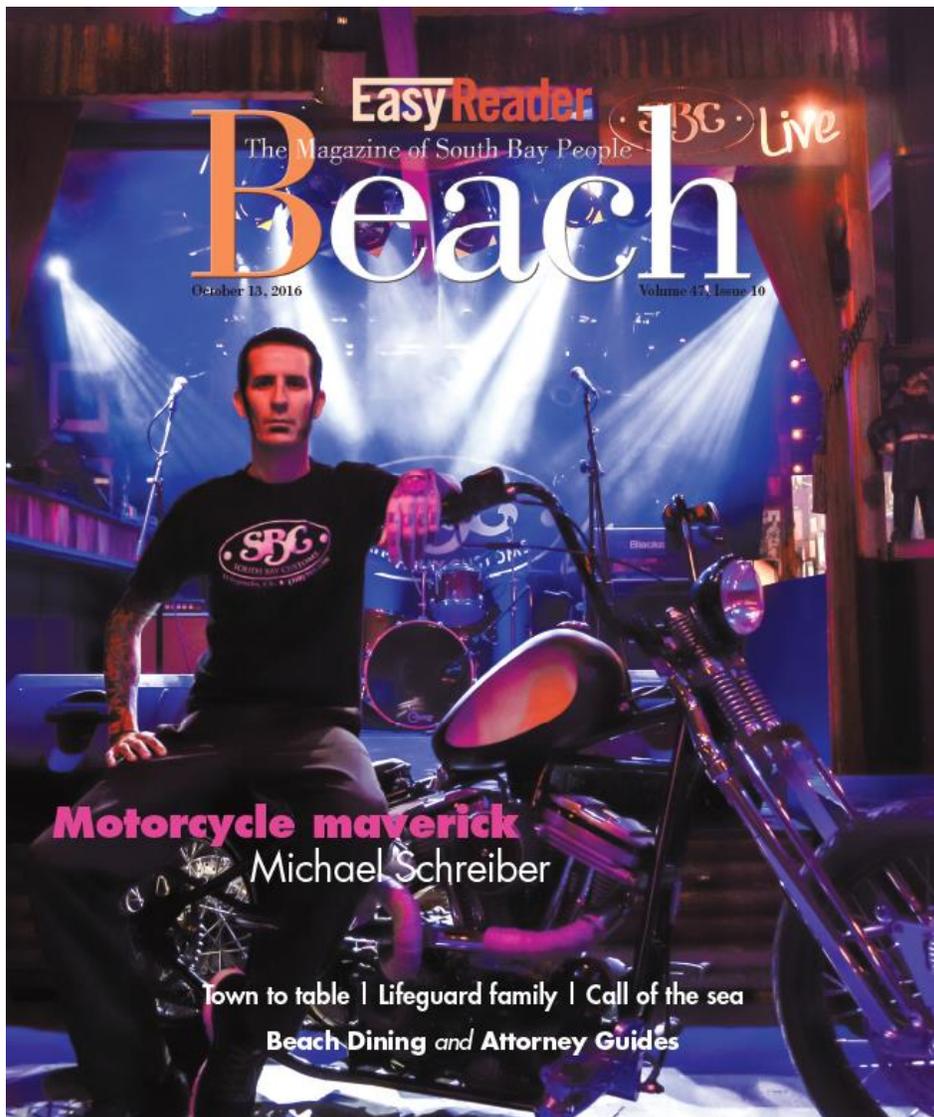


EasyReaderNews

Motors + Art + Music: How South Bay Customs became the coolest place in the coolest town in the South Bay



by Mark McDermott

Every night during the dog days of the summer of 2007, a gunmetal grey 1950 Chevrolet pickup truck roamed slowly through the streets of Smoky Hollow. A long, tall, razor thin

dark-haired man sat behind the wheel, surveying the buildings in El Segundo's rundown warehouse district.

Michael Schreiber was looking for a home. He sought a place where he could not only build motorcycles, but assemble something else, something he'd never seen before except in his mind's eye — a pirate's ship of a building, a skull and bones kingdom where he could make his own rules. He was prepared to make a stand.

Schreiber had reached a make it or break it point in his life. He was 36 years old and been building cars and bikes since before he was old enough to drive. He'd spent 10 years working as a mechanic for Harley Davidson shops but had constantly run afoul of his bosses. It wasn't an issue of work ethic, or ability. Schreiber was a hard worker and a meticulous craftsman. In fact it was his commitment to his meticulousness that was the problem.

"I was always having difficulties working with other people, because I thought I knew a better way," Schreiber said. "But not out of arrogance. I would see something I saw as an efficiency, and I wanted to make it better....I would go outside the lines of convention. I was told, 'Just show up and do what you are told — it doesn't matter if it's right, wrong, or indifferent, just one and done, let's do it.' And I couldn't. So I ended up in a lot of trouble."

Being a mechanic was more than a vocation for Schreiber, but an almost spiritual endeavor. He was the son of a mechanic who'd grown up bouncing back and forth between Redondo and Lomita, and from the age of six would find machines and appliances in other people's trash and start taking them apart and putting them back together.

"I just look at something, and all I can do in my head, it's like extra vision — I look into it and start thinking about how it works and take it apart, piece by piece," he said.

He quit his job with Harley Davidson before he could be fired, again. He knew he had to strike out on his own. His passion was to build motorcycles from the ground up, his own way, less overtly stylized than typical custom bikes.

Schreiber had a partner in crime. His girlfriend Robbin Holden was an artist and a classic car enthusiast. Together they felt the stirrings of a different kind of vision for how they could build a life. He sold his beloved '69 Chevelle, which he'd completely restored and owned for 15 years, and Holden sold her '62 Falcon. They took the money, paid off some debt, bought some equipment and moved into a little 250 sq. ft. section of a warehouse in South Redondo Beach. Thus was South Bay Customs born. The space, which was part of a strip mall, wasn't big enough. Ten months later, a larger space opened at a friend's warehouse in El Segundo, and they moved. This only lasted a year — the building sold, and they had 30 days to move. They found a temporary location on Franklin Street in El Segundo, but time was running out for South Bay Customs.



Robbin Holden, and Hank, of South Bay Customs. Photo by Michael Schreiber

Hence Schreiber's nightly hunts. "I would just drive around every night, so miserable," he recalled. "I knew I had to get out of it."

One night that September, he finally spied a "For Lease" sign outside a low slung warehouse on Penn Street. He called from his truck, made an appointment to see the place the next morning, and signed a lease three days later.

He knew he had his work cut out for him. "The first time he walked in, the word that came to mind was "dump." The 3,000 sq. ft. warehouse had been occupied by an auto mechanic for several years, and then for the previous year it had been a bread bakery.

“So it was a combination of the guy who didn’t clean up very well, the auto mechanic, and then the baker...he made a mess. You know, a little flour slurry everywhere. It was disgusting. I couldn’t sleep the night after seeing it. I knew.”

But he also saw something else. The scale and feel of the warehouse was expansive enough to contain more than a custom motorcycle shop. He’d found his pirate ship.

“I started seeing what it is now, just instantly,” Schreiber said. “It all came.”

What South Bay Customs is now defies easy description. It’s a motorcycle shop, art gallery, music venue, and event space, but it’s also something more. SBC is an alternative universe, the distillation and perhaps evolution of some of the South Bay’s and particularly El Segundo’s proudest traditions — precision mechanics and a defiant but pronouncedly unbothered inclination to go one’s own damned way. Rock ‘n’ roll not as a musical genre but a way of life.

Schreiber, to whom the idea art was anathema prior to meeting Holden 10 years ago, has been described in the custom motorcycle press both as a master of his craft and an artist. His reason for founding South Bay Customs sounds a lot like what many artists say about their calling to create art.

“I couldn’t not,” he said.

Writer Jack Kerouac famously wrote, “The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn...”

Schreiber is more of a slow burn. And South Bay Customs is his flame.

“For some people, it’s going to to burn a way out of them if they don’t let it out. Michael is that guy,” said his friend Tony Goodreau, an El Segundo native and a musical mainstay at South Bay Customs. “If he didn’t do this he would wind up in a padded cell. And that’s an artist to me. You watch true artists, like a great guitar player, and you think, ‘Man, if he wasn’t doing this, he’d catch fire.’ It’s like an exorcism. Michael does that with everything, whether he’s working, shaping metal, or putting on a show, putting together flyers....He’s intense that way. It’s definitely art to me, man.”

South Bay love

It began at Pat’s Cocktails II. Schreiber was having a drink with friends at the quintessential South Redondo dive bar. Holden was likewise there with friends. She noticed a tall man at the bar.

“I first thought he was cute, then I was like, ‘I don’t know,’” she recalled. “He kind of just didn’t seem interested...He was single, so he was probably scanning the floor.”

Schreiber is, if not taciturn, self-contained. He’s deliberate in most things, including whom he lets in his life. He was more interested in Holden than he let on. Within a couple weeks, they went out on a date.

“So we met at another bar, and had the world’s worst, most awkward first date ever,” Schreiber said. “I really couldn’t wait for it to be over. We are not clicking, it was uncomfortable, and we ended up going our separate ways that night. I was like, ‘Well, that is that, right?’”

He didn’t hear from her until about a week later, on his birthday, when she called and left a message wishing him a happy birthday. The cool simplicity of it got his attention. He told his sister about the call. She told him he should give Holden another shot.

“Who knows?” Schreiber thought.

So he asked her out again.

“That date went way better than the first one,” Schreiber said. “And now it’s been 10 years.”

A photographer who shot Robbin Holden once described her as “the calmest person I ever met.” She’s a self-taught artist with a bent towards assemblage, steampunk and darkly Victorian art who knows every good swap meet and antique store in a 100 mile radius and pores over art and design magazines for ideas or art she can clip out.

She knew she had her work cut out for her when she met Michael.

“He and I are so opposite,” Holden said. “He hates art. I mean, he likes it now, but he hated it then. He thought we were a bunch of stuck up assholes who sit on our pedestals and judge people. All he wants to do is work on bikes and listen to rock ‘n’ roll, that was his thing. So it’s been ongoing, but spending time and realizing that low-brow artists are not the same ...it’s just a different type of person. I don’t have a degree and I’m not pretentious.”

“I have to give Robbin credit for her influence. I was super naive to what art really even meant or could be before I met her,” Schreiber said. “I kind of had this opinion that everyone who is into art is an arty kind of person. I thought they were sort of like snobs and they walked around with their pinkies in the air. It really quickly dawned on me when I met Robbin and saw the art that she does, and the art she appreciates, the way she decorates things — I was completely wrong. She really opened up my eyes to what art is and can be, and even sort of taught me that I had a little bit of artist in me, even though I’d never recognized it, or even wanted to admit that what I was doing was artistic.”

Holden’s idea of art wasn’t overwrought. She’d grown up poor in San Pedro and came to art more from necessity than some need to make a conceptual statement.

“I hung out with poor kids,” she said. “So my view was just like, ‘Okay, this is what I do, how I express myself. I can’t go to the mall and buy a shirt, so I’ll just paint my own.’”

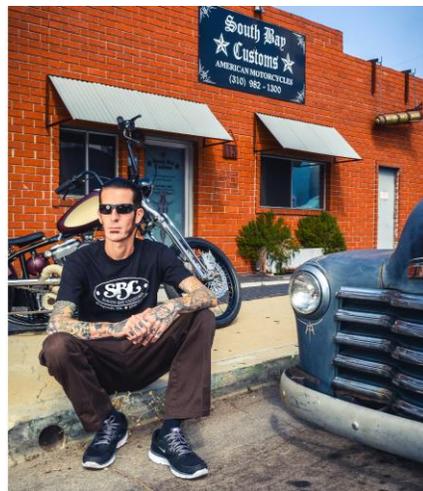
Something Holden and Schreiber had in common from the beginning was a work ethic somewhere between relentless and outright insane. When Schreiber is on task, for example, sleep becomes inessential. He possesses an outsized capacity for single-minded focus.

When the couple took over the warehouse and began its transformation into South Bay Customs, they dug deep. They scrubbed and scraped and painted and fabricated and assembled. Holden went into overdrive, scouring swap meets and antique stores, paging

through her vast collection of art books and magazines, clipping and framing and hanging art.

“For like a month, the doors were closed,” Schreiber said. “We decorated it, and started building it out. It resembled very much what it is now.”

(click blue arrow for full screen gallery)



South Bay Customs, 50 Chevy
Photo by Paul Rouston

If you build it

The building at 115 Penn Street calls little attention to itself. It's a tan, single story brick warehouse adorned with two slanted metal awnings and a sign that says, "South Bay Customs" in large ornate lettering and, in a simple bold font beneath, "American Motorcycles." There are two hints something unusual might be going on behind the glass front door: the 1950 Chevy pickup always parked out front, and a small rocket painted with the words "Motors" "Art" "Music" hanging on chains from the far right roof ledge.

The experience of walking inside for the first time is something nearly every visitor remembers long after. The artist Holly Socrates moved to El Segundo three years ago to open her own gallery on Main Street, and people kept telling her she needed to go check out SBC. She was in the neighborhood one day and decided to finally visit. To this day, she can't find the words to describe the experience of that first visit — the long hallway, thick with art, ranging from vintage horror movie posters to collections of old magazines ("The Radio Times," "Woman's Own," "Punch") to a photo assemblage featuring dozens of photos of midgets from the first half of the last century (one is stamped "Photo Roto Co of N.Y." and shows two midgets boxing, with the caption, "Mike and Ike, twin midgets measuring 24 inches at 20 years old"). A bright red, old school popcorn machine a little further in has a sign that reads, "Please don't feed the..." above a photo of Michael and Robbin's dog, a very mixed breed named Hank ("pure bred awesome," as Schreiber him), looking sadly popcornless. And then you step inside the shop itself, which feels like stepping back into some century that could have existed a hundred years ago but never did. Hundreds of photos, assemblages, posters (a bright colored Carter the Great magician poster exclaims, "Carter Beats the Devil!"), and motorcycle parts framing artworks (one Victorian Age man looks solemnly at you from one angle, then becomes a skull from another). A stage is at the front of the room, with a backline of amplifiers and a drum kit and dozens of professional-grade show lights above. The building further opens up into another, larger room, with a hoist and a lot of other mechanical gear and a rugged looking but sleek, stripped-down motorcycle on display at the back of the room. (Dubbed "Death or Glory," the bike is Schreiber's masterwork, which he raced on the Bonneville Flats, a "bucket list" item checked off). The room opens to a sloping back deck, where there are picnic tables and a smoker (Schreiber has taught himself, with characteristic avidness, the fine art of BBQ).

There are a hundred captivating details, it seems, per square foot. But as Socrates noted, the main feeling you come away with is warmth, because every guest somehow is invited to be complicit with this secret world Schreiber and Holden have constructed.

"They are just good people," Socrates said. "I just love that if you do what you love, good things will come — Michael is living it. It's such a cool inspiration as a small business owner seeing that."

The shop has flourished and has done so in ways even Schreiber did not envision.

His primary business in the beginning was, of course, building motorcycles. Early on, he started hosting music shows — both because of his lifelong passion for music, and in the hopes that people visiting for shows might become motorcycle customers, given the

crossover between music and motorcycles (“It turned out there was zero crossover,” Schreiber said, with a laugh. “And it turned out I was perfectly fine with that.”). His first show was the locally based Irish punk band, Hoist the Colors. Word immediately spread throughout the South Bay music community that a new, legit musical venue had arrived.

Elvis Cortez, the lead singer and guitarist of the Wilmington-based band Left Alone and the punk supergroup Transplants, remembers hearing about SBC and investigating.

“I googled it, and was like, ‘Huh, it’s kind like a bike shop, but they do shows?’” he said. “I’m from the South Bay and I’ve been booking shows a long time and I’d never heard of this place...I showed up and was blown away just walking in. ‘Okay, it’s a museum, but also an awesome bike shop. And eventually I started playing there, and it’s hands down the my favorite place I’ve ever played — and I’ve played a lot of places, from the House of Blues to Conan O’Brien to a hundred other clubs.”

“I compare it to those little backyard places. The vibe is undeniable. And people you take there feel at home. No one disrespects you, everyone is comfortable...I hate to use it, but the word is organic. People feel good there.”

“That makes everything worth it to me,” Schreiber said. “The biggest constant I want to keep for this place is that no matter who walks through the door, they feel welcome, comfortable, like they can just come and focus on what’s going on. They don’t have to worry, ‘Oh, am I dressed right? Is that dude going to give me the hairy eyeball? Am I cool enough to be here? Is this my demographic?’ There is no demographic for this place. You’ll have people who bring their kids, and you’ll have middle aged kids, you have adults, you have senior citizens, long-haired, short-haired, bikes, no bikes, tattoos, no tattoos, it doesn’t matter. The only thing we insist on is you show up with a good attitude. Don’t be a dick.”

Schreiber, once he delved into putting on shows, did extensive research and obtained state-of-the-art everything. The lighting and sound systems are as good if not better than any full time music venue in Southern California.

“There’s probably more lighting up in those rafters in this motorcycle shop than there is in 90 percent of the venues in the South Bay, maybe Los Angeles,” Schreiber said. “That just goes back to my personality. I don’t know how to leave things alone. Good enough is never good enough for me.”

Cortez said SBC has established itself firmly on musicians’ maps throughout the country. Tim Armstrong, the lead singer of Rancid, has filmed videos there, and both local and nationally touring bands regularly grace its stage. Goodreau and his musical partner Neil Van Flue started playing there in SBC’s early days with their band Hangdog Expression. Their duo, Sanguine and Shiny, have become a house band in recent years.

“It’s the best music venue in the South Bay,” he said. “We rarely play anywhere else, and it feels kind of weird when we do — like I almost want Michael’s blessing, ‘Shit, dude, I’m cheating on you.’ It’s just home for us.”



Hank, the Chairman of the Board at South Bay Customs

This unexpected aspect of the business began about five years ago when a woman attending a concert was having the typical “Holy hell, what is the place?” first time experience at SBC. She asked Schreiber if he ever rented it out for private birthday or holiday parties. The thought had never crossed his mind.

“I gave her the most confident look and I go, ‘Yeah, all the time,’” he recalled, laughing. “Because I instantly realized, ‘Great idea.’ In the 10 seconds it took to answer her question, I realized, ‘I need to do that.’”

He gave her his card, hosted her event like it was routine business, and was off and running in the event business.

“Word started spreading and now it’s more than 50 percent of my business,” Schreiber said. “Birthday parties, wedding receptions, record releases for bands, corporate holiday parties, bar mitzvahs — I’m not kidding, we do barmitzvah. So one day we have Tim Armstrong from Rancid and Hellcat records and then 24 hours later we’ve got little Billy celebrating his 15th birthday. That’s how we roll here at South Bay Customs.”

Socrates had a vision the first time she visited, as well. She instantly thought that El Segundo should host an Art Walk. Two years ago, she asked Schreiber if he would help. His answer, in her mind, would determine if such an event was feasible. He emphatically said yes. The El Segundo Art Walk just completed its second summer and has widely been lauded as the best event of its kind in the region, with over 30 businesses hosting a wide range of art, putting the little town on the map as an emerging artistic haven.

Mayor pro tem Drew Boyles said SBC is emblematic of El Segundo itself.

“What is cool is what he’s doing — he’s actually building things in there, but he’s also got all this beautiful art all around, and music, this really cool combination of creativity and machines,” Boyles said. “It’s like El Segundo, and further to that point, what Smoky Hollow is becoming, reinventing spaces into something cool, fun, and creative.”

Socrates still can’t quite describe it. She has one word of advice for anyone who wants to know what this curious motorcycle shop in Smoky Hollow is about.

“Go,” she said. Just go. You have to experience South Bay Customs. You can’t explain it to somebody. You just need to go and see for yourself.”

See a photo gallery and video at EasyReaderNews.com. South Bay Customs is at 115 Penn Street in El Segundo. For more information, see SouthBayCustoms.net. Sanguine and Shiny play SBC on Oct. 15 with touring act DB Rouse and local musician Aaron Jones for a “Rad Swampy Americana Night.” The annual Halloween Bash takes place Oct. 31 with music by a surprise, secret guest. See SouthBayCustoms.net for more info.

[See the full article here.](#)