

# Gusto

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## Body Art

### Tattoos, piercings, and scarification in Austin

By Rob D'Amico  
Photography by Barton Wilder Custom Images

**S**upang's ears hang low and they bobble to and fro. She's stretched them with weights and other mechanisms so that they hang about seven or eight inches and brush back and forth in a tickling motion across the tops of her shoulder. It's no big deal, because Supang is a young tribal girl living in Borneo, where women there have practiced such feats for centuries. Her lengthy and sometimes uncomfortable pursuit of stretched ears, as well as tattoos, relate to a traditional quest to connect artistically to the spiritual world.

*Jump to Red River Street in Austin, Texas.*

A nervous young woman in hipsters stands shifting her weight from hip to hip and heel to heel in white tennis shoes. She's about to take the plunge into a human tradition of body modification by altering her anatomy with a pierced navel. If she's like many of her peers, she simply wants to emulate American teen idol Britney Spears, who sports itsy-bitsy bellybutton jewelry to add sparkle to her one-dimensional stomach.

Who's to say whether Spears is less an icon to revere with self-adornment than the spirits of the Borneo afterlife? Jumping from Borneo to pop idols illustrates that body modification—namely tattoos and piercing—have become so vastly popular in every spectrum of history, as well as in American society today, that there's no longer any good way to pigeonhole the practitioners.

Sarai Tidwell's tattoos took fifty hours to complete.



# Laws on Tattoo and Piercing Parlors

The Texas Department of Health (TDH) is responsible for licensing, inspecting and applying administrative penalties to tattoo and piercing parlors. Currently, only the business establishment is required to register for a license, although new legislation recently passed will require all tattooers and piercers to take a four-hour course on blood-borne pathogens and safe practices and register with the TDH annually. The legislation takes effect September 1, 2003, but the artists have until June 1, 2004 to register.

## Current requirements from TDH include:

- ☞ Keeping a well-maintained and clean establishment.
- ☞ Following precautions to prevent the spread of infection. The artist must wash hands with a germicidal soap, wear clean clothing and single-use gloves, utilize personal protective equipment, use instruments

which are either disposable or routinely sterilized, and follow proper handling and disposal of waste.

- ☞ Keeping records showing routine sterilization practices.
- ☞ Observing the prohibition against tattooing or body piercing minors unless notarized approval is given by parents or guardians.
- ☞ Staying sober on the job. Under the new law to take effect, the artist's license can be revoked for intoxication on the premises.
- ☞ Refraining from tattooing or body piercing persons who are under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- ☞ Maintaining records for each person receiving a tattoo or body piercing.
- ☞ Reporting any infection or adverse reaction to TDH. **T**

—Rob D'Amico

"Outlaw...Rebel...Freak...What were they thinking?" All the expressions to define and try to explain the tattooed and pierced aren't worth much salt anymore, namely because in many pockets of America—and particularly in our city—they are a majority.

The only certainty is that Austin is in the thick of things, a hotspot for some of the country's premiere professionals in the field of tattooing, piercing and other forms of "body modification." And "professional" is a key word, since it affords the masses hungry for ink and studs the opportunity to fulfill their desires in a relatively safe environment, free from the potential danger of blood-borne diseases like HIV or hepatitis that are an unfortunate byproduct of unsafe practitioners.

"I think Austin is one of the most tattooed cities around," says Scott Ellis, an artist for True Blue Tattoos on Red River Street, just off Sixth. Ellis draws and talks at the same time, using a black pen to carefully craft the outline of a scarab beetle, a special request from a client who wants the creature to permanently reside on her. Ellis's arms are tattooed, of course, but only with a couple of designs in dark ink that lack the outlandish flavor and body coverage of works he does for many of his clients. "For a city this small, Austin has got a lot of shops," he adds.

"Yes, Austin has quite a few shops," confirms John Gower, director of programs for drugs and cosmetics at the Texas Department of Health (TDH). Indeed, TDH lists some fourteen licensed tattoo and piercing parlors in Travis County alone, compared to fourteen in Dallas and twenty-seven in Houston. State-wide, the numbers are rising at a rate of about fifteen percent a year, Gower says.

However, Gower notes that the Austin region doesn't pose much of a problem for his team of eleven investigators, who perform routine inspections of tattoo parlors and piercing studios throughout the state and look for everything from required records on tattooed minors to improper sterilization techniques.

With all the activity, the problems seem minor. Travis County accounted for just eleven of the three hundred twenty one complaints filed at TDH over the past two years. And the department has written warning letters about minor violations to businesses sixteen times in the past two years. No administrative penalties, such as fines, have been levied in that period, although three follow-up letters were sent for repeat violations.

Current law requires businesses practicing tattooing and piercing to be licensed and undergo periodic inspections to make sure records are in order regarding sterilizations and documentation of parental or guardian go-aheads

for minors.

The advent of advanced techniques, training and professionalism for body modification practitioners, along with the regulatory oversight of health officials, has nullified many of the concerns about disease transmitted by contaminated needles, hands and other instruments.

"We don't actually have any confirmed cases... (for) transmissions of AIDS or hepatitis in a licensed studio," Gower says. "That doesn't mean it hasn't happened," he says, but adds that rogue tattooers and piercers outside of the licensed businesses are the main health concern. Indeed, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has no information on HIV transmission resulting from tattooing or piercing, and states that the practice, if done with recommended sterilization, does not contribute to the transmission of other blood-borne diseases such as hepatitis C.

However, even a simple infection can be painful and debilitating for some. "One of the common problems is infection," Gower says. "And, of course, that could as much be a problem of the aftercare of the tattoo as the fault of the studio." The TDH also keeps track of each infection, requiring licensed businesses to report them and encouraging customers to do the same.

So if you're interested in taking the plunge with a tattoo, piercing or some other form of altering, like scarification (scarring your body through branding or cutting), you've got a lot of avenues to check out the reputation and record of who will be doing the work. (See the TDH web site at [www.tdh.state.tx.us/bfds/dmd/tattoo.html](http://www.tdh.state.tx.us/bfds/dmd/tattoo.html) for more information.) Maybe your mind will be at ease with the issue of disease, but what about the rest of the picture? Are you ready for a life with a new permanent fixture on your "bod?"

## What's the motivation... Is something burning in you?

The motivation factor for body modification seems to have changed, or at least manifested itself, in numerous ways over the past few years for Americans. In the past, it was simple. You get a tattoo...you're a sailor, a rebel, a blue collar uncouth or in the case of a woman, "loose." For piercings, the history varied, but in the early years it often signaled you were gay or punk.

"It was more of an outlaw thing to do it then...shock value," says Josh Moore, a piercer for Southside Tattoos on South Congress Avenue. He's munching on French fries during a work break while another young woman fills out paperwork in the background to prove she's over eighteen and, thus, legal to get her navel pierced. "Now it's more of an art form."

Moore himself sports a variety of colorful

tattoos, piercings and even scarification. Scarification is the practice of scaring tissue—usually with a scalpel—to form permanent design with the healing tissue. “I prefer it,” he says. “It’s your skin forming the design.”

All of the tattoo and piercing workers interviewed stressed that the aesthetics of body modification have improved tremendously in the past decade, as has the sharing among professionals. “Now it’s more an open thing... there’s publications, conventions,” says Ellis. “Before, you’d get beat up, shot, maybe even killed for tattooing on other people’s turf. That’s why it’s exploded so much now. Lots of kids have now only been tattooing for two or three years, but with an open community they learn quick...there’s so many great artists out there.”

The mechanics of tattooing are relatively simple, injecting permanent ink under the surface level of skin where it sinks into the permanent cells of the dermis. Usually, artists use a machine with multiple needles that electronically puncture the skin at a high rate—anywhere from fifty to thousands of times per minute—to inject the ink.

And piercing is equally straightforward, a needle piercing the tissue. But it’s obvious from the layperson’s perspective that individual techniques have resulted in markedly different results in recent years. Just look to the stereotypical sailor of yesteryear with the fuzzy blue-green American eagle on the upper forearm, or the punk rocker with the safety pin through his ear, compared to the three-dimensional tattoos and custom gemstone and elaborate stud piercings of today.

Aesthetics are at play, sure. But unnerving people might be a motivator for many of Moore’s customers and for himself as well. The petite teen waiting sheepishly in the lobby at Southside for a navel piercing squinches her face when Moore mentions that he’ll be inserting small metal balls into the skin of a man’s penis on Monday evening.

A navel piercing might seem innocent enough. After all, it’s not that visible. But regardless, Moore notes, “Anything you do to shape the body or decorate it is modification, whether it’s pierced earrings or breast implants.” Changing the tissue you were born with is bound to have some kind of psychological effect, so it’s worth giving some thought to before doing it, he says.

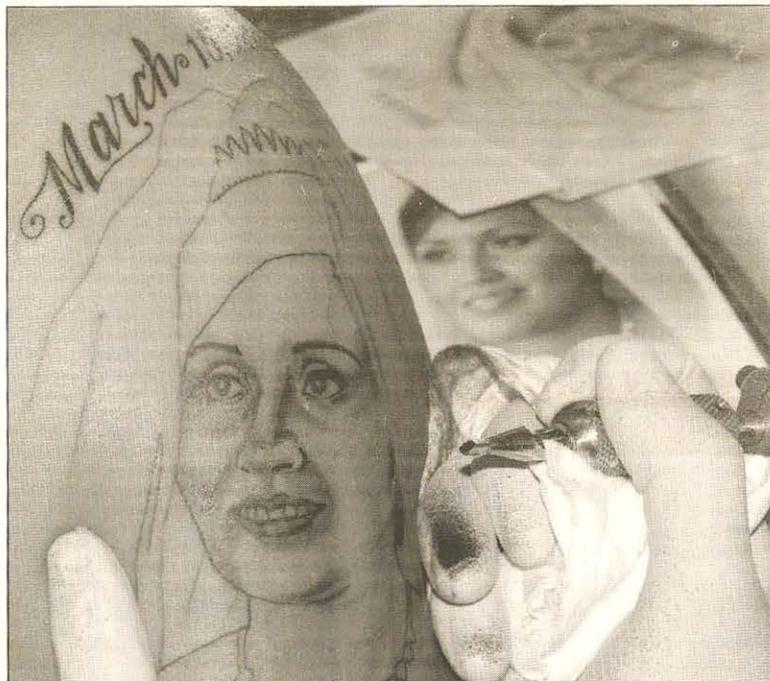
Perhaps a letter from a 1992 issue of *Outlaw Biker Tattoo Revue* magazine offers some insight on the psychology behind a first tattoo. “Once I took the plunge, I never looked back,” a reader wrote in the letters section. “It’s been one hell of a ride since.”

Perhaps those who “take the plunge” feel that the body modification will free them to pursue other avenues in life they may have felt restricted in doing before. Indeed, Sarai Tidwell, a piercer from Canada who recently moved to Austin, expounds on the freedom issue. “I just pierced a woman who was seventy-two years old...her nostril,” she says. “At that age it’s not a rebellious statement. Maybe it was something she wanted to do long ago and now finally can do it...I see a lot of middle-age women getting piercings.”

Then there’s the addictive aspect of it all. It’s not surprising that once someone gets one tattoo, they may take off the emergency brake and head down a road of more tattoos, and often piercings.

“It’s definitely addictive in some ways,” says Tidwell, whose own face is punctuated by a variety of silver studs from piercings, along with scarification in the semblance of a necklace across her breastbone.

The reason for the addiction varies from trying to be more and more outlandish and on the fringe, to simply delving deeper into the art form of it all, sometimes even succumbing to the pleasure of pain.



Mark Castillo is getting a tattoo of his wife Linda by Scott Ellis, an artist for True Blue Tattoos.

“Oh definitely, the piercing is euphoric,” says Bear, the piercer at Glory Hole Piercings, the companion business to True Blue Tattoos on Red River Street. His body is marked by a vast array of items and ink. The most noticeable modification are his ears, which are stretched perhaps to their limits by inserted, hollow discs the size of small dessert plates. Of course, this is a guy who’s first piercing ever was a Prince Albert, essentially a metal ring that goes through the penis and out the penis hole.

Bear has blackened much of his body with dark ink, a style that he likens to many tribal tattoos, merely a preference he has. All those hours of tattooing have made him extremely

accustomed to the procedure. “It really kicks my endorphins. And if I go to sleep during a tattoo, I sleep really well.”

The desire and addiction can go too far. Take this description from Ed Cushman’s autobiographical account:

“*Losing a Hand* was written by Ed over the past thirty years,” wrote one reviewer. “It documents how he first came in contact with amputee friends, and then tells of how he chose amputation for himself and then with the aid of a power saw removed his own hand.”

Pretty scary, but Tidwell reminds us that the obsessive-compulsives can be found in a variety of different pursuits, such as the compulsive

## Tattoo’s Gotta Go?

Jeremie Perry, MD, of Image Sculptors in Austin says that a growing need for tattoo removal is an indication of their popularity in the first place. So the removal of tattoos promises to be a thriving industry in the years to come.

The most common reasons for wanting a tattoo removed, he says, are to erase the name of a former significant other or get rid of a mark that was decided on when the individual was in a different state of mind...including inebriation. “Occasionally you’ll have someone who wants to put something else as a tattoo in its place,” he adds.

There’s several ways to get rid of a tattoo, but none of them are exactly easy or painless, on either your skin or your wallet. Perry says he uses a two-step technique that is popular for dealing with multi-colored tattoos, which are seen more and more as the industry improves the vibrancy of pigments.

The process uses “basically an advanced tattoo machine to do a reverse tattoo,” Perry explains. The new tattoo scabs over and draws ink into the scab, which eventually falls off. The remaining skin is mostly flesh tone, but a second step of more traditional treatment with lasers and intense pulsating light then fade any remaining dark areas.

Perry says that if you have a large tattoo it’s best to do it in steps, about four square inches at a time. The estimated cost for that area is about \$400. Some tattoos require two

to three treatments.

Perry also advises that anyone considering a tattoo realize that even if you can get it removed later, the skin will be altered forever with textural changes and hair loss. “It’s not going to be the way it was before, no matter what,” he says.

One increasingly popular alternative to “real” tattoos is henna body art or “Mehndi.” Henna is a plant used to produce a cosmetic paste that is painted in patterns to stain the skin a variety of shades, but usually in shades of orange, red and brown applied in intricate designs.

The practice has been performed as body art for centuries and is becoming increasingly popular in the United States as people who are still skittish about permanent tattooing with needles realize they can dabble in body art with an all natural and temporary product.

The stained skin can last from a couple of days to a couple of weeks, depending on how the paste is applied and how long it is left on the skin. (It’s normally a several-hour process for long-lasting designs.)

Even henna art isn’t without risk, though, as a recent wave of “black henna” produced a variety of ailments, such as burns and skin rashes. Real henna doesn’t create black, and a compound in the synthetic paste is blamed for the adverse reactions. **E**

—Rob D’Amico

sion to dive out of perfectly good airplanes.

## Hey, there’s people doing something... let’s legislate

A tidal wave of anything new usually signals a call for new legislation, and it’s the same for body modification, with a new Texas law passed in this year’s regular session, SB 1317. The law includes one major change: a requirement for tattoo and piercing artists to be registered with the TDH rather than just having the establishment they work in be licensed. The registration requires a TDH training course in bloodborne pathogens, as well as a fee, of course.

The new legislation also endeavors to make sure the establishments are safe, delineating criminal offenses for persons tattooing under the influence and also prohibiting license renewals for businesses that are the location of “a shooting, stabbing, or other violent act or an offense involving drugs.” And yes, it also mentions that the practitioners shall not be involved with “moral turpitude.”

The new legislation forbids just one form of body modification: tongue splitting. It might seem like the bizarre practice is singled out for health reasons or some strange relation to a sex act that would constitute moral turpitude. Bear says it’s roots are in the crusade by outraged parents who found that their eighteen-year-old son had the splitting done, although it seems like lawmakers around the country are dabbling with the idea of making it illegal for a variety of reasons.

Rebecca Hendriks, a tattoo artist at True Blue, doesn’t mind the new registration requirements for artists. But she sees the tongue-splitting issue as yet another symbol of how something meant to be a personal choice for expression or plain old personal preference turns into a lightening rod for those who don’t understand the decision to modify the body.

“It’s unfortunate, because then (tongue splitting) won’t be regulated at all,” she says. The illegality will lead to “back alley” splittings in unsanitary conditions and then possibly other unsafe piercings. “And people will like to do it even more because it’s illegal, which makes it more on the fringe,” she adds.

It’s clear that, tongue-splitting aside, body modification of all types seems likely to grow more popular among the Austin populace.

Bear notes that much of the ritual and symbolism of tattooing and piercing is dying, left for museums in places like Borneo. But once again, the reasons for body modification are many, and the people choosing it “span the economic and social strata.” Bear, for example, typifies one extreme. “It’s interesting,” he says of people’s reaction to his odd appearance. “It’s shock and awe. They look at me and they can’t fathom that someone would go to this extreme, even people who are tattooed themselves.”

On the other side of the spectrum are the fan followers. “You see (pop diva) Christina Aguilera with a nose ring and that’s all you see the next week coming into the shop...young girls wanting nose piercings,” Bear says.

Regardless, Bear says that at least Austin is an “oasis” in America that tolerates and allows for safe and professional work, the place to be if you want to take the plunge with a tattoo or piercing. **E**

Rob D’Amico is a local writer whose freelance stories have covered a wide range of topics, from seedy motels, to music and environmental politics. He is “too lazy” to buy a new pair of shoes, much less put forth the time, effort and money for body modification. You may e-mail Rob via editor@goodlifemag.com.