



# A CANVAS OF CUSTOMS

CHRONICLING THE LIFE OF ANGEL MANUEL SOTO, A REBELLIOUS, PASSIONATE MOVIE MAKER INKED IN CULTURE.

BY MIGUEL COSTA

**A**ngel Manuel Soto is a cinematographic rebel with a cause — a visionary who sees many similarities amidst his background, before the fame, and the protagonists that he brings to life on the big screen with films such as *Blue Beetle* (2023).

The success story behind this storyteller was shaped by a litany of risky decisions during his upbringing as a poverty-stricken teen on the streets of San Juan, Puerto Rico. Instances like trespassing onto reggaeton music video sets for a behind-the-scenes look at professional film production and shoplifting a novel written by Robert Rodriguez called *Rebel without a Crew* from Borders bookstore (Soto and Rodriguez would go on to share a laugh about this incident years later upon an introduction) are standout moments from his ascension over the years. But perhaps the most career-defining gamble he made thus far was when he decided to tattoo his hands.

"I got my hands tattooed as a guarantee to myself thinking, 'Now you have to make it work because nobody's going to hire you now,'" Soto recalled. "It was a motivation to keep me from conforming [because filmmaking] is all I wanted to do."

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Eventually, Soto's riskiness paid off. Subsequently, nearly a decade and a half of hustling as a freelance director in the Caribbean and stateside resulted in his independent film *La Granja* (2015) landing on the radar of Fantastic Fest Founder Tim League, who then offered him a premiere at his annual film festival in Austin, Texas. The critically acclaimed sports drama garnered attention from Javier Alvarado in Southern California, an agent with Creative Artists Agency who went on to become his manager.

Years after relocating to Los Angeles, the Puerto Rican native returned to his home island in May 2022 to make his breakthrough film *Blue Beetle*. The full-circle moment added \$20 million to Puerto Rico's economy while also manufacturing nearly \$76 million worth of jobs, some of whom included friends and crew members from his arthouse film *La Carta* (2010). Now, the same hands that used to slap

do something with that Juan Salgado style, but I want to do it with black and grey... My left arm is all patched with an engraved aesthetic. And my neck tattoo is from Nora. My wife has a sleeve from her."

Lyashko tattooed a kiwi flower on Soto's neck shortly after *Charm City Kings* (2020), starring Meek Mill and Jahi D'Allo Winston, wrapped filming in 2018 in Baltimore. Additionally, Soto, his Director of Photography Katelin Arizmendi, and the camera operator Stewart Cantrell, all inked themselves with friendship tattoos, inspired by the 12 O'clock Boys, the dirt bike riders from their movie, during the production phase. Soto's tattoo is a Molotov cocktail that says "12XII." Around that time, he also procured an inner lip tattoo of the word "help."

Soto's most elaborate tattoo is a chest piece based on artwork by Omar Velazquez. It includes a script that reads, "Honor, loyalty, and respect." Like many ink enthusiasts, he's also the owner of a "drunk tattoo." The whimsical memento is located just above the fingers on his right hand, spelling out the word "true."



Xolo Maridueña and director Angel Manuel Soto on the set of "BLUE BEETLE," a Warner Bros. Pictures release. Photo by Hopper Stone/SMSPS



Xolo Maridueña as Blue Beetle in Warner Bros. Pictures' action adventure "BLUE BEETLE." ©DC Comics

basslines for the ska-punk band Los Chéveres in the late 1990s are writing scripts, rolling cameras, and closing clapperboards for some of Hollywood's biggest motion pictures. You cannot depict Soto's timeline as a moviemaking aficionado without conveying his passion for tattoos because they go hand in hand.

At first glance, Soto looks like more of a rockstar than a filmmaker who spends much of his time out of the limelight. His long hair and black fingernail polish are supplanted only by the tattoos that cover nearly half of his upper body. The 41-year-old from the Santurce neighborhood of San Juan frequents a pair of his countrymen, Tattoos by Ché Owner Javier "Che" Rivera and Color Conspiracy Tattoo Gallery Owner Juan Salgado, to conduct the long tattoo sessions Soto compares to therapy.

The theme on his body carries a traditional Caribbean undertone with engravings, Catholic Nautical sensibilities, and random patches throughout his arms and upper torso. Soto also frequents Sashatattooing Gallery Co-Owner and Artist Nora Lyashko when he is stationed in L.A. for filming.

"I think I've done all of [my tattoos] around the island," Soto said. "The biggest ones have been with Ché and Juan Salgado. I'm trying to



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Soto is currently in Los Angeles preparing for *Wrecking Crew*, a buddy-comedy starring Jason Momoa and Dave Bautista. It may take a while for Soto's filmography to surpass his growing tattoo collection, but even though pre-production is keeping him busy, he is already thinking of his next tattoo.

"The next one is a face tattoo, but my wife is like, 'no' (laughs); I've always wanted something little [on my face], like the 787 area code of Puerto Rico next to my eyebrow," Soto said. "Or my mom and father's initials.

He added, "There are a couple of things that are very iconographical from our Puerto Rican revolutionary legacy. But what I like the most is a native name for Puerto Rico besides 'Borinquen,' and it's 'Oubao Moin.' That means 'Island of Blood.' It was a name that the Taínos (the indigenous people of the island) called it. I've always liked that way of honoring our ancestors."