

Nashville's Ink N Iron fest mixes tattoos and music

By Dave Paulson | August 4, 2015



The Ink N Iron Festival is Thursday-Sunday at Bicentennial Mall State Park in Nashville.(Photo: Submitted)

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A tattoo lasts forever.

That might be what inspired you to get “inked,” or it might be why you’d never dream of it. But the drive to have a permanent piece of art on your body, it turns out, is pretty universal. It defies age, income brackets – even musical tastes.

You’ll find proof of that at Bicentennial Mall State Park Thursday-Sunday, as the [Ink N Iron Festival](#) sets up in its new home of Nashville.

Country legend Merle Haggard is one of dozens of musical performers. So are rockers Coheed and Cambria and soul favorites Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings. Hot rods and motorcycles will be on display, and contestants in a “Pin-Up Pageant” will take the stage alongside vaudevillian performance artists.

But at the center of this cultural tornado? More than 200 tattoo artists -- including artists from Black 13, Kustom Thrills and eight other Nashville shops – will be exhibiting their work and giving attendees “the ultimate tattoo experience.”

Founder Trace Edwards says that concept is what birthed the festival in 2002 in Long Beach, Calif., and it remains “the hub of the show.” Meanwhile, tattoos have continued to mark up the mainstream with reality TV hits such as “Miami Ink.”

“In prior decades, it could be considered either a military thing or a biker type of thing,” Edwards says. “But now the industry has been raised from out of the back room to being

very much in the front of the television. When that took place, suddenly we had a clientele that could be a schoolteacher right up to a truck driver.”

What led to the festival’s relocation? Edwards says it wasn’t easy to work with the city of Long Beach on a large-scale music event. Nashville, on the other hand, was a lot more cooperative.

“They’re not apprehensive about having large crowds of people enjoying live music,” he says. “For us that’s a blessing.”

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Other acts taking the stage over the four-day fest include punk rock veterans Suicidal Tendencies and The Misfits, “Queen of Rockabilly” Wanda Jackson and “psychobilly” mainstay The Reverend Horton Heat. It’s the kind of show that Shooter Jennings considers “fine-tuned,” and if he wasn’t performing, he’d probably be hanging out in the crowd.

“A lot of the people who grew up listening to The Misfits, their parents were listening to Merle Haggard, or there was a natural connection in the quality of the music,” he says.

“They’re not a crowd you can pin down as a Merle Haggard crowd or a Misfits crowd. It’s really a large group of people that are coming together over culture as opposed to some kind of marketed music genre, and I think that all of the people that are on all of the stages kind of represent the same kind of attitude, regardless of the music.”

That crowd will be coming from all corners of the country. Edwards says the festival has sold tickets to people in a 22-state radius. “We’ve always enjoyed a clientele that travels,” he says. He’s counting on local residents to make the trip to Bicentennial Mall, too.

“Is Nashville going to be interested? Are they going to come out and see what’s going on? We hope so, and we think so.”

If You Go: The Ink N Iron Festival runs Thursday through Sunday at Bicentennial Mall State Park (600 James Robertson Pkwy). Single-day passes are \$50-\$90, and four-day passes are \$125-\$360. One-day admission to the tattoo festival is \$25. For more information, visit <http://nashville.ink-n-iron.com/ticketing-options/>.

Contact: handsonpr@aol.com and 323.788.0741