



Angels

IN AMERICA

Spike presents a new series *Ink Master: Angels*. Darlings from *Ink Master Season 8* Ryan Ashley Malarkey, Kelly Doty, Nikki Simpson and Gia Rose traverse the country, challenging local artists to see who has the chops to make *Ink Master Season 10*. We sat down with three of the four while they swooped into Austin and talked about their alliance.

by Richard Whittaker
photos by Katrina Barber



It was the alliance that changed *Ink Master*. In Season 8 of the Spike reality show, the female tattooists rejected sabotage and dirty tricks in favor of mutual support and friendship. Now four of the best have taken to the road as part of *Ink Master: Angels*.

They're on a whirlwind tour across the US. Today they're at a hip bar in Austin, with Season 8 winner Ryan Ashley Malarkey poolside, braving the 100-degree-plus temperatures. Inside, third place runner-up Kelly Doty and fifth place winner Nikki Simpson are beating the heat (Gia Rose, who came eleventh, is back at the hotel). It's not all fun and relaxation, as the quartet are on the hunt. At each of the 10 city stops for *Angels*, locals will challenge them: If they beat the veteran, there's a place on *Ink Master* Season 10 waiting for them.

Malarkey still seems a little shocked that joining the main show would lead to this new adventure. She said, "I didn't have any intention of making it all the way to the end and kicking ass. I just wanted to be part of something awesome." She also did not anticipate the girls' alliance, which she described as "legit. We would stay up at night and laugh 'til 3 AM, and be silly together. We knew the whole time it was a competition, and we would

look at each other and go, 'Yeah, we are competing,' but life is not about competition. Life is about the friendships you make, and the lessons you learn." When the producers approached them about *Angels*, the answer was a quick yes. "Of course we wanted to do this whole amazing project again, this life venture again, but really we just wanted to spend time with each other."

The spin-off has been a real change of pace for confirmed homebody Malarkey, who normally prefers the solitude of her mountain home with her pets. "It feels like my life at home and what I have established for myself is one side of me, and what I'm discovering is another side. I do like adventure, and I do like travelling to these other places, and it hasn't been hard." For Simpson, this nationwide jaunt fulfills a childhood dream of being a rock 'n' roll star. Growing up in Tucson, she said, "I wanted to tour and I wanted to travel, but I have no real musical talent in my body. My dreams were gone, but that fantasy was there." Conventions and guest spots scratched that itch, but for *Angels* she's relishing a different city every few days. "I love falling in love with cities, with art, with people." Yet, life on the road is a massive change to life in the studio. As profession-

al tattooers, Doty said, "We're used to a regimen and a regular schedule of get up, start drawing, tattoo all day and all night, go home, draw, sleep, repeat. Now we're TV hosts and tattooing on TV regularly, and it's a completely different world. Getting to do that, and going to all these cities, meeting artists that you've never heard of, but you're absolutely blown away by, it's an absolute gift."

It was a gift Doty almost never received. She almost said no to Season 8, as filming would take her away from her newly opened shop in Salem, Mass. Now she's a road warrior, immersing herself in the different local scenes. "If you were to divide up the country, I could tell you all the regions of styles. New School is definitely an East Coast thing, California is very rooted in black and white realism." Those differences are reflected in who the local competitors choose to challenge from the Angels. "People want to go up against somebody that they see themselves in. Luckily, with us, we have so many different styles represented that they have their choice in all of that."

Those regional trends are something Simpson experienced before. With her bold lines and bold colors, and fine art influences from Pre-Raphaelites like John William Waterhouse and Art Nouveau master Alphonse Mucha,

she stood out in LA and Hawaii, but, she said, "I'd go to the Northwest, and no one gives a shit. They'd go, 'You're neo-traditional, you're color illustrative, we have a million of you.'"

A pure East Coaster, Doty calls her own style "spooky illustrative," merging the area's thick-lined and bold-colored New Style traditions with the influences of Gothic illustrators like Gris Grimly, and lowbrow fine artists, Camille Rose Garcia. By contrast, Malarkey stands as a geographic and stylistic oddity, a Pennsylvania artist whose works epitomizes those West Coast fine lines and gray scales. That's something she attributes to a different kind of needlework: A graduate of New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, she began her artistic career as an illustrator and finisher for a high fashion house. "I had tweezers and a pile of beads, and I had eight hours to make this intricate, beautiful design. ... My artwork has always been fine line, has always been delicate, so once I picked up how to translate that into the tattoo medium, my style just snowballed."

The non-traditional influences on all three artists point to a reality of the tattooing industry—that, for the longest time, was male-dominated, both in terms of the number of tattooers and its culture. Simpson admitted she was a little surprised when she saw how many female artists *Ink Mas*





ter found for Season 8, “but I think that women with tattoos lately have become such an important factor in the industry of cool that people are embracing it. People love to see women with tattoos, and people love to see powerful women, and people love seeing women making moves. So I think this is the perfect time for women to be inspired to do whatever the hell they want, and be whatever the hell they want.”

Malarkey blanches at being called a pioneer because, she said, “There have been so many brave, strong women that have been through some serious shit and paved the way for us to take this opportunity, and to be taken seriously, and to be respected.” However, it’s still a long way from a level playing field. “People are like, ‘yeah, she’s good, but people just want to get tattooed by her because she’s hot.’ You know what? I don’t have to either be a good tattooer who doesn’t give a shit what I look like, or this put-together woman who sucks at tattoos. There’s no reason that women can’t be strong and confident and beautiful and talented.”

Moreover, the changing world of tattoo enthusiasts has undeniably

meant more opportunities for female tattooists. “It’s not just big, burly dudes anymore,” said Malarkey. “There are really feminine, ladylike tattoo enthusiasts who want something soft and delicate. I feel like I entered the industry at a point where there is so much demand for what I do that I was able to connect with so many of my clients because they trusted me, and they trusted my aesthetic, because I am a female.”

Simpson hopes that just by showing women at the top of their game, *Ink Master: Angels* will inspire the next generation, just as she was inspired by seeing the generation before her. “I love seeing a woman make waves, and really make her presence known, because we were never in the foreground in this industry.”

For now, all the Angels are just relishing being on the road for the show. Simpson said, “What can be better than doing everything you love, and getting paid for that, and spending time with some of your best friends, and visiting the coolest places? I literally can’t ask for anything better.”

***Ink Master: Angels* premieres on Spike, Oct. 3**