

# FOUND OBJECTS

BORN OF THE OCEAN AND THE SKY, AND WRITTEN  
IN THE SAND ...HOW ONE FURNITURE MAKER  
CREATED AN AUSTRALIAN SUCCESS STORY

by Alan Munro

The title on his business card is 'Designer/Maker' but you get the feeling Gary Bennett would be equally content if it said 'Surfer', or 'Beachcomber.' Add 'Managing Director' to the mix and you begin to get close to defining the way this man has managed to create a life with no discernible line between work and play.

And, along the way, built a very successful business. Together with David Paris, his business partner and long time friend, Bennett runs Jah Roc Galleries, a West Australian company he describes as "...a bespoke furniture maker."

It's an accurate enough description, but it gives only a tantalising taste of the true flavour of their unique approach to designing, creating and selling fine furniture.

Jah Roc has become something of an icon in West Australia, and overseas, their award-winning designs feted in newspaper articles and profiles in the extravagant prose more often reserved for poets and painters.

"...showcasing Western Australia's most iconic natural resources (wood, stone and iron) to create 'legendary' pieces of studio furniture for the collectors' market, whose very materiality articulated a characteristically Western Australian personality."

And, "In painting and poetry, they have grasped the thread of the Silhouette series' undulating wave pattern and woven it into their own creativity."

It's poetic, evocative, passionate and inspiring. And it's all true. Gary Bennett does see himself, in part, as an artist. They do design and make furniture that is deeply, and deliberately, evocative of the time and place they live in. They are also very passionate about what they do, and there's no disputing that their work is frequently both inspired and inspirational.

They're proud of those things. Very proud. But they are equally as proud that Jah Roc is a solid, profitable business that employs some twenty people, and is growing every year.

This is not a couple of blokes scratching a living making one-off furniture in the shed. Both Bennett, a one-time carpenter, and ex-cabinet maker Paris are equally at home in the role of businessman as they are with the part of creative designers and manufacturers.

"We did start out as a purely 'one-off' studio," says Gary. "But I guess now you could say we straddle the fence of mainstream and studio furniture. It's worked well. Certainly for a decade we've had growth in sales of around 25 per cent a year."

They are not alone in wanting to avoid the rat race of volume production and competition from imports by seeking a niche in customised products, but they have been much more successful at it than most. So what are they doing differently?

You could say that what they have done is to create a story. It begins with a carpenter who got bored and thought it might be good to have a go at making furniture.

"I worked on few building contracts, travelled round Australia, spent a few years fitting kitchens, before getting bored with it all," recalls Gary.

"I remember walking into a gallery in Yallingup and seeing what a couple of furniture makers were doing and thinking, 'that's what I want to do.' That's when I decided to give making furniture a go."

That was back in 1987 and from the beginning, despite having no formal training Gary was determined to design all his own furniture. Call that decision 'chapter one' in the Jah Roc story, a recognition of the consumer's desire even then for something that is unique and 'theirs' alone.

A year later Gary joined forces with his surfing mate David Paris, moving his small operation out of his backyard and into Jah Roc's first factory, in Perth, where they stayed for seven years. A cabinet maker, Dave Paris was at the time producing and installing kitchens.

"We built the artistic side of the business using the kitchen business as a bread and butter line to pay the way," says Gary.

Both were also determined to use recycled wood exclusively, knowing

that the days of cutting down ancient forest trees had to end. That decision gave them chapter two in their developing story — history and a sense of time.

One of the first WA furniture companies to recognise the marketability of recycled timber, they felt that if the furniture made from these 'found objects' — salvaged from jetties, bridges, wool stores, or from ancient fallen trees — spoke to them of a sense of continuity and place, it would resonate just as strongly with their prospective customers.

It did. For somebody who as a child had perhaps walked on the timbers of a century old jetty, the knowledge that their new dining table had been created from those timbers creates a powerful emotional connection with the piece. Jah Roc has used that connection to create a very strong point of difference between their products and those made by others.

To this point everything they had made had been one off custom designs. "We knew we didn't want to be mainstream mass producers. We wanted everything to be 'special,'" says Gary. "But we'd been battling away trying to make a buck from one offs and we realised that we had to scale everything up a bit to be viable."

"We started to design things that worked together, but we designed them all specifically around the materials we were using. For instance we bought the old Bunbury jetty and we designed pieces that would work with the sizes of the wood we got."

"Even though we made a lot of tables out of the wood from that jetty, and each one was unique and numbered, they also related to each other in their design concept."

With that change in strategy they were able to make enough pieces to begin selling them in galleries around South-West Australia, bringing their work to the attention of a much wider market.

Chapter three was written soon after and represented an important, perhaps a critical, turning point for the developing company.

"We were renting a little factory in Perth at that time but we wanted our own place," says Gary. "So we bought the old flour mill in York."

The four-storey building became not only their new workshop but the first Jah Roc Gallery, a place where they could effectively display their work in an appropriate setting. The old mill had its own ambience, and its location in the historic tourist town created the perfect backdrop to showcase the history of the pieces.

It also brought the ideal audience; tourists with the time and leisure, and the inclination, to absorb and enjoy the story of how the collections on show had been created.

From the beginning they had created patterns, jigs and detailed plans and costings for every piece they have ever made. "For every design I've ever done, David knows exactly how long every process takes and how much it cost," says Gary. "We have detailed plans and written notes for every process."

That information has not only helped defeat the age-old problem of accurately costing a custom piece, it proved invaluable when their venture into retailing dramatically lifted the volume of customers wanting their pieces.

"Really customised design would now be only about ten per cent of our business. Adapting our standard designs would probably be more like forty per cent. The other fifty per cent, people just buy the set designs off the floor."

They encouraged local artists and craftspeople to display their work in the new gallery, which gave them a way to show their own work in more 'natural' settings, and provided a healthy additional income stream from sales of artworks.

Five years ago, another chapter in the Jah Roc story was completed when Gary decided that York was just too far from his beloved surf and moved to WA's Margaret River region. Another tourist area, with a reputation for superb surfing, fine wines and chic cafés, it was a logical place to open the second Jah Roc Gallery.

"We were so well structured in the York gallery that it was really easy to replicate it in Margaret River. And when we opened it our business immediately doubled."

Their 'story' began to pick up pace. They produced leaflets and brochures for their designs, encouraging visitors to the gallery to read about the genesis of the pieces they were admiring.

Cleverly written to evoke the sense of history imbued in the materials, and to emphasise the uniqueness of each piece, the professionally produced promotional material also invoked the sense of place and the unique qualities and landscapes of Western Australia's southwest regions that Gary, a born and bred West Australian, brings to all his designs.

Quintessentially Australian, the designs, and their story, appealed not only to the local tourists who visited the York and Margaret River galleries, they resonated with overseas visitors, those who wanted to take home something more than a fluffy kangaroo or a boomerang.

Jah Roc designs have since been shipped all over the world, and the company's international and interstate sales are now a substantial part of their business, giving Jah Roc an enviably strong profile overseas.

As the demand for the company's product has increased, and the sources of their preferred materials become more scarce, there have been some inevitable changes to the way in which they produce their furniture.

They still use salvaged hardwoods but advances in saw technology and blades have allowed them to cut logs and recycled materials into 5 mm slices rather than their previous 50 mm thicknesses.

By overlaying these slices onto plantation grown poplar plywood, using the high tech glues now available, they have increased recovery by up to five times while still delivering an essentially solid piece of furniture.

It has meant they can now get a full collection or range of furniture out of a single fallen log. Their latest range, the award-winning Silhouette Series (see sidebar, *Catching the Wave*) is a perfect example of how this marriage of technology and intelligent design can result in a product that captures the imagination, and the cash, of the consumer.

The story remains intact. "...an entire suite of furniture created from a single 300-year old log recovered from the Boyup Brook" is a compelling message in these days of environmental awareness. In a practical sense, the poplar core has helped cut production and material costs, and reduced the weight of individual pieces, making them even more economic to ship interstate and overseas.

Surprisingly, Gary says that the attraction to overseas tourists has been not only the uniqueness and distinctly West Australian flavour of Jah Roc's pieces, it has also been economic.

"We've got products in the gallery that we can land door to door to London for less than my floor price. Once somebody is spending more than say \$10,000 the GST generally pays the freight."



ABOVE: An earlier design, the 'Reef' collection's clean lines and use of metal reflects the severe landscape and the materials of Western Australia.

LEFT: The 'Roo' rocker was inspired by the hundreds of kangaroos to be found in the inland regions of WA.

Right: A couple of surfer dudes get serious about a new Jah Roc design. Gary Bennett (left) and David Paris in their York factory/workshop.



Gary points out that a British tourist looking at a dining suite worth \$12,000 in Jah Roc Galleries can, with the GST removed for export, land that suite in England for \$12,000 or less.

“Even if they could buy the same thing in England, which they can’t because of the materials, they would be paying around the same amount in pounds sterling,” he says.

“So they’ve just saved themselves at least \$8,000. They can come to Australia for a holiday, buy a \$12,000 suite and the savings would pay for their holiday.”

The potential for the tourist trade excites him. “I reckon there’s huge potential in this kind of tourism for furniture makers like us,” he says. “We just don’t promote it .”

The final chapter in the Jah Roc story is yet to be written, but the setting is likely to be elsewhere, as they look to ‘export’ their unique designs and the retail concept that has been so successful for them in WA.

“We’re getting people saying they’d like to have a Jah Roc gallery in their town,” Gary says. “We see it getting bigger and bigger because it’s so easy to replicate the retail experience we’ve created here.”

He likes the idea of Jah Roc Galleries on the Sunshine Coast, or in Byron Bay; in all of those iconic places where distinctive landscapes reflect the elements of ‘place’ that feature so strongly in Gary’s designs.

“We’re not so hung up on the making as we used to be,” he says. “We used to think we were the only people in the world who could make our work but we’re not.

“You get good craftsmen working to our designs and jigs using our specially

developed processes and it becomes a highly scalable operation,” he says. The craftsmanship is still vitally important but they have learned that it’s the design and the marketing that really makes the difference.

“How an East Coast gallery might develop I don’t know but if we found the right people in Noosa or somewhere I’m sure we could work with them to create something appropriate to the area.”

He’s certain his designs will still appeal to the markets targeted by Jah Roc, whether they’re seen in Noosa or Margaret River.

“The coastal theme we have in the design of something like the Silhouette series for instance can be found all around the coast. It’s not exclusive to WA, it’s as much an Australian theme as anything.

“We’ve found out we’re pretty good at the retailing side of things. And that’s probably the next way to scale up.”

As for design, he’ll continue to work to develop creations that are drawn from the ever changing moods of the ocean and the unique landscapes of Australia.

The success of the Silhouette range, a collaborative project which brought Bennett together with architect and designer Ian Bailey, textile designer Annie Georgeson, artist Shaun Atkinson and internationally renowned Western Australian poet John Kinsella, has underlined the value of inviting others to contribute to the design process.

There are likely to be more of these collaborations with local and international artists and designers as Gary Bennett seeks to express the authentic spirit of Australia in his furniture.



## CATCHING THE WAVE

THE STORY OF SILHOUETTES:  
FURNITURE INSPIRED BY THE  
MARGARET RIVER REGION

The ‘story’ Bennett and Paris have created is, of course, a tale of a brand as much as it is the story of designing and making fine furniture.

It’s not yet Nike or Holden by any means, but, through a combination of a passion for excellence, good design, creativity and smart marketing, Jah Roc is now a well defined and recognisable brand that consumers, in Australia and around the world, find easy to understand and relate to. Few small furniture makers can say the same thing.

It’s a distinctly Australian story, and one that has been underscored by the more than forty industry awards Jah Roc have collected. Gary Bennett and David Paris don’t yet know how it will end but they intend to enjoy the rest of the tale. And their story may yet turn out to be a ‘manual’ for the future of an Australian furniture manufacturing sector under threat.

From the balcony of his Margaret River studio Gary can see the surf is pumping, and there’s just time to catch a wave. Before he heads off to the beach he pauses to offer one last thought.

“There’s an opportunity at the moment to step outside the square and turn this industry around. Everything happens for a reason and perhaps China having a crack at us right now is going to make us all stop and think and see what we can do better.

“I shudder to think of family businesses going down the dunny after maybe two generations. But the writing’s on the wall and we’re all going to have to do things differently in the future.”

The Silhouettes collection had its genesis in a forgotten Jarrah log which Gary Bennett found at Boyup Brook. Perhaps three hundred years old when it fell, the exquisitely mottled grains, blushing pink and rich brown hues of its wood told him that here was a rare beauty and strength. A beauty deserving of rebirth.

From that ancient log, Gary Bennett and architect-designer Ian Bailey set themselves the challenge of creating the entire suite of furniture that makes up the award-winning Silhouettes collection.

Working from Bennett’s Margaret River studio, as the design collaboration progressed the works began increasingly to reflect the influence of the surrounding landscape. Taking the studio’s view of coastal sand dunes and ocean as their primary inspiration, the designers isolated a hand-carved ‘wave’ motif that seemed iconic of both land and sea.

“One detail in a couple of Gary’s existing pieces kept drawing my attention” said Bailey, “a lovely, subtle ‘wave’ line incorporated into the end profile of solid slabs used in desk tops. It seemed to me to reflect this landscape of rolling heath-covered dunes, and the ever moving swells of the Indian Ocean as they approached this coast...”

This wave detail would become the stylistic link for the various works comprising the Silhouettes collection, and the inspiration for Bennett to continue exploring the work’s conceptual development through collaboration with a visual artist, Shaun Atkinson, and with poet John Kinsella.

The Silhouettes collection features more metal than in previous Jah Roc furniture, and environmentally friendly cores of lightweight plantation timbers to provide strong internal structures.

The upholstery for the collection’s chairs, ottomans and chaise lounge makes use of new Australian technology — a ‘non-woven’ process developed by Macquarie Textiles, using pure wool to produce felted fabric many times faster than traditional weaving methods. This ‘Fusion’ range has been designed by Bailey’s partner, Annie Georgeson, and is distributed by Radford Textiles throughout Australia.

The creative collaborations that led to the Silhouettes collection represent a unique cross-disciplinary approach to furniture design that attempts to articulate a specific regional identity. The project has cemented Jah Roc’s already formidable reputation as an innovator in contemporary Western Australian furniture design.

The Silhouettes project was initiated by FORM: Contemporary Craft and Design and was supported by the Rio Tinto WA Future Fund. Support was also provided by the Department of Local Government and Regional Development of Western Australia. This description of the Silhouettes design process has been abridged from material written by Victoria Laurie, a Perth-based feature writer.



PICTURED: Some of the pieces in the award-winning Silhouettes Collection. The coffee table (above) shows the ‘wave’ detail that became the stylistic link between each piece, leading to the waveform shape of pieces such as the chaise (far left).

The Silhouette screen, which also features the wave motif, is shown on page 35.

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