



LET'S GET PHYSICAL

If there's a name on the public's lips right now, it's that of Chris Jones. As he pounds out some serious realistic portraits that everybody can identify with, we took all his toys away for an hour to drill inside his head. Well, most of his toys...



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In 2007, my girlfriend and I travelled from Belfast to attend the Cardiff Tattoo Convention. It was our first con. I was booked in with a young, Welsh upstart named Chris Jones who was fast becoming one of the most prolific new school artists in the UK.

I met Chris on the Saturday. He was in good spirits, chatting about where everyone was going out that night. Sunday came and I was up and out nice and early, keen as you like. Chris was a little bleary and needed a brew. We got started an hour later but Chris worked fast: he whipped that chest piece up within 90 minutes.

I looked in the mirror, liked what I saw. Asked what I owed him. "Eighty quid," he said. I gave him ninety. We entered the competition

and the piece won best of the show. I was blown away, proud as punch as we left the venue.

Chris was, too. "On the phone to me mam," he shouted over as we passed, big smile on his face.

Fast forward to 2012 and we'd relocated to Cardiff. Chris was no longer based in the Valleys, now co-owner of Cardiff-based studio, Physical Graffiti. I called in looking for another tattoo.

There was a big demand for Chris' work; a three month waiting list. Worth it, of course. When I got my new tattoo, it immediately became a favourite piece.

Today, I'm visiting the shop for a different reason. Chris is waiting for me at reception.

"You been here since the place was done up?" he asks.

I hadn't and so I get a mini-tour. The studio looks great. Very



NOWADAYS, YOU GET TATTOOISTS WHO START DOING REALISM, SAYING THEY'RE NOT DOING RELIGIOUS SLEEVES OR WHATEVER. I CAN UNDERSTAND WHY, BUT I THINK YOU HAVE TO EARN THAT

"The first year of junior school. There was a drawing competition. I drew a tarantula and won." He laughs. "I won it every year."

So what led him into tattooing? "My gramps had tattoos and they fascinated me. Even though they were old and blue, I still thought you had to be a really good artist to do something like that. But when I got one and they put a stencil on, I thought, 'You're just tracing a line!'"

Tattooing became more accessible, then. Not the dark art he'd thought it to be. So, did Chris seek out an apprenticeship?

"I asked my local tattooist, Dave Fleet." But Dave turned him down, so Chris went out on his own, converting his spare room into a studio. "Back then, there wasn't the big thing about scratchers and

everything else, like there is now. I wanted to do it properly, though, so got Environmental Health to come and check everything and registered as a tattoo artist."

Chris was working for the job centre at the time, a suit-and-tie job. He cut down his hours, worked there Monday to Wednesday and spent the rest of the week tattooing. "I did that for months until one day, I just couldn't bear to put the tie on anymore."

He tattooed whatever came through the door: a fair share of Beckham angels, religious and tribal. "It's a good way to start. Nowadays, you get tattooists who start doing realism, saying they're not doing religious sleeves or whatever. I can understand why, but I think you have to earn that. You need to learn

modern and professional with seven artists in residence and numerous guests working. There's a door on the first floor. "This is the best bit," Chris says, the door opening into his apartment. "Always hated commuting to work. Now I don't have to."

I get the Dictaphone going. Chris grabs a drink, pours me one too and we get started. I take us back to the beginning: little Chris with his crayons at school. What are his earliest memories of art?

how to tattoo, about putting colours in and blending and doing solid lines, before you can specialise in anything.”

Eighteen months later, Dave Fleet came and offered Chris a job. “I became known as the custom guy at the shop who would draw up designs for people.”

I remember the magazine ads Chris used to run in Skin Deep around that time: bright, vibrant and definitely new school. It soon became a speciality. He’s moved away from that now, establishing himself as the go-to-guy for realism. So why the change in style?

“I stopped doing new school because people like Mat Lapping started doing it better,” Chris tells me. “Joshua Carlton put

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out an instructional DVD and I watched it and did two portraits of my then girlfriend’s kids in black and grey. They won awards left, right and centre. I’d go to a show and get first place with one, second place with the other. So I started doing more of that.”

“There weren’t a lot of colour portraits being done around then,” Chris explains. “If you wanted realism, it was black and grey. So I did that for quite a while even though, looking back, I don’t think I was that great at it.”

“Then someone came into the shop wanting a Christian Bale portrait from American Psycho in colour. Again, I watched an instructional DVD; Mike DeVries had just released Get Real. I did the piece, the customer loved it, it healed perfectly and things just went from there.”

We talk about the prep involved for portraits. Chris refers to Photoshop, how it’s really helped to up his game.

“It’s surprising what you can do.

A guy came in recently wanting Iron Man with the face plate open. But if you google that, there’s only one image that comes up and it’s out of focus. So I looked for someone that was making an Iron Man costume and found some photos of the helmet, face plate open. I then searched for a photo of Robert Downey Jr. looking at the same angle and Photoshopped his face into the helmet. I try to do that as much as possible: look for bits of images that I can stick together to make a tattoo that no one else is going to have.”

Sci-fi movies are also a big part of Chris’ life. Along with twenty or so others in the industry, he’s a licensed Lucasfilm artist, working some big events in the US and Europe. He organised the Star Boards project in 2012, a fundraiser where tattoo artists designed Star Wars themed skateboards. He has his own convention, Cardiff’s Tattoo And Toy. And there’s more in the pipeline...

“I went over to Oregon in

November to film a pilot for a sci-fi based tattoo reality TV show,” he reveals. “They filmed it as a sizzler and I’ll find out soon whether it’s been picked up. I’m still unsure about doing it. From a public point of view, tattoo reality shows are great, but the industry hates them and I don’t want to be that guy that everyone calls a sell-out.”



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Hardly a sell-out when sci-fi is something he is genuinely passionate about, that’s played a huge role in developing his passion for art and is influencing his style even today. We talk about some of Chris’ favourite comic book artists: “Simon Bisley: his work’s outstanding. Alex Ross, too, purely for the realistic element. And then there’s Joe Madureira: his stuff reminds me of Mat Lapping’s work; almost new school in a way.”

I wonder if anyone would ever go to Chris, now, for anything apart from sci-fi realism or portrait work.

“You’d be surprised,” he laughs. “Someone e-mailed the other day after googling ‘Talented tattooists in Wales.’ ‘Your name came up

round the top’, they said. ‘Your portraits are amazing and my friend wants this tattoo’. I looked at the photo she’s attached and it’s that feather exploding into birds - we’ve all seen it.’

It’s a common misconception that a good artist will excel at all styles. In reality, a good portrait artist isn’t necessarily going to be good at, say, traditional.

“God, no! I’m terrible at traditional!” Chris laughs. “And script. I used to do it because I would get asked for it, but now we’ve got Ash working in the shop and his script is amazing. I’ve had the odd piece where I’ve had to do a portrait and there’s been script underneath and I’ve been: ‘Ash, 🙄’





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can you draw this script for me?"

As always, his candour and honesty is refreshing. And being open to such guidance has clearly helped Chris evolve as an artist, something he's still striving for today. He recently posted a facebook status update saying it was time to take it to the next level and I ask what he means.

"It's just to push myself, I think. With tattooing, there's always someone new on the scene, snapping at your heels and I think, What can I do to keep where I am?"

Is it a peer pressure thing?"



"It's a bit of everything. Peer pressure from other tattooists but then there's the pressure that you put on yourself."

I mention Stephen King; how he was asked in a recent interview whether he was still trying to write his best book at 65 years old. His answer: Well, I'm not phoning it in. Would Chris be happy to plateau? Would that be good enough for him?

"Probably not. I'm my own worst critic. I beat myself up a lot. I think maybe it's the medium we work in. You take a photo, once

a tattoo's done, and it's distorted because of the curve of the body. I get like that a lot, to the point where sometimes I take a photo and won't post it anywhere. That's the pressure that I put on myself: trying to constantly improve so I like what I do."

Does he talk about that with other artists?

"Sometimes. The last time I saw an improvement in my work was when David Corden was guesting at the shop. After working with him for a couple of weeks, watching how he does stuff, it changed what I do. I'd like to do more of that; bring guests into the shop that I look up to."

We finish talking about Chris' TV work because, frankly, you can't interview Chris Jones without asking him about that Come Dine With Me episode. So why did he do it? Was it for further promotion? Another aspect of taking it to the next level?

"Because I live here, next door to the shop. And what better form of advertising than getting the shop on TV!"

He was a little tipsy during filming and worried before it came on TV. "But most of what I said was cut out. I was hardly in it at all." He laughs, thinking back on it. "Probably for the best, really."

And that's Mr Jones for you in a nutshell: brutally honest to the end. 🤖

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