

# Fly by every night

Bangkok bar owner Ashley Sutton is bringing his Iron Fairies to Hong Kong, writes Jason Gagliardi

“All my life I’ve been searching for something/ Something never comes, never leads to nothing/ Nothing satisfies but I’m getting close,/ Closer to the prize at the end of the rope/ And I’m done, done and I’m on to the next one.”  
*All My Life*, Foo Fighters

For Ashley Sutton, Bangkok’s golden boy of bar design, art is long, life is short, and so is his attention span. The feted creator of Iron Fairies, Clouds, Mr Jones’ Orphanage, Five, Maggie Choo’s, and fish and chips saloon Fat Gut’z is a restless, questing soul, never satisfied, always searching.

Sutton professes scant regard for his creations, says he couldn’t care less about running bars anymore – “s\*\*\*holes” is how he refers to them. As soon as the paint is dry on the latest Sutton special, the heavily-inked Freemantle native with the Australian Rules footballer’s physique, matinee-idol looks, fierce vodka thirst, raging insomnia and potty mouth is done, done and on to the next one.

Fortunately for Hong Kong’s more discerning barflies, the “next one” but one (he first has to open Bangkok Betty, a new military-themed diner in the Holiday Inn on the corner of Sukhumvit Soi 22) is a bigger, better incarnation of Iron Fairies to open mid-2014 in a yet-to-be-revealed location in Central. The original Iron Fairies in Bangkok’s trendy Thong Lor district was a jazz-soaked, absinthe-drizzled, hard-boiled steampunk wonderland of a bar, which made Sutton an overnight sensation in Bangkok and saw the great and good begin queuing up to secure his services.

Sutton conceived the Iron Fairies mythology while driving cranes and digging mine shafts in Western Australia’s rugged Pilbara region. “You’d be underground for so long you’d just about lose your mind,” he recalls. “I started thinking about fairies, and then I started doing some sketches.” Then he lost part of his left hand in an accident (not his drawing hand).

He visited China, set up a foundry in Dalian, and cleaned up selling wrought-iron ware to Australian yuppies. His sales manager saw his fairy sketches, urged Sutton to turn them into a book, and the rest is history.

Now a three-volume set which has sold more than 200,000 copies in four languages, part journal, part poetry and part mystery, *Iron Fairies* revolves around the adventures of a group of miners who live in tunnels amid the rich red ore of the Pilbara. One day, the miners begin making fairies, which exist in a state of suspended animation until they are touched by the first rays of the



Photo: Cedric Arnold

morning sun. Each fairy has a name, the wings of an insect, and a poem that details its provenance.

Sutton briefly opened prototype Iron Fairies bars in Perth and New York, before settling on Bangkok to perfect the concept. Entering Iron Fairies in full swing is always a trip: workers bustle about with files and moulds, leather aprons flapping. The titular fairies are everywhere, coarse yet delicate, dense yet ethereal, dusted in a delicious patina of rust and verdigris. A wrought-iron staircase spirals to nowhere and a New Orleans jazz band swings. Hand-tooled leather books spin fairy legends. Patrons dine on the kind of hamburgers you find in Australian milk bars and sip absinthe.

“Iron Fairies was my workshop,” Sutton says, gesturing around the bar. “Friends would come in to watch me work, and I’d get some wine, and then I put a little kitchen in so I could make some food. That was four years ago. Now I’m making money 24 hours a day. The place is always packed, and when the customers go home we make fairies.”

The original Bangkok Iron Fairies is no more, after the landlord,

unimpressed by the treasure within, turfed Sutton and his elves out. Earlier this year, its replacement launched, a couple of doors up the road. More than any of his bars, Iron Fairies has Sutton’s blood, sweat and tears soaked into every surface.

It is the Hong Kong incarnation of Iron Fairies that has him fired up for the moment.

We meet at Maggie Choo’s, Sutton’s orientalist bordello-speakeasy-cabaret-noodle joint confection in the basement of a Silom hotel, named for “a Shanghai cabaret owner who fled her hometown in 1931”, where haughty gaggles of Suzy Wongs glide through the air on velvet-roped swings. The myth-making and attention to detail are staggering, from the busts of Queen Victoria to the private vaults he claims were built by the East India Company in 1947.

Sutton’s mixologist, Joseph Boroski, is behind concoctions such as the Haymarket Hector (white pomegranate, mint, molasses, lime and sparkling wine), named for “a pimp, penance or whore’s minder”.

During my first interview with Sutton three years ago, he was at his most animated telling me about his



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ASHLEY SUTTON, ABOUT HIS JOURNEY FROM A WESTERN AUSTRALIA MINE TO BANGKOK

“crazy new project” in Silom – yet here he is, with his creation in full swing, and it seems he’d rather talk about anything else. “Maggie Choo’s is just another s\*\*\*hole to me. I brought Sanya [Souvanna Phouma, former creative director of Bangkok nightspot Bed Supperclub and son of a Lao prince] in to run the place.

“I’m also doing a big job for Asiatique, a 50-million-buck project, for the beer bloke [Thai beverage tycoon Charoen Sirivadhanabhakdi, owner of TCC Capital Land] and I’ve been commissioned to design a ‘restaurant centrepiece’ for the glitzy new Central Embassy luxury mall opening next year in Bangkok’s Wireless Road.

“The other big challenge is doing Iron Fairies in Hong Kong, in SoHo. It’s going to be amazing. Hong Kong is a nice city. I wish I’d moved there five years ago instead of Bangkok. The location is confidential due to competitors and the landlord not wanting to say until it’s close to opening, but it’s a short walk to Feather Boa [in SoHo].”

Sutton merely grins when pressed as to what we can expect from Iron Fairies Hong Kong. “It will be a stupidly crazy design, and I’ve got more than double the budget of the Bangkok Iron Fairies to work with. I looked at a lot of sites in Hong Kong but this was the only one that I thought would do justice to my concept and where it evolves from here.”

Typhoon Sutton is on a direct collision course with the Fragrant Harbour. He will leave in his wake, no doubt, a staggering work of heartbreaking genius that scales uncharted alps of cool, a hotspot with a waiting list as long as its cocktails, and a frenetic buzzing furore that requires time to subside.

And I’m done, done and I’m on to the next one...  
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