

MICHAEL KAVES

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On a Thursday morning in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn Made, the tattoo parlor owned by artist Michael 'Kaves', is abuzz. Howard TV just finished shooting Kaves giving Howard Stern super-fan and minor celebrity 'Mariann from Brooklyn' her first Howard-inspired tattoo. The crew just left, and already Facebook photos and tweets are streaming in from excited fans. There are several more tattoo appointments scheduled for the afternoon, and now this interview. Yet amidst the commotion, Kaves, impeccably dressed, with his trademark fedora perched on one side of his head, is notably unruffled.

Maybe it's an innate Brooklyn cool; or the fact that he has four children ranging from 17 months to 13 years; or maybe it's the youth he spent with spray can in pocket, dodging cops as he spread his name across the boroughs. Whatever the reason, the 42-year-old creative juggernaut, who, among other projects, recently designed the 2011 label for Beaujolais Nouveau, was one of 30 artists, including Shepard Fairey, showing work in the Metallica art show in LA, and just completed his first short film *The Shoemaker*, seems totally at ease with the juggling act of his artistic life.

Born Michael McLeer to a working class family in Brooklyn, Kaves was driven to make a name for himself from a young age. The oldest of three kids with divorced parents and living in what he says was called a "white trash" building, Kaves was the typical Brooklyn kid looking for a break. Films like *Saturday Night Fever* and real-life stories of Brooklynites who'd risen to fame fed the fire to succeed. "It was ingrained in us," recalls Kaves, in his faint yet recognizable Brooklyn accent. "There was this underlying determination to make your mother proud, to make good, to be famous."

"To compete with the kid with the pool in the backyard and the shiny new bicycle, you needed to make something happen. I needed some magic. And out of that spray can I found some magic."

By the time Kaves was ten years old, he and his brother were running wild, spraying his tag 'Kaves' – a name given him by a mentor graffiti artist – in schoolyards, on paddle courts, under bridges and on the most coveted territory: subway cars and tunnels. "The Verrazano bridge was my private gallery...the trains were my playground," he recalls. The late '70's and early '80's were a good time to be a kid in the city, armed with little more than a few cans of spray paint; the young artist was coming of age during a massive explosion of art and the rise of graffiti subculture in New York. His 'writing' earned him enough notoriety to be featured in writer Henry Chalfant's collection *Spraycan Art* in 1987.

But after about six years and a few NYPD run-ins, it was time to trade in the spray can for more lawful projects. Kaves parlayed his street cred into lucrative work both as an artist for major brands, including NIKE, WWF and RECON, and as a logo and graphics designer to stars as big as the Beastie Boys, Everlast and Busta Rhymes. His connections also got him a foot in the door for his own musical enterprise, Lordz of Brooklyn, the 90's hip hop outfit he started with his brother, which is still kicking today under the name The Lordz. And three years ago, amidst the regular flurry of art, music and television projects, Kaves opened his tattoo shop, Brooklyn Made, in his native Bay Ridge.

Like Kaves, a self-described "old soul," the boutique parlor feels like a slice of another era, filled with art – by Kaves and fellow artists, a vintage juke box and old-school red leather barber chairs. Sitting below a framed photograph of his grandmother standing on nearby 3rd Avenue in the 1940's, Kaves says the artistic intention, whether he's tattooing or designing a label for a new wine bottle, is always the same: to tell the story. "To me, it's the ultimate compliment, that [someone] is walking around with a Kaves tag on their sleeve," he says. "It's the ultimate storytelling."

Kaves says his youth as an outlaw artist helped him channel his frustrations, struggles and dreams into storytelling. "I could've gone down a different path, been violent, angry...Being an artist taught me how to write, how to tell my story." Regardless of the creative project, those early days with the spray can shaped who he is and what he creates, he says. "You still see the roots and the youth in my artwork." Kaves credits the "hustle" of the graffiti days – navigating cops, other artists and his parents – with preparing him for the art world. "That was the best schooling I could've had."

While Kaves admits that he's always looking for the next big thing, evidenced by the multitude of projects currently on his plate – a new art docu-series, his newest fancy, filmmaking, and a book on former graffiti artists turned tattoo artists – he's a firm believer in living in the present. "We have to really marinate in the moment," he says thoughtfully, staring off into the distance. "The next great thing might just be the next tattoo that walks in the door."

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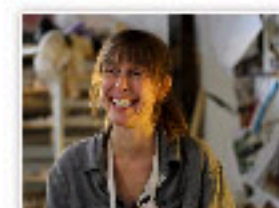
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