

THE BOY FROM (SOUTH) OZ

SHAPER BEN WALLBRIDGE'S DESIGNS ARE MAKING WAVES IN A CITY FAMOUS FOR ITS LACK OF THEM

Interview by Jock Serong

At a time of enormous upheaval in the shaping game, South Australian Ben Wallbridge is defying all the stereotypes - insisting on values of craftsmanship and individual effort in an age of looming mass production; experimenting with high performance materials far from the industry hubs of the east coast; and wagering the financial wellbeing of his young family on getting it right. So far, he's been winning steady praise from the critics..

SW: At secondary school in suburban Adelaide, as far back as 16 you were already saying "I'm gonna be a surfboard shaper". Your mates thought it was hilarious at the time - no-one else had a clue what they wanted to do. How were you so certain about it back then?

BW: Growing up in suburban Adelaide in the 80s it was all about skateboarding for me. We were a minority that was very underground: there wasn't one skateboard shop in our city. There weren't any skate parks or ramps so most weekends I invaded the multilevel carparks. We'd dodge cars, security guards and ride the concrete standing, sitting, kneeling... from this need for speed and carving surfing was just a natural progression for me. We had a family holiday to Noosa when I was 13. It coincided with a cyclone in '85 and I was hooked. By the end of the trip I'd bought a single fin and was surfing first point. The waves that I watched coming through Boiling Pot and the excitement in the car park will stick with me forever. Coming home if I wasn't surfing the curl on my Maths book or dreaming of the weekend it was about my board and what I was going to do on the waves. I was the original suburban surfer arriving by train and skateboard. Surf all day, then hot chips back to the train station. Three years after I tried surfing I was making my own boards: I've always enjoyed working with my hands creating, drawing or constructing. To this day you can still see the resin outline on Mum's backyard paving under the verandah where it all began.

Did you come from a strong family background in surfing?

No - very little. Being the youngest of four, I liked doing something no one else had really done. Dad's love of the sea has always stuck with me. He was one of the original Chiton Life savers in the early '60s and he found lugging those huge boards laborious, so he stuck to bodysurfing in the sluggoes. Dad's mum also lived at Yorke Peninsula so we spent family holidays spear fishing, skim boarding and crabbing amongst the pristine granite and limestone reefs with no one to be seen. I have unforgettable memories like watching my brother at Pondi frantically waving his arms, confronting a beached bronze whaler thrashing in the shallows. It's been a priceless background. Now having a family of my own, my wife and son and daughter all surf.

How did you find surfing influences in Adelaide?

Basically I was influenced by my own drive: there were no Michael Petersons or Rabbits. But Adelaide has waves. It has two foot windchop at the metropolitan jetties, perfect reef breaks on the mid coast, and east coast-like beaches near Victor Harbour and perfect isolated waves in other parts of the state. This range has allowed me to experiment with a variety of board designs and to hone my skills.

You've described yourself as having 'Cactus Fever' - would Cactus be your favourite among the South Oz waves?

I'm a big grommet - I like to surf well in all waves but have had the most challenging waves at Yorkes and Eyre Peninsula. Some of the best waves ever I've had are here in SA. I remember surfing Castles late one evening at Cactus and a mate mentioned something surfacing and disappearing...well, that was enough for me to call it quits. As I was going in over the shallow reef I was suddenly surrounded by forearm-length salmon swimming frantically around me. Seeing the desperation of the fish I quickly got up onto the sand to find garfish launching themselves at me on the beach! What could one do but grab some before they slid back into the water...we feasted on them round the campfire that night. I never saw what was chasing them but it wasn't Flipper. I've gone over there regularly since I was 17, although it's a twelve hour drive one way. I've even caught the Perth bus to Cactus, asking the driver to stop in the middle of the night, deep in the Nullarbor. I was confronted with a pub brawl next to the bus stop with no means of getting to the beach...did I mention the area is prone to severe mice plagues? The beautiful wild west memories are always interesting ones.

What were your early shaping efforts like? When did you sell your first board?

From my first single fin, I went to a quad, then a thruster. I was then ready to start designing my own. I'd ride any board design if I could borrow it: I had a go on a Cheyne Horan lazor zap with the Ben Lexcen fin, and I built a 6'6" pintail single concave to surf reefs with great transparent blue glassed-on fins, got shackled and never looked back. I still remember surfing 6ft -8ft Caves for the first time with a mate - the board would flex off the bottom so I've always thought this was important to the integral feeling of control and the life of a

OPPOSITE: SNORT ALL YOU LIKE AT THE IDEA OF SURF IN ADELAIDE BUT ONLY A FOOL WOULD DENY THE QUALITY OF THE WAVES ALONG SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S SECRET CRAGGY COASTLINE. BEN WALLBRIDGE HAS THE DESIGNS TO SUIT ANY CONDITION. (ARANDELOVIC)





“I aspire to be a true artisan at what I do. People now come to me for my open-mindedness and ability to interpret what they want in a board.”

ABOVE: PANCHO SULLIVAN DOESN'T GO FOR THE CROWS, HE GOES FOR THE POWER, WHICH IS WHY HE TOOK A FEW WALLBRIDGE SHAPES BACK TO THE ISLANDS LAST YEAR. (DAVEY)

board. Reflecting back I probably would've drowned if I'd wiped out as the take off was like the whole southern ocean was about to unload next to me. I would have been 16-17 and had already designed the new one in my head before I got home. I remember reshaping many old boards, stripping the glass off damaged boards. It was a cheap way of getting a blank to shape. For the record, I didn't destroy any classic shapes.

Who are the shapers you admire? Who's been good to you? Dahlberg for his simplicity, Chris Garrett for originality, John Robertson for function, Greg Brown for planshapes, Bob Margetts for experience and Mark Platter for concaves. The time that they've given me has been invaluable.

When did you get to the point that you knew it was going to work?

I met my wife and before I knew it I'd got married and was establishing a factory at a permanent site. With her support I was no longer juggling multiple jobs, so I could focus just on shaping. It's about the next design, playing with new materials, deck shapes, it's endless... I'll shape anything and everything from shortboards to fishes, mals, tow, kite, wake, nipper, paddleboards and SUPs. There's always a crossover. I aspire to be a true artisan at what I do. People now come to me for my open-mindedness and ability to interpret what they want in a board.

Do you feel a bit alone in the industry? I can't think of many people your age, especially in SA, who are flying the flag for custom designed, handcrafted boards...

We are without a doubt a dying breed in South Australia and I might be one of the last men standing. Retail surfshops here turn to the more recognised well known generic pop out models. However, custom shapers have had a revival since the likes of Kelly Slater have tried different designs during contests, similarly to the period when Curren rode a fish in huge Indo and at Jeffries. So there are more design choices in the market - communication between shapers and surfers becomes so important. All the leading pros have a relationship with their shaper. Some might ride CAD-designed boards touched up by ghost shapers, but I bet you they're communicating with an experienced shaper, not a shop assistant.

What shapes and materials are you currently working with? What do your customers seem to want?

In all forms of design, you're always looking for materials to shine better than existing ones. I've found the balsa shell/ESP foam/epoxy resin shapes we've been doing are an enhanced version of our PU/poly boards. Easy to fix like normal boards, but livelier, faster, stronger and paddle machines. They can drive through dead sections without moving your feet, and they work in small and big surf. The blank off-cuts are recycled into more foam products or even aerated concrete slabs. The balsa's from eco-friendly renewable plantations, not the jungle. The epoxy resins have far less volatile gases, so they're better for the builders. They can be custom made in any size or shape but more importantly they flex, hold the energy and release beautifully through any conditions. We have been making quads, fishes, diamond tails, singles, twins and flyers in a lot of new shapes. We're continually trying new materials too so it's a giant design broth that we keep stirring.

You've had good recent surf media reviews of your designs.

How important was that coverage for your profile? How about Pancho Sullivan rating your boards so highly?

It was very rewarding to get feedback from a well-regarded surf industry writer such as Nick Carroll. All those years of dust, sweat and blood seem worthwhile, showing that these innovative ideas work. Such things don't just happen overnight: we tweaked the thickness of the balsa veneer, the glass work, weight, rocker...and we could reproduce it over and over again with the same feel. Our new balsa/EPS can be ridden shorter to allow tight whips in the pocket but still maintain drive. The rear half of the planshape we pulled in as much as possible to prevent too much slide. Hey presto, Asher Pacey, Tyler Wright and Nick all rated it. For Pancho, I designed a board for 8-10ft Pipe or 10ft Sunset. He didn't quite get the right size waves but the ample rocker, the heavy rolled vee through bottom and the vent I put in the tail to allow squirt off the bottom worked a treat. He loved it. The gratification also came from the fact that I had designed the boards for particular waves, people and performance and I came up trumps! 