



# BOARD SHAPER, HONEY MAKER

words by Anthony Pancia  
photos by Russell Ord

For someone with a deep obsession for all things surf, it's slightly surprising it took so long for Gary Bennett to turn his hand to making surfboards.

Intricately designed and crafted, Gary's timber surfboards look good on a wall, but perhaps more importantly, they work well in the water too.

The boards are the result of a collaboration with respected shaper, Jim Banks and Gary's business partner, David Paris.

"I've always loved the sculptural form of surfboards and I guess what really got me into having a crack at making one was my friendship with Jim Banks, who is a passionate woodworker and loves making guitars and all that sort of stuff out of wood," says Gary.

"We wanted to do things a little differently and apply the contemporary lines of Jim's designs, while also creating collectable art pieces made from some of our beautiful, local grown timbers."

Although Gary admits they regularly take "longer to make than they should," he says the sense of pleasure gained from running his hands over the finished product makes it more than worthwhile.

"We're all passionate surfers, so the idea of sculpting a masterpiece than can be taken down from the wall, waxed up then taken down to the beach for a surf is immensely appealing," says Gary.

"We're still experimenting with different types of wood, and in that sense it's been a bit of a slow cooker."

The boards also complete a circle of sorts, which has taken Gary on a remarkable journey that began many moons ago.

"The surf bug had hit pretty hard when I was about 13," Gary begins.

"Until then, we'd sort of lived all over the place, including Busselton where I was born, because my dad was a school principal. But through a combination of fate and good fortune, we moved to City Beach in Perth and I remember looking at the ocean and thinking, 'Wow, how good is this'."

This marked the beginning of a rapid progression through a myriad of surf craft common amongst young surfers. Fate again intervened when a friend invited Gary on a "trip down south" to visit an uncle.

"My mate's uncle was a dairy farmer, so we caught a train down to Busselton, then a bus down to Margaret River and I distinctly remember this odd sensation of feeling like I'd come home or something as we came into town," says Gary.

"Then my mate's uncle threw us in the back of his tractor and took us to this beach called Conto's, where we stayed for about two weeks. Looking back on it now, it seems incredible, just a bunch of teenagers camping in these old fishing shacks in the middle of nowhere with no parental supervision whatsoever. We'd just surf ourselves stupid day after day until it was time to leave."

This became a ritual for Gary that continued most weekends and grew his love for surfing and the region

even more.

School though was proving to be a different story, and a young Gary found himself struggling with the academic side of things, yet excelling with tactile subjects like wood and metalwork.

"My year 9 report cards pretty much all said the same thing, 'Gary's wasting his time' or 'Gary's a pain in the ass', yet I'd get these ones from my metal and woodwork teachers and it was like they were talking about two different kids," says Gary.

"My dad, who was no stranger to the behavioural habits of school students, was really good about it though, because when I eventually said I wanted to leave school, he said 'Yep, I reckon that's a good idea' and encouraged me to go on and do something I loved."

Just as fate had led Gary to the ocean, it once again stepped in with his choice of careers; carpentry.

"Early on I'd always wanted to be a farmer because not only had I grown up around farms, but I really loved watching the old cockies fixing things or making things and, although I didn't realise it at the time, I was attracted to that innovative spirit they had; that ability to improvise and come up with something beautiful and practical with whatever was laying around," Gary says of his early mentors.

"A carpentry apprenticeship seemed a good fit, and for a while I was satisfied with doing that."





Tucked away in the back of his mind was a move down to Margaret River, but the town had yet to hit its stride in terms of available work, so Gary did the next best thing.

“I headed over to far north Queensland with a guy I was working with at the time,” recalls Gary, laughing at the memory of the unplanned detour.

“I’d wanted to learn more about roof carpentry and there was plenty of work for that over there at the time. That lasted about six months, then I moved further down to the Sunshine Coast where I ended up staying for three years before heading down to Phillip Island in Victoria.”

While in Phillip Island, Gary found himself working for the late Skyhooks singer, Shirley Strachan, building a surf shop and café with an approach that proved to be “a real light bulb moment.”

“Shirl basically had no budget and wanted me to make all this furniture for the café with all the offcuts we had leftover from building the surf shop,” says Gary.

“At first I thought ‘how the hell is that supposed to work?’ but I got stuck into it and ended up creating some pretty nice and functional bits of furniture, and that’s where the seed was planted.”

That same spirit of creation sparked something of a plan Gary had concocted early on in his carpentry career; a way

of fusing his love for innovation and practicality using reclaimed timber.

A move back to WA followed, and the grand plan of somehow combining his love of surfing and the Margaret River region began to subconsciously unfold, albeit after one last unexpected detour.

With new wife Lara, business partner David Paris and David’s wife Joanne (Gary’s sister), they took their fledgling business to York, officially Western Australia’s oldest inland town. For a keen surfer like Gary, it was about as far from the ocean as one would want to get.

Despite that, the move to an abandoned historic flourmill helped the pair further establish their business and perhaps more importantly, hone their vision. But three years in, Gary was hit hard by a need to be back in Margaret River.

“Business was booming and we’d hit all sorts of markets and targets we’d set for ourselves but, by that stage I was really struggling with a lack of surf,” says Gary.

“Earlier on I’d bought a block of land in Margs and had started heading down there to build a house. Every time I had to head back up to York I’d be hit with this feeling that I was leaving my true home. It got to the point where I told Dave, ‘Look mate, not being near the ocean is killing me, I feel like a fish out of water’. Luckily Dave was very accommodating and agreed it was a good idea.”



The final piece of the puzzle was in place, and the pair eventually shifted their operation to Margaret River, hitching their already established brand to the steam train of success the town had since become.

“Once we’d made the decision to shift down here I could see the overall plan coming together,” Gary says of the move.

“The reach of the Margaret River brand, which had been established long before we came to town, was already at that point phenomenal. Early on we attended some trade shows in Italy and took some local wine with us and literally everywhere you went over there they knew the name just by

looking at the bottle.”

The move to Margaret River set Gary’s inspiration and creativity free, and the furniture he was creating began to embody this.

“What that trip to Italy also rammed home for me was the concept of designing from a sense of place. You only have to take a look at our coastline to get a feel for what this place is about,” says Gary.

“I guess it happened organically, but I’d soaked in that environment and it came out in our furniture. It still happens today, I get so inspired by what I see and dream about when I’m out surfing I’ll want to get back to the workshop so fast I’ll still be dripping wet.”

The move also inspired Gary to indulge one other passion, beekeeping; a throwback to a hobby he was first exposed to by his grandfather.

“I have my hive right outside my workshop and to tell you the truth, I probably spend a bit too much time just staring at them in amazement,” Gary says.

“I’m inspired by the pace they work, the purpose each of the thousands of bees in there have and how it all adds up to the greater good of the hive. Some days I literally have to tear myself away from standing and staring at them.”



