

Commentary

Bill Hall Skin matters for musicians

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

A musical young friend of mine, who is honing his tuneful talent, showed me a design for the tattoo he intends to add to his own personal body for an extra boost up the ladder of fame.

While I have my doubts about permanent pictures painted on the walls of my house or on the skin of my body, a part of me understands the urge to adorn yourself in ways that attract attention - especially when you're going into a line of work that involves seeking attention. Decoration is often a part of the package in showboat jobs like writing, acting and music.

I remember a time when, having chosen writing as how I wanted to earn a living, I mistakenly assumed that appearance looms large in the needs of a professional writer. I let my hair lengthen and made a few feeble attempts at growing a beard. Writers like Ernest Hemingway grew beards so I assumed I would need a beard if I wanted to become a writer.

Of course that had the cart before the horse, the hairy face before actually writing something. Hemingway and other fuzzy scribes had accidentally pointed me toward a false need for a writer.

Actually, the best thing a person who hopes to become a writer can do is to start writing. The beard comes later. The beard is a consequence of becoming so obsessed with pounding out a story on a keyboard that you forget to shave and bathe and wear trousers if you're not careful. A beard isn't actually necessary. A lot of people write really well without a beard. Women, for instance.

I gave up on the beard early on. I didn't resume wearing a beard until I was in my 40s and going bald in a cold climate. If I couldn't keep my head warm on top, at least I could clothe it in hair on the bottom. Besides, a brainy beauty had taken a liking to me and said she preferred a bearded man.

I preferred not letting her get away. I immediately grew a beard. Before long, she asked me to marry her. We were too old to have children, but that beard of ours will be 30 years old next July 4. My beard is a Yankee Doodle Dandy, born on the fourth of July.

But I want it on the record: The beard doesn't make me write any better, though my muse, the wife who wanted the beard, probably does.

Similarly, I wonder about the necessity of a tattoo for my young musical friend. I concede that a tattoo may be more a part of his success in music than my beard was helpful to my writing.

But there is one stark difference between a beard and a tattoo: A beard is easily removed. Not so with a tattoo. Oh, they can be dimmed with lasers. And they can be altered. Some skin artists make a good living tattooing over the top of shoddy work, converting it to something tolerable, if not also gorgeous.

But the trouble with permanent decorations is that they aren't like clothing. Clothing fashions change from year to year. If a shirt or a hat or trousers go out of style, you replace them, and save the world and yourself from the same old same old.

There certainly is such a thing as a classic and beautiful work of art imbedded in human skin, but they aren't all gems and, unlike the Mona Lisa, even the best of them don't last hundreds of years.

But in truth, some professional music careers are enhanced by creating a rebel identity, letting your fans know that you are a wild and crazy guy. A musician might sell a few more concert tickets by having an extra eye tattooed in the middle of his forehead, or some such bow to the gods of gaudy showmanship.

One time, as a gag, I wore a fake tattoo to a party - a classic heart with the word "Mom" in it decorating one shoulder. People at the party believed it was real and they were not very complimentary.

Maybe when it comes to tattoos, the best solution for everyone would be for someone to develop a false skin made of some kind of snug flesh-colored Spandex. Tattoo the phony skin and then change the design with a new Spandex skin from time to time.

And so I say to my young friend, there's more than one way to skin a musician, you wild and crazy guy.

Hall is editor emeritus of the Tribune's Opinion page. His email address is wilberth@cableone.net.