

Creative Drive

Multi award-winning, WA-based, JahRoc Furniture thrives on creativity and a drive for quality, underpinned by artistic collaboration

By Rob Ditessa

"I think it's just about being different, and obviously quality is really important to us, making sure it's really built well," says Gary Bennett. Gary established JahRoc Furniture, a bespoke fine furniture business in partnership with his friend, and subsequently brother-in-law, and cabinet maker David Paris.

"We offered — pretty much from day one — a lifetime guarantee on our work," he continues. "I don't even know if anyone still does that. All the old guys in the industry just said 'you guys are crazy, that's going to bite you'. But we've had it all the time. We do get the odd claim, but we fix it or re-build it. I've even brought back a piece from Sydney, fixed it, and sent it back. We've found that type of commitment to our product for our clients builds a lifetime bond that keeps them coming back."

Solid Jarrah
9ft Gun made
by Jim Banks
and Gary
Bennett — 2010

The Family
Tree Dining
Table — Butson

From the start Gary wanted his work to be different, something that hadn't been seen before. In his design work, he "wasn't going to be led by any one influence, and just wanted to come up with new work, and to keep it fresh," he says. He learned the art of design, he muses, through a sort of osmosis, by absorbing the shapes and colours of the world around him.

Gary's collaborations with a variety of artists helped him learn how to see through an artist's eye. "One particular guy, Shaun Atkinson, taught me how to see things I'd been looking at all my life but had not noticed," he says. Shaun, the internationally acclaimed Western Australian artist, was noted for his pared-back silhouettes of the landscape and seascapes he painted using evocative shapes and colours.

Shaun's studio and Gary's workshop had a similar view, overlooking a beach, which eventually motivated both to collaborate on an exhibition of work inspired by the landscape surrounding their respective studios, only a few kilometres apart.

It was through this collaboration that Gary developed a deeper understanding of how to capture and reflect the colours, lines, and shapes, in the vista and geography around him. Shaun would point out a feature of the landscape or seascape in the way Gary was drawing a design. "I'd look up and there it was in the light or the scene in front of the workshop. I was sort of doing it unwittingly, I guess," he says.

Their collaborative exhibition also included work by leading Australian poet John Kinsella. It was one of several artistic co-operations JahRoc accomplished, and this one took them to Italy.

"The [exhibition] in Italy was pretty cool because we were invited by the state government to go. They obviously saw the value of the project that we did as we were reflecting a real 'sense of place' in that

work. In Italy, we were really just showing our work, so we didn't have to go there and sell furniture, which was great," Gary explains.

"Schools wanted me to talk to their students all about design, and timber. It was ironic really as I'd never really done that well at school. Yet here they were inviting me back to talk to their students. I was even asked to talk to the Business students at the University of Western Australia. Crazy really," he laughs.

One of the awards won by JahRoc was the Wesfi Noel Hearn Fellowship Award for 'Outstanding Contribution to the Development of an Export Market for WA Furniture'. The award, says the WA government's heritage website, "is given to an outstanding individual whose further personal development will benefit the growth of the furniture industry in WA".

Gary reflects, "The Fellowship was really cool to win. The Hearn family were an integral part of the West Australian furniture industry so I felt very honoured to be the inaugural recipient of the that award. The study tour of the Japanese timber and furniture industry had a profound and long-lasting effect on me personally and on our business."

He adds, "The FIAA [now ACFA] Best of the Best awards also felt extremely rewarding to win. In the context of the Australian furniture industry, JahRoc was a very small player. So, when we were announced as the recipient of that award for the first time in 2003, I just couldn't believe it. We went on to back it up with wins in that category again in 2005 and 2009."

As they rode the wave to success, Gary and David, who are both keen surfers, embarked on a collaboration with Jim Banks, the surfing identity and surfboard shaper. JahRoc made pieces and furniture, and surfboards, with a surfboard theme that showed off the rich colours and grain textures of local timber. The project was aptly titled "Always Offshore".



Sue's Chaise — 2002



L-R David and Joanne
Paris, Lara and Gary
Bennett — 2022

Another project, a commission from Sue Ulrich and painter Bill Anderson, put Gary to the test but also showcased his design and making skills, and his fortitude. The commission was for a chaise lounge, but Gary had never designed or made any soft furnishings. With imagination and his innate skills, and the determination of the client, he accomplished the work, and won the Excellence in Lounge Furniture in the National Furniture Industry of Australia Awards. He tells *Connect*, "Sue's Chaise", as it was named, went on to take out the Best of the Best over all categories in 2002, which we felt was an amazing achievement to be recognised by our peers in that way."

JahRoc's creativity and drive for quality has been sustained by artistic collaborations as well as clients attracted from related businesses. In their previous location in York, an historic town located 100km east of Perth, where they renovated an old mill building, they eventually were sought out by 11 small concerns to share the building; one purpose was a music venue. The musicians, he remembers, came and walked through to see what they were doing and put in orders. They crafted a bed for singer Marcia Hines, and other furniture for folk singer John Williamson.

"People think we moved to Margaret River because it was good business down here," Gary continues with a laugh, "but that wasn't the case. I moved here because I liked to go surfing, and there just happened to be a market here for what we did. We were extremely lucky in that there are people from