

BACK IN THE DAY

ELAYNE ANGEL



If you were not present, it would be hard to imagine how incredibly different “the field” of body piercing was in the 1980s, when I landed my job as a professional piercer and manager at Gauntlet, Inc.

At the time, piercing was some years away from being an actual industry. As far as we know, there was still just that one specialty studio in the country (and possibly the world)! Body piercing was all but unheard of. Literally—most people had simply never heard of it. The general public thought that women’s earlobes were the only site for such ornamentation, and maybe some noses in exotic, distant lands. Body piercing, when it was perceived at all, was viewed as underground, radical, and exceedingly deviant.

Even the National Tattoo Association (NTA) did not welcome Gauntlet at their conventions. Despite multiple attempts to rent a booth, they refused to offer the simple courtesy of a reply. They felt that piercing was outlandish and would give tattooing a “bad reputation.”

We had a tattoo artist client who used to buy jewelry from Gauntlet and do some piercings on the side. He confided that if his tattoo artist boss knew that he was pierced, and that he was performing piercings on others, he would be fired for being a pervert!

When I first became employed at Gauntlet, the clientele was still primarily gay leathermen (like its owner/founder, Jim Ward himself), and others from the BDSM community. Jim Ward is the person who essentially brought piercing out of the bedroom and dungeon. Initially, “kinky” people who were exploring the limits of their bodies were about the only ones engaging in piercing. We put holes in ears here and there, but mostly we pierced nipples and genitals, and the occasional septum on a willing slave or daring dominant.

At that time, piercing was very much about sex, eroticism, sensation, and enhancement. Piercings were for *function*, and the aesthetics were somewhat secondary. It used to be more about how a piercing felt than how it looked.

Then piercing got some media attention, including an article in the *National Enquirer*, with the sensational headline “Bizarre New Fashion Fad Turns Folks into Human Pincushions.” As melodramatic as this tabloid fodder was, it caught the attention of a lot of interested parties. That coverage was definitely responsible for putting tongue piercing before the public eye and its popularity soared afterward! Tongue piercing had not been in the repertoire of usual puncture sites in those days. At. All.



Bizarre New Fashion Fad Turns Folks Into Human Pincushions

The latest strange fad coming out of trendy California is sure to leave you on pins and needles — business is booming for “body piercing” shops!

In outrageous procession, customers in Los Angeles and San Francisco are clamoring to have rings, pins and other jewelry inserted not only in their ears — but also in their navels, noses, tongues, nipples and other places we can't even mention.

“Lately we've been doing a lot of tongue piercing,” said Elayne Levine, 29, manager of the Gauntlet piercing shop in Los Angeles.

Pierced tongue jewelry resembles a tiny barbell — with the round ends protruding on the top and bottom of the tongue.

“I have one myself — and



NOSE BONE: What happens when he's got a cold? it feels wonderful!” says Levine.

“This past January alone, we did 219 piercings on 178

people. Some of our recent patrons are Axl Rose of Guns N' Roses, Nikki Sixx of Motley Crue and Terry Bozzio, drummer for guitarist Jeff Beck.”

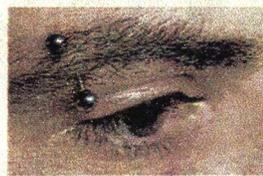
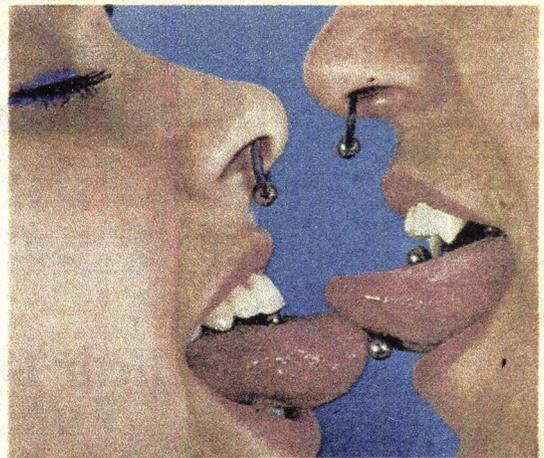
Never a city to be left out of a weird trend, San Francisco is the home of a booming piercing salon called Body Manipulations, run by Esther Saldana — who is one of her own best customers.

“I have 21 rings in my left ear,” declared Esther. “Every time I had a fight with my old boyfriend, I had another one put in. I have others in my navel. I love them!”

Not satisfied to be merely a human pincushion, Esther is also a walking art gallery. She's covered with tattoos, including some on her head, and has several brands — like those used on cattle.

Esther's brands include a skull and a tree branch on her legs. She also has four “scarifications” — intentional scars made with a blade.

“We do those processes in



EYE-YI-YI! This piece of jewelry is a real eye-raiser.

our shop, but the biggest business is in piercing,” she said.

“One fellow has a bone through his nose and huge

TINY BARBELLS decorate the tongues of these ring-nosed piercing fans.

earrings. But he's employed as a clerk, and his boss won't let him wear them to the office.

“A lot of my friends think piercing is bizarre and disgusting. I tell them I'm making a statement with my body.

“But I do not wear a barbell through my tongue. My mom would kill me!”

— JAMES McCANDLISH

Kid Stuff

The carton's here and I behold
Three little words there printed bold,
Guaranteed to make me tremble,
Namely: “Easy to Assemble.”

— Alma Denny

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In addition to the *National Enquirer* piece and other print articles, we got a fair bit of television coverage too, including CNN, After Hours, MTV, French TV, and Japanese TV. An old syndicated news show called *Inside Report* filmed a noteworthy segment at Gauntlet in the late 1980s. I find it very illustrative of that era.

I'm rockin' a piercing-purple skirt suit. The blazer's padded shoulders set off my long curly, dyed-black Mohawk. As I speak there's a text overlay on the screen reading, HOLE-EE COW!

Me: One of the other new piercings that is getting very popular, and it is rather painless to have done and very erotic: it's the tongue piercing!

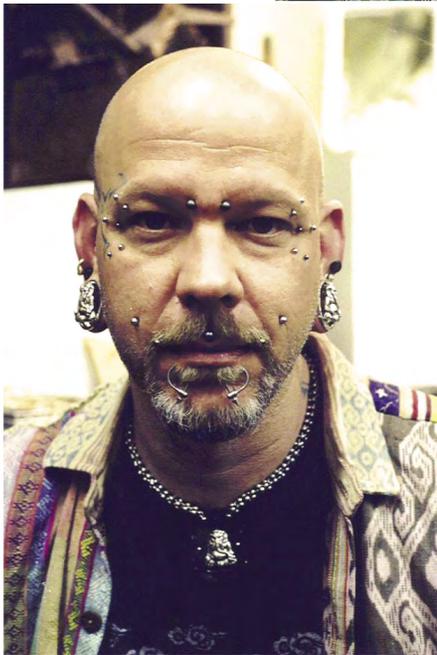
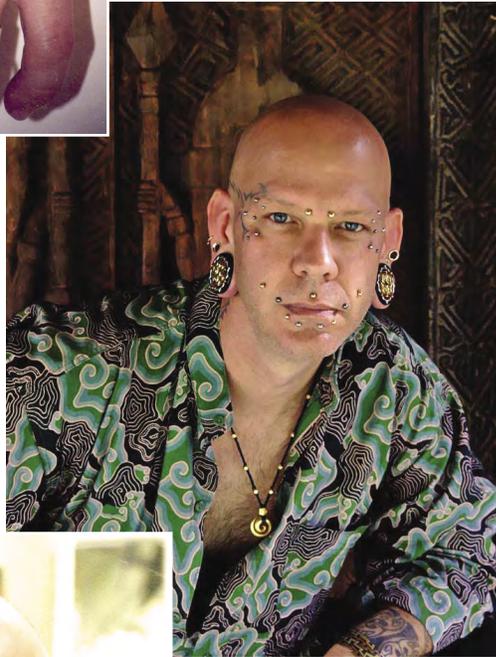
The poofy-haired anchorwoman, clad in a sassy leopard print dress (with massive shoulder pads), opines: “For most people, even getting their ears pierced is a traumatic experience. But imagine having your nipple or your navel pierced?! Body piercing is becoming a booming business, and not just with rock and rollers or radicals. This **painful** fad is becoming popular even with the *yuppie* crowd! *Inside Re-*

port's Angela Shelly shows us some folks who have more holes in their bodies than Swiss cheese!”

Cut to a Mötley Crüe music video with reporter's voice-over: “It's kind of your job when you're a rock star. You're supposed to shock people. Like Axl Rose of Guns n' Roses, Nikki Sixx of Mötley Crüe, these two have a lot in common. No, not music; nipples! [Cut to close up image of a pierced male nipple with a captive ring.] Both of the rockers have recently gotten their nipples pierced at this shop [image of the Gauntlet storefront] in West Hollywood, California.

“But don't think piercing is just for the raunchy and famous. A lot of regular people...and a few irregulars are pierced in places you never thought of—take navels.” This as they show a preppy short-haired young man getting his eyebrow pierced, then one of the Gauntlet staff strutting down the street in SM-fashionable leather and chains, sporting septum and navel piercings.

Next, they interview a sincere young piercee



Top to bottom, Elayne’s experimental wrist piercing; two photos of Joe Ruby of Borneo Joe and Flaming Bones jewelry. Many of his facial piercing placements were totally pioneering (and wildly attention-getting) at the time. It is fantastic to see that he still wears them to this day.

about her new navel piercing as she is bouncing a toddler on her hip. “It’s a pretty exotic place, I thought; something out of the normal. Not everybody has one.” [Though, of course, some years later, nearly anybody might have one!]

This show actually recorded my very first eyebrow piercing. Once the fixed bead ring was inserted and closed (of course we didn’t have any NeoMetal curves back then), I looked over at the client and said—in all seriousness—“You are a wild man!” Yep, piercing was quite different in those days.

Soon piercing started to catch on with entertainers, artists, musicians, and others. Being located in Southern California, Gauntlet was well positioned to handle that clientele. In the late 1980s (coinciding with the release of the Re/Search book *Modern Primitives*), more varied types of people became interested in body art and modification. They wanted to decorate different areas including more ear and facial work, and surface piercings.

There simply was no existing body of knowledge to draw from to fulfill many of these new requests. So, we moved forward as best we could, applying principles from our stock of “traditional” piercings whenever possible. It was an era of experimentation, informal research, and trial and error. And, yes...there were errors. Some piercings didn’t heal well and left scars. Fortunately, I have no real catastrophes to report (except for the disaster described on page 119 of *The Piercing Bible*, called “The Worst Piercing Story,” which is about my own cheek piercings).

We were always honest about our experience (or lack thereof) for any atypical requests. But when the customers were up for trying, we did our utmost. It was acceptable to just... attempt something new—nearly anything. We didn’t yet know what the boundaries and possibilities were, so we had to feel for them. We pushed, to find out what worked. Compared to today, there was relatively little expected by our clients, which facilitated this process. If they were willing to ultimately walk away with a scar for the chance at a new piercing, we gave it a go.

The truth is, we did some foolish stuff. And once that initial period of exploration ran its course, I pretty much stuck to the piercings that routinely healed successfully and let go of the rest. I suppose it is ironic that I’m now viewed as a “conservative” piercer, given these origins.

But my current attitude springs from having experimented a lot in my formative years.

Some of our early efforts come to mind. A number of them turned into very popular piercings; others, not so much.

In the 1970s, the first piercing I'd done on myself (other than an ear) was through a pinch of tissue just below the prominent bone on the outside of my left wrist. I was in high school at the time and was afraid someone would see it and send me to the looney bin, so I kept it in for just a few weeks before abandoning it. After joining the Gauntlet team, I thought it would be fun to reprise this piercing, so I had a colleague hold the forceps while I pushed the needle through. Then they did the jewelry insertion for me: a 14 ga $\frac{3}{8}$ " gold captive bead ring. I wore it for some months and it healed quite well given the minimal tissue, and the frequent handwashing and glove wearing required by my work. Ultimately, I found it impractical and gave it up.

I also thought it would be neat to have a hand-web piercing, which I'd seen in issue #23 of Jim Ward's *Piercing Fans International Quarterly Magazine (PFIQ)*. Somehow that settled in too, in spite of the Betadine and water soaks I used to "help it heal." I had it for several years before it began to migrate and had to be abandoned.

Innovations were tossed around and regularly tried out on the very willing staff. The lower central labret was already somewhat established, but one of my employees (Rebecca L.) got the idea for a midline piercing above her *upper* lip, and that was the first philtrum piercing I can recall.

Another staffer (piercer Jen D.) wanted her forehead pierced horizontally, as close to the hairline as possible. I didn't think a ring or straight barbell would work well, and curves were years from becoming readily available. So, I got the bright idea (ha!) to make a flexible "barbell" by filing the seam off of some plastic weed-eater line with a jewelry file. I figured out a creative way to melt and flatten the plastic ends with a lighter to hold some beads on. Amazingly, it healed just fine and she later put in metal jewelry. Jen wore it for years, and to my knowledge, indefinitely.

An employee from the jewelry division wanted to get an ear cartilage placement that "not everyone has," so I evaluated his anatomy. I decided to frame the prominent horizontal ridge near his face, toward the upper region of

his ear. We called it a "Niler" as his last name was Niles. Later, Erik Dakota would dub this placement a "rook" piercing.

Then there were other inventive things to be done with piercings. I thought it would be cool to have a vampire bite scar on the side of my neck. So, I took a long straight barbell (12 gauge, about $1\frac{1}{4}$ " in length) and while a colleague held the tissue in some forceps, I pierced it myself, and inserted the jewelry. The intention was to leave it in temporarily, and for it to not heal at all well. Somehow, minimal scarring resulted, which is probably for the best.

Believe it or not, I wasn't the only one to try this "vampire piercing." Joe Ruby of Borneo Joe/Flaming Bones jewelry was an early frequent visitor in the studio, and he also got one. Many of his facial piercing placements were totally pioneering (and wildly attention-getting) at the time. It is fantastic to see that he still wears them to this day.

In addition to performing experimental piercings, some of the circumstances surrounding them were unusual as well. I recall a few topless after-hours, invitation-only piercing parties. In fact, my forward helix—the first of its kind, as far as we know—was done at one such event. It was performed by Crystal (now Clayton) Cross, pierced from the interior, into a cork on the front. A small bead ring was the initial jewelry.

I also have very fond memories of a "first cleaning" party that took place in my large home shower, only a mile from Gauntlet's door. About a half a dozen of us bathed together and washed our tender new piercings with Hibiclens surgical scrub. Believe me when I tell you, that harsh soap was actually a big improvement from the agonizing rubbing-alcohol-on-cotton-swabs aftercare method I used for my nipple piercings back in 1981!

Stretching cartilage (or any large gauge hole in that tissue) was also pretty revolutionary at that time; most enlarged piercings at that point were Prince Alberts. For my conch piercing, a 10-gauge matte-finish charcoal ring was selected as the initial jewelry (ever so unwisely). What agony! But it healed, and within nine months I'd somehow stretched it enough to fit in a 4-gauge double-flared eyelet without damaging the tissue.

A memorable and unique man came to Gauntlet in the '80s with a number of highly unusual requests for the times. He went by the name Erl Van Aken (RIP), and he got the

first bridge piercing, which we dubbed an “Erl.” He also got the first neck surface piercing (nape). He wore both of these for many, many years. Less well known was his foray into axillary piercings. Though he was a very physically active man, Erl thought it would be a good idea to pierce the folds at the front and rear of his underarm creases. Though I tried to discourage him, Erl was a very persistent and persuasive person. I eventually placed 14ga $\frac{5}{8}$ " rings there, front and back, bilaterally. Although he didn't wear those piercings for as long as his others, they healed despite his inventive care regimen: twice daily applications of Bacardi 151 rum!

An adorable and effervescent young gal named Madison was the first to come in requesting a surface piercing at the front of her neck, which we labeled accordingly. We placed a ring in it and she wore the piercing for years, stating that she never had problems with it. Amazing!

I also recall a gent named Chet, who requested a single cheek piercing. He brought in a spent Magnum .357 bullet shell casing, and we had the jewelry department slice off the inscribed back portion of it to make a threaded end for the front of his piercing. Once the project was complete, he thought it looked like he had a bullet in his face. That was creative and...different. (I want to take this opportunity to clarify a common misconception: we did use internally threaded jewelry, even in those early days, for everything 14 gauge and thicker.)

I remember Dr. Jack Ward teaching a class on anatomy for piercers at an APP Conference in the 1990s. He

entitled it: “Are We Good or Are We Lucky?” and frankly, I would have to say we were pretty lucky indeed. We didn't use needles larger than 10 gauge (I still don't), and generally pierced smaller than that. But we stuck them through some places that could have had less fortunate outcomes. I did a piercing on one of the staff members (Crystal) at the juncture of her face and earlobe, but have since learned that there is an artery present there that is usually quite large. That could have gone badly!

When I wasn't at the shop or at home, I was out proselytizing about the joys of piercing to anyone who would listen. They often heard my message, as I made countless “converts.” My passion and enthusiasm were boundless, and the role of educator/liaison was one I undertook zealously. I still do....

During that period, the energy was electric, palpable, and intense, and it was evident that the era was somehow significant. My memories of that extraordinary time are incredibly fond, but frankly I'm relieved that my experimenting days are behind me. I'm so grateful to have been there, and happy to have returned to my roots, specializing in the piercings that were Gauntlet's original stock in trade.

Disclaimer: This article is intended to accurately describe my personal recollections and professional experiences from many years ago. It is my sincere intention to be truthful, though we all know that human memory is sometimes fallible. Any errors are my own (and are inadvertent). Also, it is not my aim to seek credit for any particular piercings—just to relate some early history as I remember it.



Elayne, right, with Crystal (now Clayton) Cross

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RUNNING THE GAUNTLET

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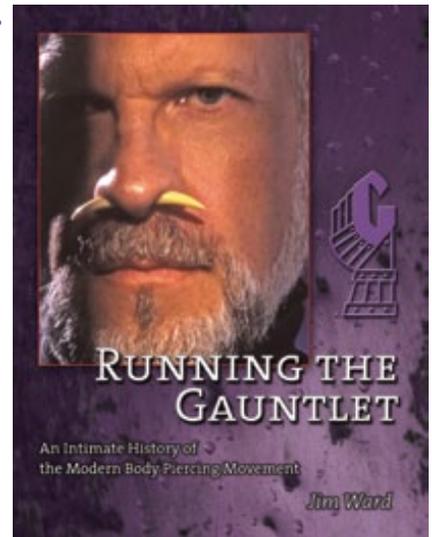
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