

# GARY BENNETT & DAVID PARIS: JUST LIKE THE ROLLING STONES?



**B**rothers in law Gary Bennett and David Paris are friends first and last. If they weren't friends, says Paris, they would probably have ended up hating each other. It was only some eight years ago they formed a furniture making company called Jah-Roc, and, like jarrah and stone, the partners complement one another despite being in many ways dissimilar.

Gary Bennett sounds just as you would expect from the open face and burly build in the photo. Voluble, he is extroverted, full of ideas and understated conviction. There aren't too many people who tell you, without even raising their voice, that they're going to build a family empire, and that they just 'want to be the best in the world at what we do'—and sound perfectly believable.

Bennett and Paris seem to have the perfect business 'marriage' with Paris playing 'ying' to Bennett's 'yang'. Bennett is the front man and creative designer who sources and selects the beautiful timbers they use. Paris is the behind the scenes organiser, who according to Bennett, 'wanted right

from the start to organise and regiment what we did. He even prefers straight lines and is a real perfectionist.' 'If it were all up to Gary', Paris says, 'the place would fall apart'. Bennett is the one who says 'let's buy this, let's do that'. Paris is the one who figures out how to do it and makes sure it happens. He says he is "'Keith Richards" to Gary Bennett's "Mick Jagger"', though, he hastily adds, 'we're both much better looking of course'. After eight years building the business, working up to 18 hour days, Bennett and Paris don't look like they've even broken a sweat, where others might have suffered cardiac arrest.

When David Paris married Gary Bennett's sister Joanne, the bloodlines of the future family empire were secured. Self confessed workaholics, the pair are now, Paris says, working on changing that, as both have wives and two toddlers apiece. Bennett's mother and father also work in the business, after all, says Bennett, it was from them he inherited his extreme work ethic.

'We met in 1981 surfing in Queensland, when we were both bumming around Australia, bludging on the Sunshine Coast', tells Bennett. David Paris continued on travelling around the world for the next three years and then, at one of those crossroads of life (the end of a love affair), suddenly changed course, came back to Australia and went to visit Bennett who he had continued to keep in touch with. Paris, a cabinetmaker, joined the former carpenter, in a 'backyard operation' in Scarborough, Perth.

It was another surfing trip which spelt an end to the kitchen cabinet work which they had both grown to hate.

Bennett took a sketchbook along with his board and two weeks later, the pair returned relaxed and armed with a series of designs which would become Jah-Roc's 'Outback' range, still one of their best sellers. The pair set to and produced samples which were then shipped out to four or five galleries 'on appro'. 'Gone surfin' again' for another week they came back to find every piece had sold. A bread and butter line was born and kitchen days were over. 'Why would we', Bennett recounts: 'want to make chipboard boxes with plastic edgestrips and then spend three or four days grovelling around on our knees putting them in someone's house?'

The business developed from there, but not without growing pains. Some years ago they were advised to close the doors when the number-crunching husband of a former secretary 'pulled the business apart' and concluded it was going nowhere fast. Bennett recalls 'David was starting to wonder, but I said no: we had a dream'.

After the dream the rest is history. In 1993 the company relocated to York, a popular tourist destination about a hundred kilometres east of Perth. The four storey brick Old York Flour Mill, a fine, once derelict, example of early Australian industrial architecture now houses gallery and display area. Furniture is made in an adjacent shed which was formerly a grainstore. An on-site blacksmith forges the wrought iron detailing which features on some of the furniture.

Buying the mill was another of Bennett's passionate ideas and turned out, David Paris reflects, to be one their best moves. For the first nine months





Photo: Robert Garvey

**The Jah-Roc team: back row from left: Geoff Stephenson, Thomas Brooks, David Paris, Gary Bennett, Zachariah Smith, Matthew Hammill. Seated: Sandra King, Kymm Luff, Quintin Skippings. Opposite: The Old York Flour Mill**

they and their young families lived on site in tents in one of the adjacent sheds and worked night and day restoring the mill. The main building was re-roofed, floors, doors and windows were patched, rebuilt and, in some cases, replaced. The old grain chutes were left as architectural fea-

tures and give a great deal of character to the displays of furniture and other artworks which are housed about them.

How to make money out of making limited editions and one-offs is a question which bedevils many craftspeople and

artists. According to Bennett, making one-off pieces is 'egotistical', even 'showing off', so it's a matter of 'getting a reputation, making it big-time, so you can justify the worth of the prices you need to charge.

Jah-Roc manages to combine the pro-



duction of regular lines with the making of what the company refers to variously as 'masterpieces', 'hallmark', 'glamour' and 'legendary' pieces. Signature pieces such as the 'Boomer' or the 'Nature Display' cabinet are really only the tip of Jah-Roc's iceberg of production. The second only 'Boomer' ever made went recently to Switzerland for the sum of \$8,000. There is no intention to mass produce these 'company hallmarks'.

You might expect to see a little conservatism in bread and butter lines such as Jah-Roc's 'Outback' and 'Ironwood' ranges, each item of which, incidentally, is signed and numbered. Instead you will see asymmetry, organic forms, features made of what others call faults in timber, and quirky references to plant life, animal forms and aboriginal icons.

The 'Boomer' rocking chair (recently renamed 'Roo Silhouette' by Jah-Roc's advertising agency) was drawn in simple mimicry of the line of a bounding kangaroo. 'Returning Images' is a free-standing mirror shaped like an inverted tear drop, which rests on boomerang shaped supports of black granite. Carved lianas or native vines coil over other pieces such as Jah-Roc's 'Natural Display' cabinet. Germinating tendrils extend across the head of 'Life Begins', a king size four poster bed made from jarrah reclaimed from Bunbury Jetty.

Recycled, reclaimed or salvaged timbers often used, as are natural edged timber sections which make no secret of the evidence of insect, fire or human attack. The origin of the timber



**'Life Begins', jarrah reclaimed from Bunbury Jetty, WA.**

is marked on each piece; if reclaimed from buildings, bridges or warehouses for example, their date of building is also branded onto the piece.

With characteristic understatement Bennett says of their three years at York 'we've had a good run'. What is now a thriving business with an annual turnover of around \$750,000 and seven employees, has developed largely from the efforts of the partners who have 'picked up' their sales, marketing and managerial nous on the way. There have been a few sales courses and seminars on the way, like the one with real estate guru Tom Hopkins, and the course on TQM (total quality management) which had some influence. Bennett is driven by the conviction that the pair, highly skilled, should be able to command the sort of by-the-minute rates commanded by solicitors and accountants. To this end the company now has its own system of

accountability and linked incentive schemes.

The days on the factory floor are measured in quarter hourly increments—seven and a half minutes rounds up, below that doesn't count. Everyone has to keep a record of what they do and the time it takes, but Paris claims the system helps motivate staff to achieve personal bests. 'You can't price a job accurately if you don't add up all the time—that includes designing, thinking about it, every process along the way. And if it takes the guy next to you fourteen hours to make a table you might start to wonder why it's taking you a lot longer.' Even the hours of a beginning furniture maker must be charged out at \$55 to \$60 dollars to allow

for every single cost of production.

Of course, quality is not to be sacrificed in pursuit of record times. If the job is no good it takes even more time to fix. But, if a maker can complete a job to the high standards demanded, under the average time allotted, that person accrues holiday time and bonuses. Staff incentives also include a profit sharing scheme and being able to stay at the company holiday house.

David Paris jokes that he has dubbed 1996 as 'the year of the meeting' and indeed, communication is probably the key, he feels, to harmonious relations between partners, employees, families, if not the whole world! On Mondays there is a factory meeting where ideas are swapped and the occasional gripe is aired. Tuesdays after work, the sales staff meet for a quick recap and a gee-up for the week ahead. Once a week the partners meet with the factory foreman



for discussions, and in addition usually have a meeting of their own on Thursdays. Then there are board meetings once a month. There's nothing like a good meeting, says Paris, in fact 'sometimes, if you go longer than two or three weeks without one, you can feel people getting a bit edgy'.

Staff tend to stay, but there are a few who have left after extensive training to set up their own shingle down the road and naturally there is a certain amount of bitterness about this. The company has employed older, more experienced tradespeople, but, finding them harder to mould to a self-made company's ways, the preference is now to employ young people, training them intensively. 'They have to want to work though', says Bennett, 'it's no good when they really wanted to be an electrician and came to us instead'. At 34 and 33 respectively, Gary Bennett and David Paris are the company elders—everyone else is under 24 years of age. One of Jah-Roc's key people is Matthew Hammill who started with the company six years ago and now runs the workshop. Another long-serving member is Thomas Brooks who, like Hammill, is adept at various wood skills.

Marketing the company has been approached in a systematic fashion. The company now spends an annual \$30,000 to \$50,000 on advertising, which includes photography and the preparation of brochures, the services of an advertising agency, advertisements in print media and floor space costs in various shows about the country.

An estimated 80% of furniture sales come from the York gallery which, without much advertising effort attracts around five to six hundred a people a week, although the numbers can vary by as much as one hundred to two thousand some weeks. The pair struggled to get fifty people through the door of the Perth workshop, and that was with considerable expenditure on advertising. Dated from 1831 York is West Australia's oldest inland town. The Flour Mill was built in 1891 and last year an adjacent shed

of 2,000 square metres in size was the venue for the York Jazz Festival. This year a country and western festival, independently organised, will take place there and, needless to say, it won't hurt business at all.

Travelling to shows is a good break from business, but manning stands is hard work. Both partners do the selling and have developed good skills. You have to be able to assess your buyer's mood and tune into body language. Looks and clothes don't always indicate purchasing power either. The downcast passerby can end up buying a dining table if approached the right way—it's happened before says Bennett. A salesperson can either 'rugby tackle' (Bennett's words) the unsuspecting prospect or talk them round a bit more subtly.

Home shows, country shows, trade shows, even shows for agricultural machinery will do. I asked how could they possibly hope to sell such highly individual and 'different' furniture at venues such as the latter? With a laugh, Bennett explains 'you've got cockies walking around looking to buy a \$200,000 header—and well, the missus might want something for herself too!'

Jah-Roc was one of the first to be part of the now environmentally trendy and friendly use of recycled and salvaged timbers in Western Australia. Current favourites are marri, recycled oregon, and jarrah as you would expect—es-

pecially curly and birdseye figured jarrah. Waney edges are back in fashion they claim.

And what of the future? Obviously family empires, indeed dynasties, are made to last. The future managers of Jah-Roc are still in nappies after all—and timber, bought green, can take years to dry in the racks. They made a commitment back in those surfing days and now, Bennett says, they will never stand still, aiming as they do to be the best. They might need more staff but they will never number more than twenty. Paris estimates more conservatively—they may need two more people in ten years time. The mill may develop more—there is an idea of building rammed earth chalets which may house other artisans and artists whose focus will be the gallery.

One thing David Paris sees clearly on the horizon is a fair deal of upgrading of machinery. The workshop is equipped with the machines the pair started out with, a selection of 'very basic, very cheap' machines which are no-name (can't remember, can't see) brands including saw, thicknesser, planer, a big old bandsaw, stroke sander, radial arm and rip saws. One good thing is the sealed sanding booth which stands 5 x 6 x 3 metres high. Paris would like to have much better machines but Bennett is more conservative in this respect 'why buy brand new when the old stuff is still working'.



'The Dowerin', an executive desk made from jarrah reclaimed from the Bunbury Jetty with inlay of sheoak and black granite.





'Roo Silhouette', river banksia, sheoak, leather.

(read 'hands on furniture making') hours for both reduced to around five a week in the case of Bennett and ten to fifteen for Paris. And with time sheet scoring such as theirs you can believe every statistic and date Paris rattles off. David Paris says he is never so happy as when making furniture—being unable to spend more time doing what you have made such a success out is one of the ironies and often tragedies of the small business operator.

Business is business but Jah-Roc make art. The wood is their medium, the outcome is furniture that is aesthetically pleasing and functional. Because they regard their furniture as art they continue to exhibit regularly at galleries and dabble in woodwork competitions where the name 'Jah-Roc' often tops the chart. In fact, with a steady stream of hits like theirs, the West Australian 'roc' duo of Paris and Bennett is sure to achieve its own legendary status as the 'rolling stones' of the Australian woodwork scene.

There is affection for the 'old' machines though. The twenty year old Altendorf panel saw is the one David Paris used during his apprenticeship and bought from his original boss ('I just told him I *have* to have your machine').

Paris reckons he can use it all day long without tiring.

David Paris modestly avows his partner to be the best maker in the workshop, however the demands of managerial responsibilities have seen 'productive'



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