



THINGS OF STONE AND WOOD

How does a penniless chippy from Busselton become one of Western Australia's leading furniture designers and exporters? Gary Bennett, one half of the renowned Jah Roc team, describes his journey from near bankruptcy to a lifestyle that includes exhibitions in Dubai and Florence one day, and surfing in Margaret River the next. **WORDS** DAVID HOGAN

Not so much an unlikely success story as an unconventional one, Gary Bennett is based with partner David Paris in Margaret River and also runs a successful furniture retail store in York that sells 70 percent of its products interstate and overseas. But it's not all surf and sun. A passion for his product, decades of toil, great support from family and friends, lots of luck and, above all, a maniacal determination to succeed, have laid strong foundations.

Speaking to Gary in his Margaret River home and workshop, it is clear that his journey is far from over. WA has the potential to be a major player on the international design scene and his role in that journey is just beginning.



How did you start out?

I started at 19 as a carpenter, building both here and in Queensland. It was pretty funny, over here carpenters either pitch roofs or hang doors and that's about it. So, we got up to this place in North Queensland to build houses but none of us really knew how. We worked it out by going around the other houses at the end of each day and looking up in the roofs and at the walls to see how they actually put them together.

There was a husband-and-wife team up there who used to build a house a week – dead set, a whole house once a week. And the three of us – fit, strong young blokes – were lucky if we could knock one over in a month. This was in about 1981.

It was good fun. We'd build these houses (in) bare feet, shorts, no shirts. It'd be 45 degrees out in the middle of the bloody desert. Then I went to Victoria and got a job building a surf shop for (former Skyhooks lead singer) Shirley Strachan on Phillip Island. Strachan was a chippy as well. So, he'd come back from his tours and whack the knacker bag on, and we built this really great cedar building. That's where I sort of honed my skills with wood.

After that I came back to WA and put in kitchens and I just got sick of it. I liked the idea of being in control of everything with furniture. I came down south and saw Gunyulgup Gallery where Robbie Malcolm and Jeff Juniper were building all this rustic stuff and thought, well that's it, this is me. At the time I was making about \$1500 a week as a chippy fitting kitchens, which was bloody good money 18 years ago. But I chucked it in and said "that's it" and went out to the shed and worked for nothing for nearly two years straight – a year in my shed in the backyard in Scarborough and the second year Dave joined me in my workshop in Osborne Park. Dave was a mate I met in Queensland when I was bumming around over there. He came back from a world trip and was a cabby (cabinet maker). We chucked in \$5000 each and that's how we started.

Where did you source your materials?

Old houses being pulled down around Scarborough. Most builders were happy if you just took it away because otherwise it had to go to the tip and they had to pay a tipping fee.



TOP LEFT: Gary at work, 1988. TOP RIGHT: Gary and Dave Paris at work. ABOVE: The first Jah Roc coffee table, 1987. BELOW: Items from the Reef collection.





Gary building the family home in Margaret River.

“Once these Rasta’s turned up in York – straight from the Caribbean, dead set, out of the jungle with dread locks, asking, ‘where’s the Jah man?’.”

for something missing in the market. Then it was back to our original roots, making rustic furniture.

We made the range, put it into about four galleries, and then Dave and I went, “What are we gonna do while we’re waiting for it to sell?”. So we went surfing for two weeks – locked the shed up and stuck a sign on the door.

We came back and everything had sold, every single thing, and we had a fax full of orders saying, “we want this and we want that”. And that was really when it all took off.

Where did the name Jah Roc come from?

A mate of mine from Queensland and I used to go out and get this stone from out of the Toodyay quarry – big green slabs. I started making coffee tables with Toodyay stone tops and jarrah bases. So Jah is the architectural abbreviation for jarrah, and rock was rock without a k.

A lot of people thought we were Rastafarians. Once these Rasta’s turned up in York – straight from the Caribbean, dead set, out of the jungle with dread locks, asking, “Where’s the Jah man?”.

They ended up having a bloody three-day reggae weekend in our shed.

How did you end up in York?

I went to introduce Lara (my wife-to-be) to Mum and Dad and I saw this ‘Save the old York flourmill’ flyer on Mum’s table. We ended up buying it for about \$160,000. We got enough wood out of one of the sheds in that first year to almost pay for the building and in the meantime we restored the mill.

Did you do all the work yourselves?

Yeah, Lara and I lived in a tent under the sheds in the first nine months and Dave and (wife) Jo bought a house in town. But it was hard yakka because we worked seven days a week. But we loved it, you know, we were just married. What else do you do with a new wife but put her in a tent and make her work? (laughs.)

ABOVE LEFT: The York workshop. ABOVE RIGHT: Gary and Dave Paris selecting timber. BELOW: Chaise lounge and “Scorpion” desk.

Where did you go from there?

We ended up in a work shed in Osborne Park. We bummed along for five or six years selling our work in galleries. We went to the US and eventually ended up in this high-profile gallery in West Hollywood. They sold our work there for a couple of years, and we did pretty well but then there were the Hollywood riots and the gallery just packed up and moved to Toronto. Then Dave and I did a big project in Broome for a crayfisherman friend who apparently had plenty of money. He gave us \$10,000 and said, “C’mon boys, I want you to run two shifts – I need this stuff done really quick”. We went into it and then this guy went broke. That was the last \$10,000 we ever got. He owed us \$50,000 for building cabinets in a resort in Broome and we owed \$45,000 to creditors for materials. We were stuffed. So I wrote this letter and divided what I owed everybody by six and said, “Look I’ll pay you off over six months”. Only one of them asked for interest. It took us two years. In the meantime I did fly to Broome and pinch as many cabinets as I could get back. My lawyer said, “Look, I can’t tell you to do this but this is what I’d do”. I had to break into this resort, and the cops drove up, saw me getting in through the window and just kept driving, they obviously knew that everybody in town had done their dough with this guy. So we took what we could back. By refitting them we made enough money to sort of trade out of the debt.

That was in 1992. It was horrific. Our accountants sat us down and said, “Boys, you know, it’s over. You’ve been at it for six or seven years, you’re going nowhere fast, you owe all this money”. So we did a trip down south, it was a bit of a surfing trip, and we drove around and looked at all the galleries





Wanting to reflect the region, we decided to run with the wave detail, because it evokes the ocean and the hills.” *Gary on his exhibition, Silhouettes*

ABOVE: Press laminated Boyup Brook jarrah and Tasmanian oak screen.
BELOW: Beech and Boyup Brook jarrah chaise – both items from Silhouettes exhibition.



How did you make a success out of a retail shop in York?

In the beginning we just opened the doors and invited all our customers up. Our customers loved the idea, they all rallied around and the people of York told their mates. We did go well for the first 12 months, but then it fell in a bit of a hole. By about '95 we were battling again.

I talked to my old man, because dad used to help out around the gallery, and he gave me this name and said, “This bloke can help you get your sales up”. So I rang Brent Stewart from Market Equity. They’re a market research company. Brent set these targets and I looked at the five-year plan and said, “Mate, there’s no way we’ll hit those targets in five years or a million years in York, we just haven’t got a hope in hell”. Within two years of doing that plan, which was about '96, we hit the five-year target and exceeded it. It was all pretty basic stuff. It was definitely our turning point. So by about '98 we had the building virtually done up, business was going well and I was starting to get bored. I’d get time off and what do you do in York? I did the Avon Decent two or three times and got bored paddling up and down the river, so I went down and bought a block in Margaret River. The move down there was never driven by business at all. I thought we’d just move down, build a workshop off the house so I could work from home and keep in touch by email and phone.

Where are your biggest markets?

The UK is the biggest market, but we do get a lot of Americans, a lot from Hong Kong and Singapore. I think the furthest we’ve shipped is Alaska. Orders of around \$100,000 aren’t uncommon.

Tell me about your exhibition, Silhouettes.

It is an exhibition of furniture inspired by the Margaret River region. It all started with a trip to Milan. That trip planted the seed that we need to create things that are of a region, because in Italy everything’s of the region. Then Lynda Dorrington (from FORM) organised the Designing Futures program, which was the nail in the coffin for me. I thought “That’s it, we have to do something that speaks of our region”, because everyone loves this place and taking home koala bears and stuff is a big cliché. So Lynda introduced me to this guy called Ian Bailey. He had a lot of traditional ideas and it really wasn’t my bag, but technically he had a lot of things that I didn’t have, like the holistic approach to creating a range. So I teamed up with him and he did three trips to my workshop and after about 18 months came up with the right ideas. Wanting to reflect the region, we decided to run with the wave detail, because it evokes the ocean and the hills. I had been doing a lot of work with the artist Shaun Atkinson who agreed to paint a panel for our exhibition. He went mad and painted 24 panels that totalled 15m in length, which is the biggest work he’s ever done. I didn’t care if we sold it or not, I wasn’t doing it for commercial reasons but we ended up selling it, which was great.

In the catalogue we wanted some poetry that could somehow stitch the two together (paintings and furniture). John Kinsela happened to be here on his summer vacation so we thought we would ask the pinnacle of Australian poetry if we could nick a couple of his poems (laughs). So I rang him up and told him what it was about, I told him about this sense of place. When I told him this whole exhibition’s made out of one log he came down and saw us and we ended up with about 200 lines of his poetry. It’s on the wall and goes right through the catalogue. For us this was the last articulation of this sort of sense of place. We’ve got it in the furniture, if you don’t pick it up in the furniture, or in the painting then here’s the poem as well. After all that, I think the buggers realised what we were trying to say (laughs).

Where is the exhibition going next?

Dubai and Florence. We’ve been invited by the state government to represent our region, the South-West, in Tuscany.

Where to for you from here?

I’ll never stop. It’s in my blood – being able to create in my house and surf when I want. If the surf’s good I’m out there, which works out about three days a week. ■