

# OLD SCHOOL FOR LIFE

## The art and artifacts of Rich T

By Chris Pfouts

**“It amazes me how much things have changed in a short time.”** --Rich T

Rich T is one of those guys who wears about a hundred hats, and each hat is connected to some aspect of tattooing. He is truly a defender of the historical flame through the ever-expanding Temple Tattoo Museum. He owns and works at Temple Tattoo. He also owns and runs Bicknee Tattoo Supply. All of this is centered at his new compound in Coalton, Ohio.

Now 45, Rich started tattooing at 30. A little later than most people but that's how it falls sometimes.

He'd done some art as a boy, his mother painted and so did he. So when he came to working on skin, things like light source, use of color and shading came easily to him.

In 1980, Rich moved from rural Ohio to New York City and made a pretty good dent for himself playing guitar. At the same time he started getting heavily tattooed, mainly by Mike Bakaty on the Bowery.

Bakaty became a friend. “If I wasn't working or out on tour I was probably over at his loft,” Rich said. “I had dinner over there two or three days a week. I watched him work

hour upon hour. I wouldn't even want to guess how many hours I watched him work.”

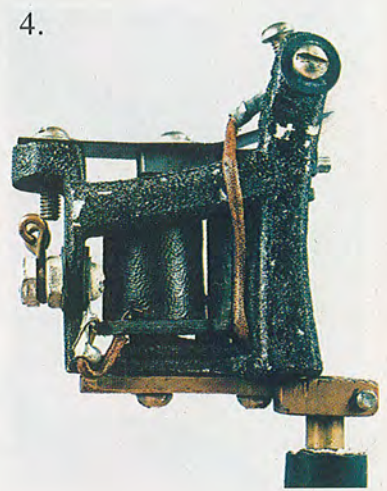
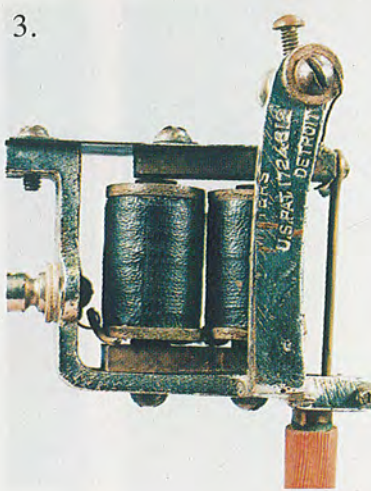
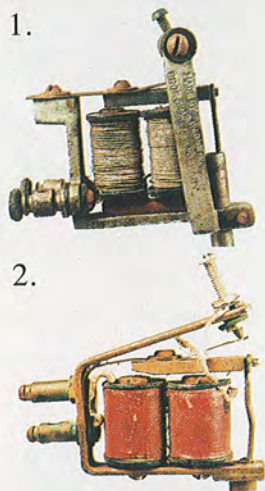
In '88 Rich gave up music as a vocation and left New York. He moved to Milwaukee. After knocking around with this and that jobs he started managing a little neighborhood bar. There was a local punk kid with tattoo equipment who let Rich borrow his gear and do some beginning work. After a while, Rich bought some equipment of his own and began in earnest. Rich's apartment was right next door to the bar and the two outfitted his front room into a tattoo studio.

“We had a table between us and two stations,” he said. “We had flash on the walls, had our sterilizer in there. It looked like a shop. We worked out of there for six or eight months together. There were plenty of customers; it was the neighborhood where a lot of the musicians and artists lived because the rents were a little lower than the chi-chi Eastside.

“It was work that I was doing there that got me as formal



1. Charlie Wagner Machine, 1920's. 2. Barber Star, J.F. Barber. 3. Percy Waters Machine, 1920's. 4. William Moore, Chicago Tattoo Supply, 1920's-1950's.



an apprenticeship as I ever served," he said. "I did a Celtic piece on a friend of mine's girlfriend. He was the guy who made all the neon for the tattoo shops in that area in Wisconsin. Scott Fredrich from Absolute Tattoo saw it and asked who did it. He couldn't believe that I'd done it. One thing led to another and that's how I got my gig in a commercial shop.

"Scott didn't just teach me things about tattooing," Rich said. "He taught me how to run a business. I feel like I owe my livelihood to him. I worked for him for four-plus years, then came back to Ohio and started my own shop."

That shop was Temple Tattoo in the sleepy southeastern Ohio town of Gallipolis. No track really beats past Gallipolis, but Rich made it work. He also opened the Temple Tattoo Museum, an excellent repository for items from tattooing's old days.

As for the museum, Rich dug the historical aspects even before he started tattooing. "I have stuff that Bakaty gave me in the '80s just because I thought it was neat stuff," he said. "I sort of stumbled into collecting. Now it's become a complete obsession. When I put together the museum, when he heard I was doing that ... he never

throws anything away. He gave me weird little knick-knacky stuff that doesn't really mean much to people off the street, but to people in the tattoo world it's cool to look at a tube that Paul Rogers made, or a needle jig he helped somebody make, things like that. It wasn't that long ago that if you wanted a jig to hold your needle bars you had to make it out of a piece of slate or something. You couldn't just call somebody like Bicknee and buy one.

"It amazes me how much things have changed in a short time," he said. Rich often gives history seminars and sets up historical displays at tattoo conventions.

And even though he came to it late, tattooing is Rich's big drive in life. "I consider myself a tattooer more than a tattoo artist," he said. "I learned it through doing it. I'm a stencil jockey, is what it boils down to. I can't do a pencil sketch of you and have it look like you, although most of the standard tattoo stuff I can draw in my sleep. That's the stuff I dig, what people would call traditional now, old-timey stuff, tattoos like my father and grandpa would have had. That's the kind of stuff I like."

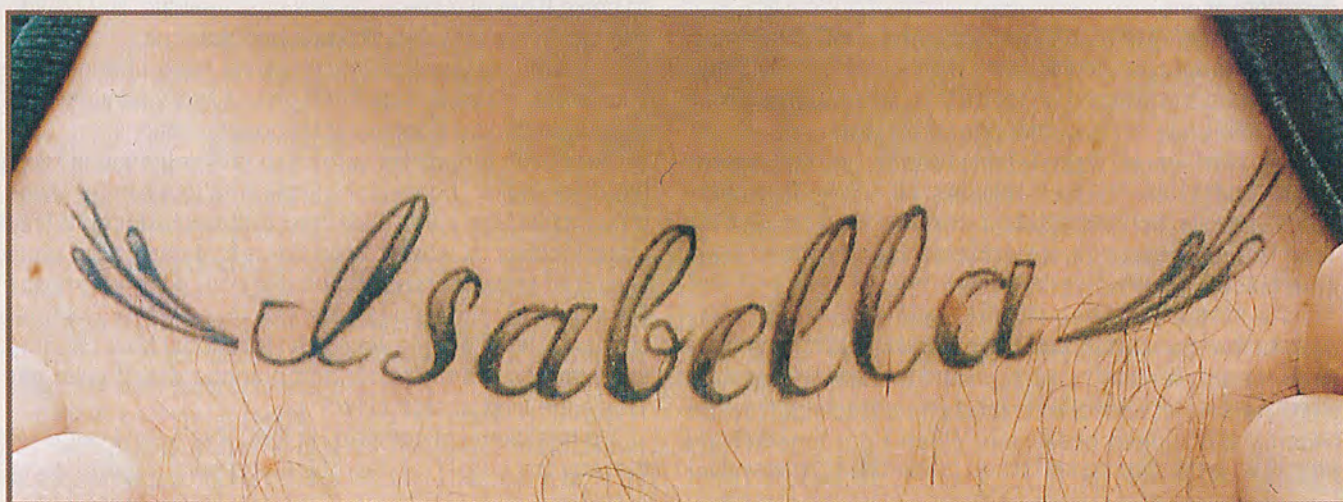
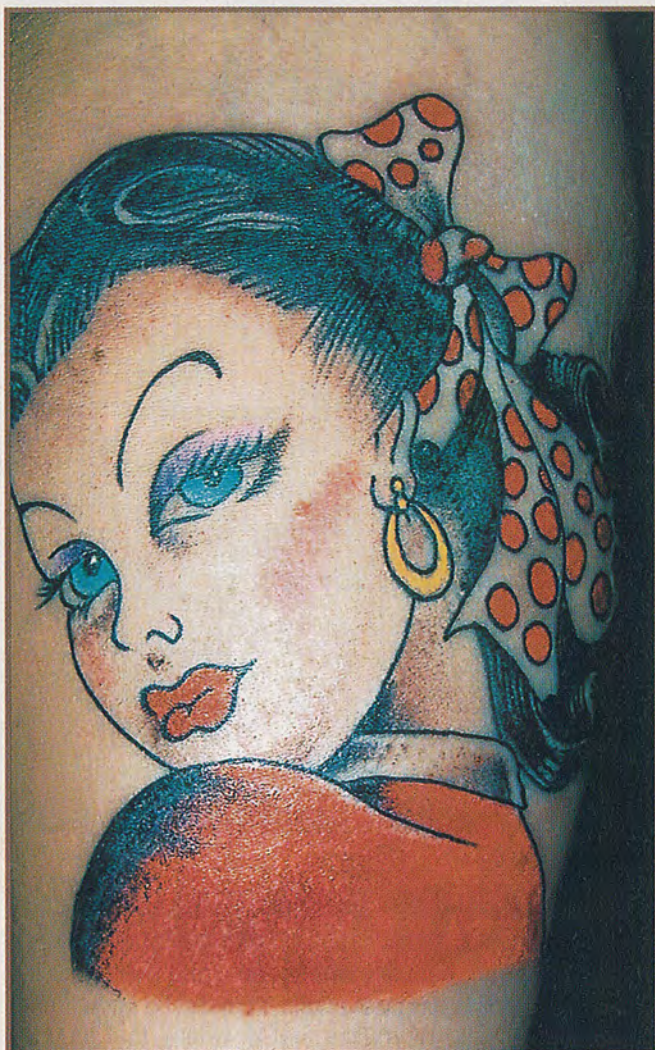
He has plenty of company in that. "I've been tickled with the way my career's been going," he said. "I go to shows

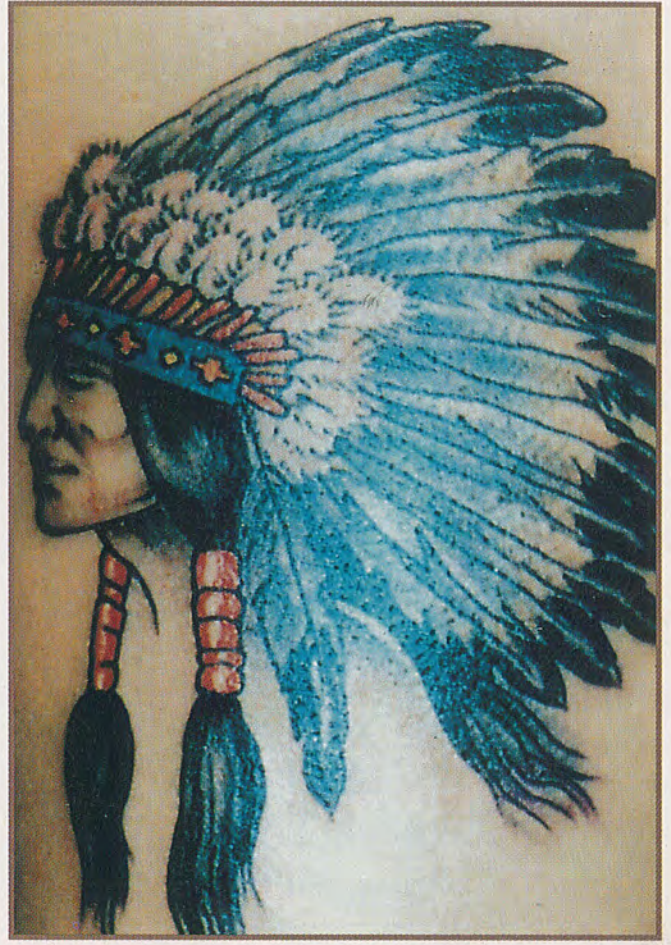
# RICH T

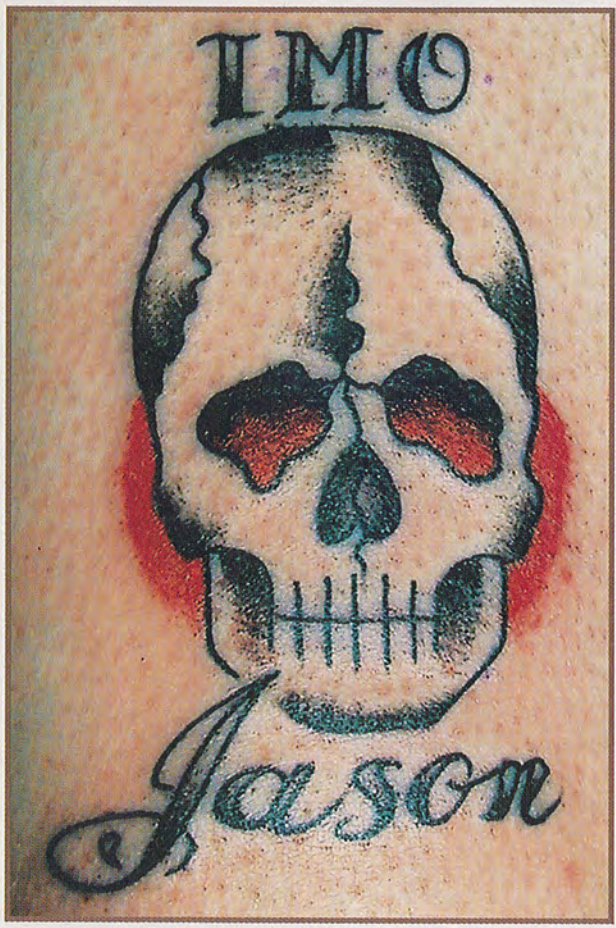
and there are people that will seek me out and want a tattoo from me." But remember, that's just one of his hats.

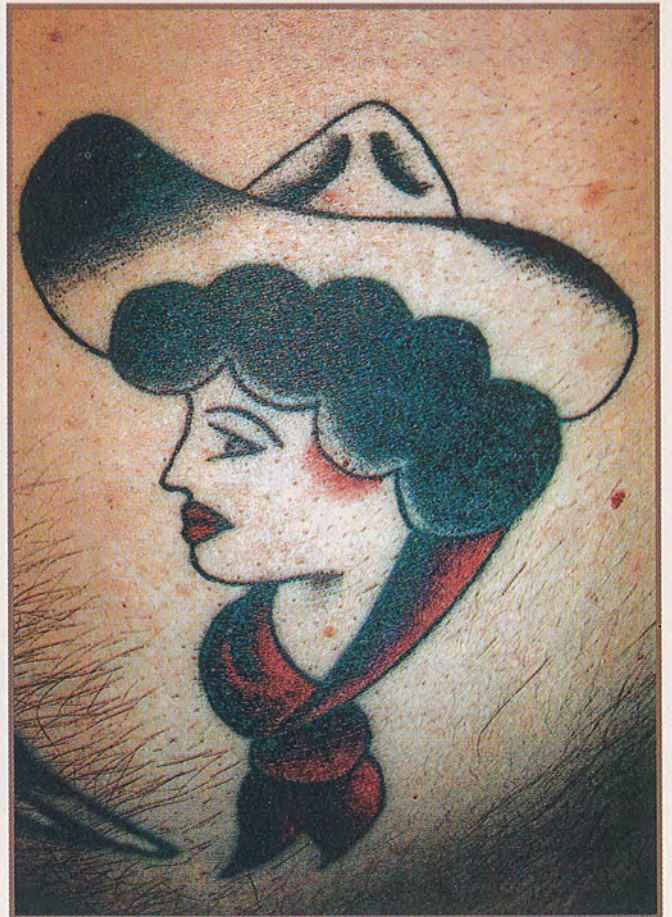
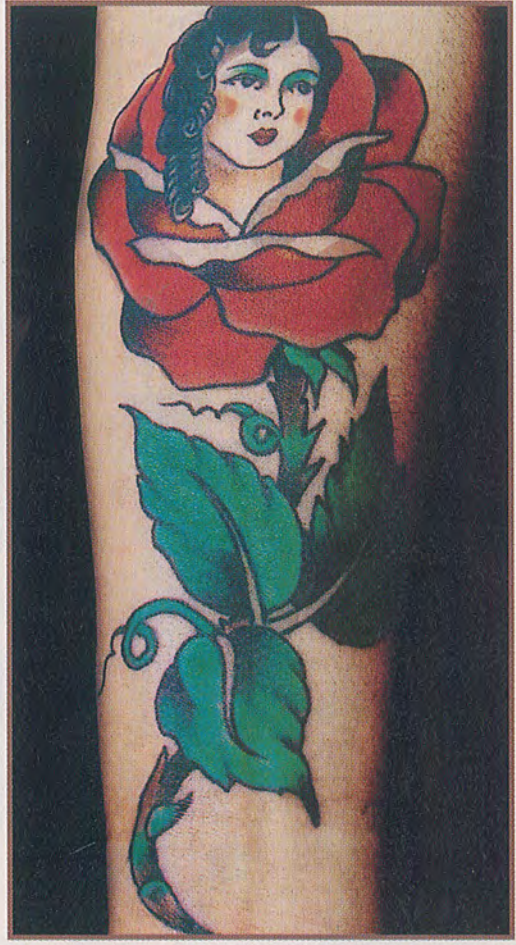
At this writing Rich is moving everything from Gallipolis to his new building in Coalton, Ohio. He should be in there completely by summer.

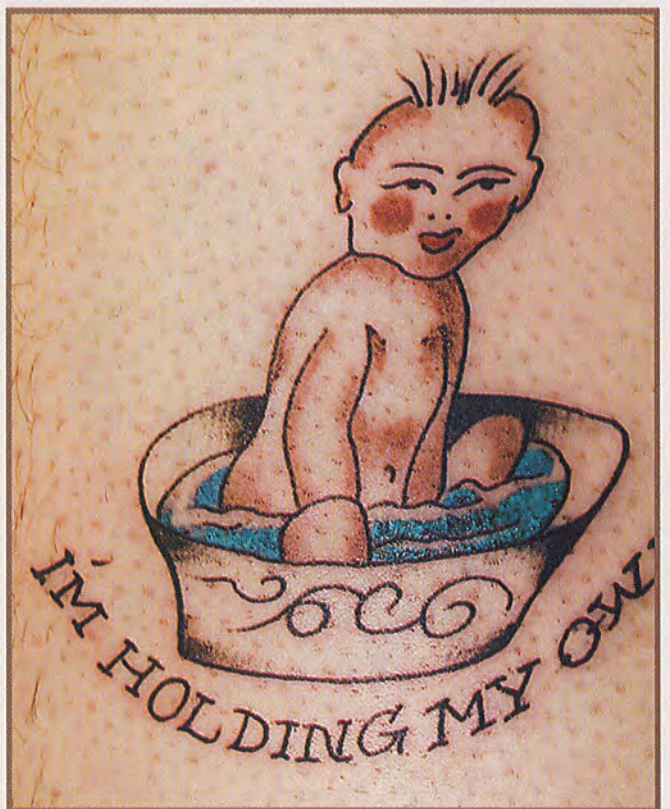
Rich T can be reached at Temple Tattoo, 108 Broadway St., Coalton, OH, 45621; tel: (740)286-2520 or on the Web at [www.bickneetattoosupply.com](http://www.bickneetattoosupply.com). 













Unknown Artist, UK, 1940's.



SUTTON & LEWIS · L.A. 54.

Los Angeles, 1950's.





Diamond Joe Rivers



"Texas" Bob Wicks, 1930.