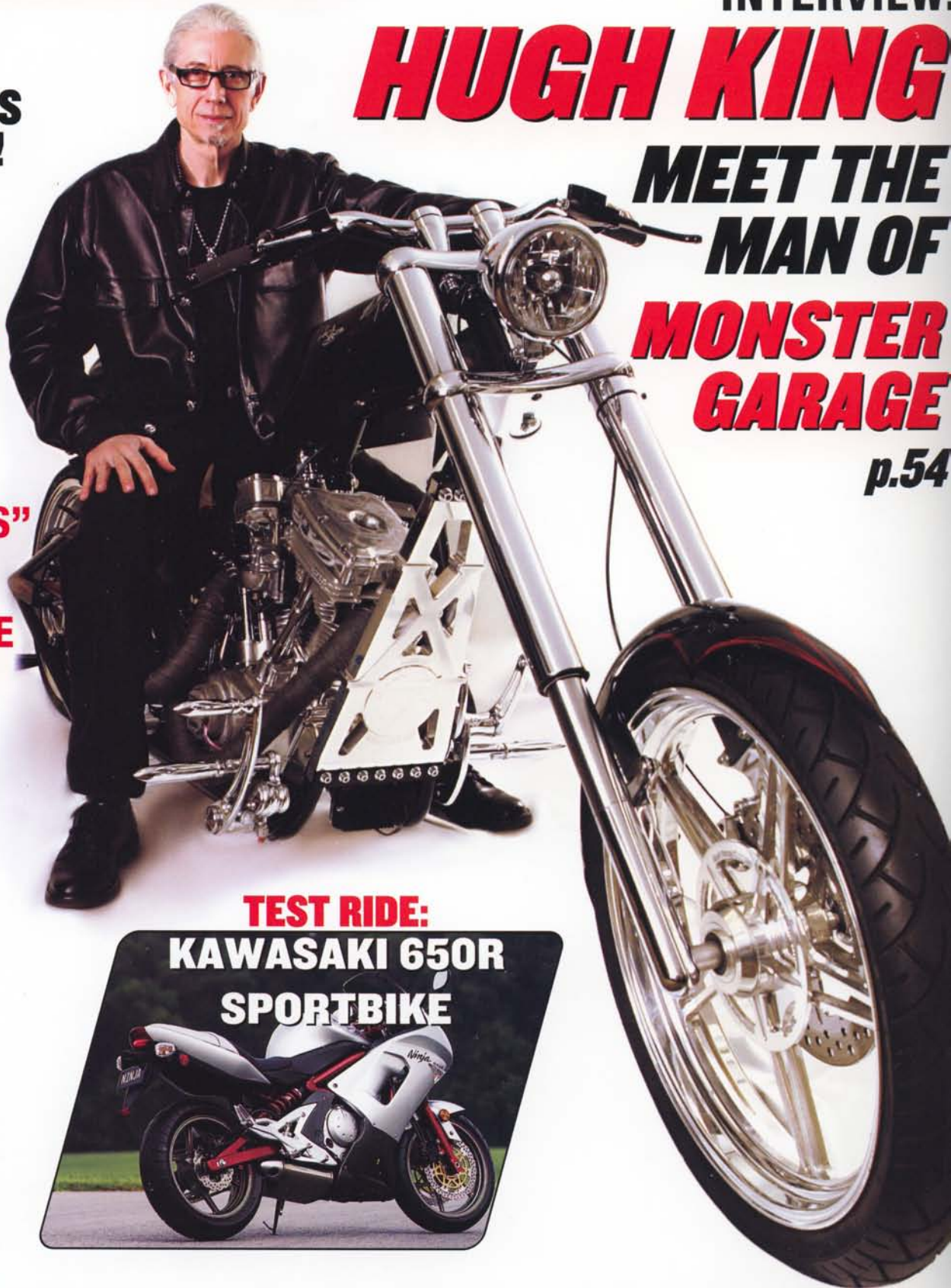
INTERVIEW

HUGH KING

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MONSTER GARAGE

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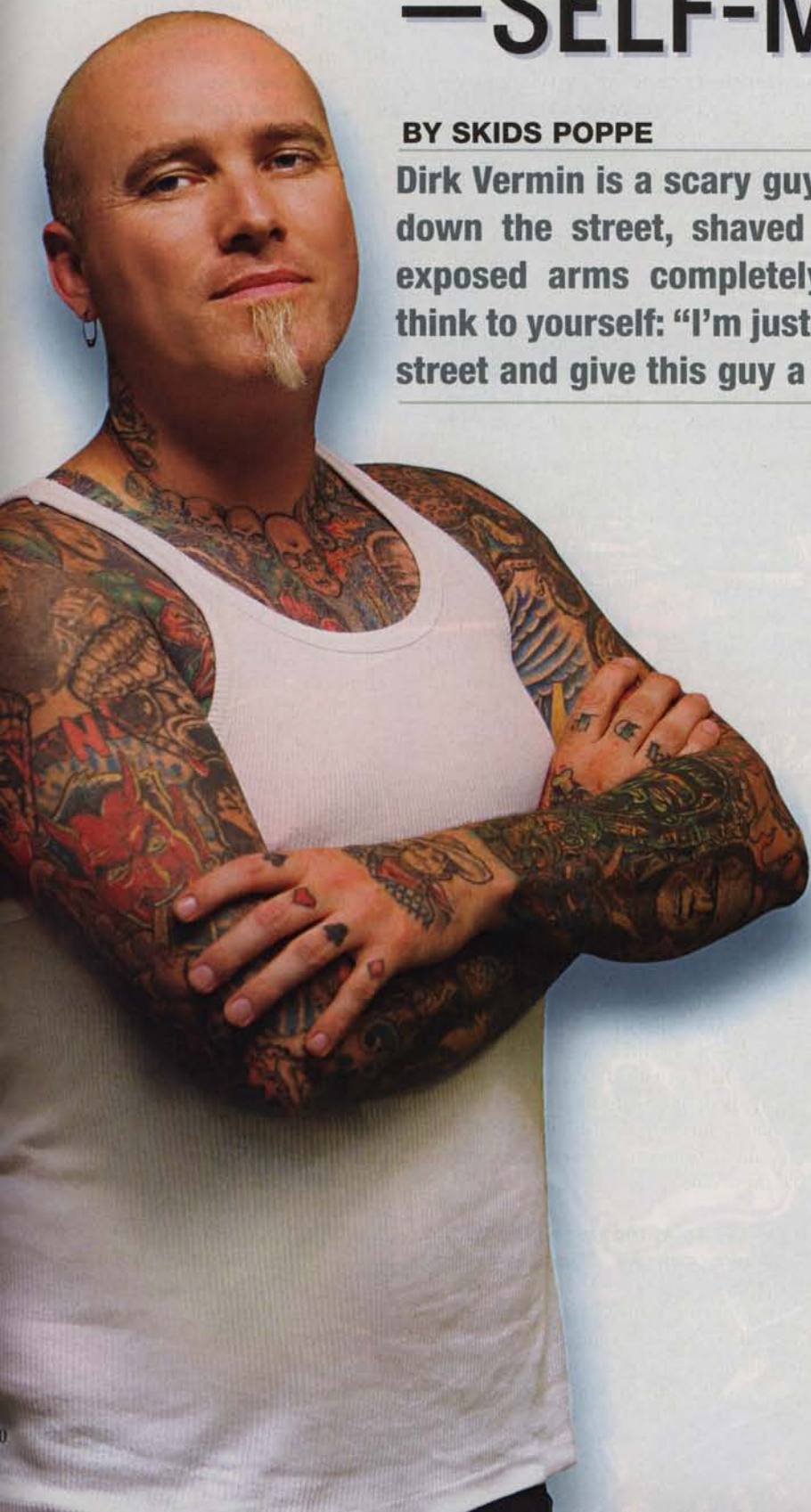
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DIRK VERMIN —SELF-MADE MAN

BY SKIDS POPPE

Dirk Vermin is a scary guy. Really. You see him walking down the street, shaved head glistening in the sun, exposed arms completely sleeved with ink and you think to yourself: "I'm just gonna walk on my side of the street and give this guy a little room."



Then you notice the Starbucks Grande hanging loose in his lowered hand. And that's when you see the grin. You know then that this guy isn't going to fit into any stereotype you might have imagined and you may just have to rethink this whole out-laws and tattoos thing.

"It's just becoming more and more mainstream. I guess you really have to be outrageous to get noticed anymore," explains Vermin. "But I like that. Certainly when I'm out in public I'm really nice, when I'm at Starbucks, or wherever I go, I make sure to be a little nicer because I know how intimidating I can look." He smiles, showing a mouth full of slightly menacing teeth. "Look tattoos...and he loves his mother!" Vermin laughs and eases into his chair. In his office at the Pussykat Tattoo Parlor he is surrounded by his own original art. Dominating one wall is a South Seas version of a Witch Doctor inspired by the old song and a suggestion by his older daughter. Along a small shelf running around the room, a foot or so below the ceiling, is a small collection of Tikis from around the world. It all gives off a very primitive vibe. "I have a fascination with primal culture, it's in all my work," he says. "It brings a little bit of kitsch and a little bit of primitive, which is certainly...my tattoos and everything, all that crazy stuff." There are also pictures of his two daughters and a few business details. What you don't find is the Flash sheets you'd find hanging on the walls in a normal tattoo shop. Or the drug paraphernalia.

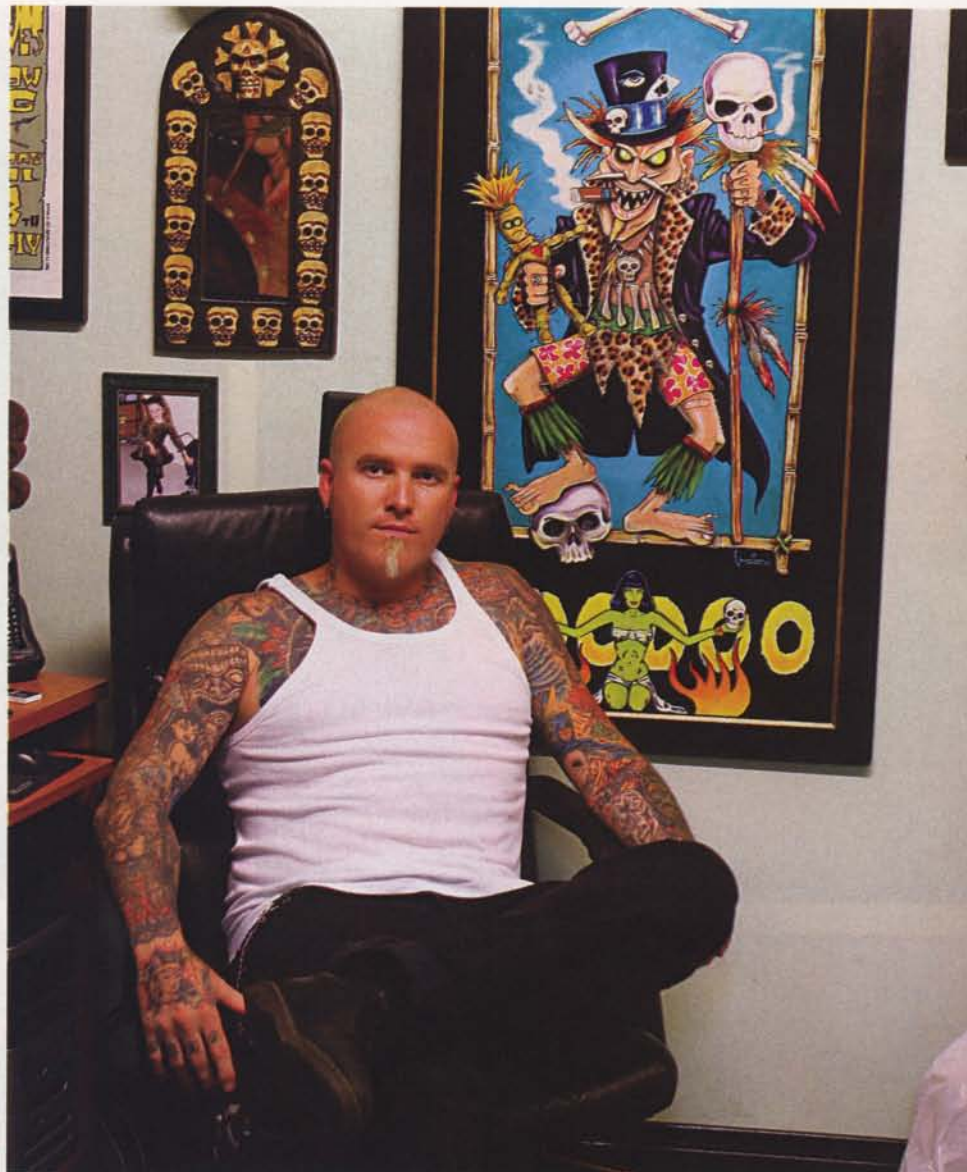
For Vermin, that's not what his shop is about. "Here it's about the art, that's why I have an art gallery instead of piercing, and selling bongos and drug paraphernalia or all that junk. It says right in the window we don't carry any of that stuff. It just has nothing to do with tattooing." He understands people doing what they need to do in order to survive in the business world, but at that point, it's not really about the tattooing, is it? It's about the business. "Any time something becomes this big it's going to be manufactured."

In Las Vegas, where the Pussykat holds a distinguished location far enough from the strip so Vermin doesn't have to do piercings or anything else he doesn't want to, the scene has grown rapidly in the ten years or so since Dirk started tattooing. Back then, there was nowhere in Vegas to work. "At the time there were only three or four shops. Which is insane when you think of it now. There was no place to apprentice, especially if you didn't have any colors. It was all biker-run." At that point, the punk element was getting tattooed in backyards, garages or at the kitchen table. Guys like Joe Vegas and Jessie Tuesday tried to open up shops here but were "discouraged" by threats of violence and death. Their solution seemed a natural at the time: They went to L.A.

"They had no choice. In a way, whether I wanted to or not, I kind of followed them. And they were the ones who pulled me into the L.A. scene." Not that Vermin was a complete stranger to the scene beforehand. "When we were young and you wanted punk rock or even a pair of Doc Martens, we had to drive to Los Angeles. There was no mall, you couldn't get it here, that stuff didn't exist."

So when Dirk found himself in L.A. for other reasons, either showcasing his art or playing with his punk band The Vermin, he also found himself hanging out at Body Electric with Jessie and Joe. Eventually, they asked him to apprentice and he spent the next several years commuting to Los Angeles on weekends to learn his trade.

When Dirk bought out the owners of the shop where he worked in 1999, he renamed the store "The Pussykat" and a new era of Vegas tattooing had begun. Yet everything old is new again. Vermin is looking at the art and finds his inspiration in the works of the past. "Look back at what Sailor Jerry was doing in the 50's, 60's and 70's. Bold line, lots of black. That stuff'll look good forever. That's pretty much what we're doing now but the artistry is certainly better. Whenever I look at a Sailor Jerry piece there's almost a real reverence to it. You go, 'Wow, look at this.' Everything reads so great, the lines are nice and bold. The color goes where it is, the black goes where it is. And you have a piece that will look good forever,



instead of the stuff that fades after time. We're almost going backwards. But the artists are so good – you know a nice big bold line. So in a way we've come full circle."

Knowing that, the history of the form, is just as important to Vermin and his crew as the technique and technology involved in getting it on the skin. "You need to know where you came from and why you do things." But that's not why there's a three-month waiting list to get work done at the Pussykat. That has much more to do with the man behind the needle.

For Vermin, the tattoo parlor is a sacred place. In his shop, the individual rooms have doors. Instead of a wide-open space, where everyone is working together, the Pussykat has the option of being private. This isn't to say there isn't a lot of camaraderie going on, there is. But just having the option to close the door makes the chair feel more like a confessional than a place of desecration. People will tell

their tattooist things they won't tell their priest. "You know, there's stuff you'll tell a guy you might not tell your wife. There's a real safety in that room, because it's so intimate. You get to know these people, and so many people that I tattoo become friends. A lot of people that are very close to me now started out as customers that came in, but after hours and hours and hours of conversation. Some of these guys, we're talking upwards of 50-60 hours we're stuck together. That's a relationship." And it's a relationship Dirk takes seriously.

Often, Vermin will transmute an appointment into a consultation if the idea is just not right. He gestures towards his book as he explains. "There's sleeve work in there that started out as one thing and then I sat down with the customer and said this doesn't feel right to me, I really think we're capable of so much more. Let me do better work on ya." He can get away with it, too. Because he is where



he is, in terms of business positioning and client base, he can afford to take his time with the projects he *wants* to work on. In fact, almost all of his work these days is bigger pieces, backs and full sleeves and the like instead of what he calls the "butterfly work." "I just don't have time for it," he says.

"There are so many reasons to get a tattoo. Some of them are deep and spiritual and people will put a lot of thought into it." Then, once they get into the room, and the needle takes its first bite, "We'll start talking and I'll tell them something that maybe I shouldn't have told them but I can't keep my mouth shut about some of the stuff. And that'll start developing that little bond and now the tattoo has even more meaning to it than just a tattoo."

The process can be too demanding so he prefers to focus on what can be a truly amazing experience instead of someone wandering in on a whim deciding to get an armband. "It's such an intimate thing to give someone a tattoo. You're putting your artistic energy and your

physical energy on them. You know, without getting too deep, that's a big deal. This thing stays forever." So Dirk does whatever he can to make it a good, positive experience. It better be because, love him or hate him, once you get inked, you're going to be saying "Dirk Vermin" every time someone asks you about that piece so you may as well make the most of it.

Nestled right alongside the tattoo rooms and the Tiki decorations is the central room of Gallery au Go Go, the art gallery Dirk runs in conjunction with the Pussykat. For him though, they are not distinctly different ideas. For Vermin, it's all art. "Certainly there are people who come in, they hear about a show and go 'Oh, it's next to a tattoo parlor.' Get out. This isn't for you. Go downtown." He is referring to a recent review of one of his shows in a local publication where the reviewer didn't appreciate the idea that the gallery was situated next to the Pussykat (for the record, it's actually inside the Pussykat). "You want to go downtown and have wine with the mayor and

congratulate everyone around you for getting it right, great. Stay out of my gallery; it's not for you. Not that we're elitist or lowbrow, but I don't want that kind of attitude. I do themed shows." And the themes he chooses are certainly not what you'd expect. But then, Dirk Vermin is all about confounding expectations.

Recently, the Gallery hosted an exhibit called "Refrigerator Art" created especially for Vermin's two little girls, six year old Jasmine and three year old Piper. "They painted their butts off. Jasmine, for her dad, in her mind, she painted a little skull in there, a little number 13, things that remind her of her dad." To return the favor, Vermin set the show at kid's level. "When you walked in, everything was at your knees. But if the child was three years old, it was hung right there. They could walk right up to it. Everything was eye level. We had Disney music playing." It was important for Dirk to show his kids how important art is because even though he makes a living with it now, that wasn't always the case. "The thing I didn't have a lot of growing up was a lot of support in art. My father thought that was a little strange."

Now, though, there is a grudging acceptance of what the son does. "My parents are not tattoo people and when I started getting into the industry, I think they were a little apprehensive. The one thing I heard, and I certainly don't have a close relationship with my parents, but my sister told me that after I tattooed James Caan (for the NBC-TV series "Las Vegas") that picture is on my dad's desk at work. There's the bragging rights. That's Sonny from *The Godfather*. My mother said that whenever an article comes out, my Dad'll clip it and put it away, so that means something."

Now, they'll have something else to be proud of. Their boy is taking all his experience about growing up in the Vegas punk scene and writing a book. The book itself covers "drugs and sex and murder in the desert," and Vermin will be publishing it himself sometime in the next year or so. Not that there's no interest from mainstream publishers; there is, but that's not the Dirk Vermin way. "The idea of the book is we went through this together, this punk thing. We did everything ourselves and that same integrity or whatever you want to call it, has carried on into adult life. It's the way I opened my tattoo parlor, the way I opened my art gallery. I did it all myself. So whatever ethics I took from the punk rock scene, I took with me into my adult life."

As the aging punk stares down the barrel of 40, he looks around the shop he's built, the shop that, whether he wanted it to or not, has become a Vegas institution and he smiles. And if you listen closely, you can probably hear the words of another Vegas legend drifting on the wind: "I did it my way." ●