



ALEJANDRO INGELMO

The shoe designer is well heeled and well inked.

When Alejandro Ingelmo walks into his Soho studio wearing jeans and a semitransparent white T-shirt—offering a view of the ink covering his chest, arm, and back—he looks more like a musician who rocks fashion-forward sneakers than a fourth-generation cobbler who creates them. The Miami-born designer, whose shoes are favored by celebrities like Kanye West and The Black Eyed Peas, is the youngest in a long line of Ingelmo craftsmen and has a deep respect for his family's traditions, mixed with a touch of rebellion. "I hate being told what to do," he says. "I want to do things my way."

Ingelmo's first subversive act was getting a tattoo when his Cuban family's culture believed only criminals got ink. Born in the year of the dragon, Ingelmo selected a Chinese symbol—long since covered up—that he thought meant *dragon* (it didn't).

Continuing his rebellion, he left home for New York, but once he arrived in the city he realized that cobbling was in his DNA. "Sometimes you need to go away from something to find out that you want it," he says. The Alejandro Ingelmo line of sexy, sculptural heels launched in 2006 (with a logo designed by Mister Cartoon), and the men's line, focused on elevating sneakers to new heights, debuted three seasons later. "I looked at all of these materials I was using for women and asked myself, Why can't this live in the men's world?" he says. "The idea was taking an athletic shoe and using richer materials, more crafted, cup

soles, hand stitching—sneakers you can wear with a suit, dress up, dress down."

Much to his mother's dismay, he also developed a respect for the art of tattooing. For nine years, Ingelmo has been working with Yoni Zilber at New York Adorned on a graphic design across his chest and arm. Mister Cartoon is working on Ingelmo's back piece, which is inspired by his Cuban and Catholic heritage and incorporates two praying hands and a line of poetry from Cuban writer José Martí that translates to: "The heart that I live with."

On top of rounding out his back with the addition of a Virgin Mary, finding a way to keep his company's production on American soil is another one of Ingelmo's missions. He recently began producing hand-stitched shoes in Maine, and he's searching for an American factory that can manufacture oxfords the way his grandfather once did. "My grandfather learned from his father in Spain and took that knowledge and craft to Cuba, which became his country," Ingelmo says. "I was born and raised in the U.S., so it's important to bring that knowledge and craft here. It feels good to stay connected to where I came from."

Despite the fact that his shoes are a far cry from the traditional shoes his family produced, Ingelmo is deeply influenced by his heritage. "Shoes are technical, and you can't always see the difference in quality because it's within the construction," he says. "I've put my name on [the shoes to] respect the craft that is embedded in me. I need to know those values are always there." —*Suzanne Weinstock Klein*