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King of bling

John Calleija explains to Nigel Bowen how a serendipitous TV ad propelled a directionless 18-year-old on a diamond-encrusted path to fame and fortune involving parties with pop stars, luxury boats and a business partnership with Aston Martin.

"If it had been an ad for hamburgers I could have ended up as Ronald McDonald," chortles John Calleija while explaining how he ended up one of the world's most acclaimed jewellers. Having just finished high school, Calleija was lounging about watching television when his mother demanded to know what he was going to do with his life. An ad for jewellery came on so Calleija Jr unthinkingly blurted out he was interested in being a jeweller before escaping further parental interrogation by heading out in his tinnie. By the time he'd returned home his mother had set up an interview with a Maltese jeweller for the following afternoon.

"My whole family had been heavily into boats since we moved from Canberra to [Sydney waterfront suburb] Hunters Hill when I was young and I could have easily gone in that direction," Calleija recalls. "Two of my brothers became outboard mechanics before they went into our father's trucking business. I actually had an interview with the MSB [Maritime Services Board] a few hours before going to see the jeweller. I was offered a position there that would have paid three times as much as what I got as a jeweller's apprentice and allowed me to spend the working day in a boat cruising around Sydney Harbour. It would have been a great job but when I saw what the jeweller was doing I thought, 'Wow, this is fantastic.'"

Calleija, a creative type who enjoyed drawing and building things, realised he'd stumbled on his dream job. Which is not to say his early years in the trade were easy or that it was readily apparent a glorious future awaited him.

"I did a four-year apprenticeship that started at \$60 a week," he recalls. "Even in 1981 that was barely enough to cover bus fare. Shortly before my apprenticeship ended, my boss decided he'd had enough so I sold my pride and joy, a Haines Hunter 1600S, to buy the business, which was essentially just some machines and goodwill. I was 21 and it was a pretty hairy, sink or swim situation. I decided I'd put 100 per cent effort in – every customer would be treated as if they were our sole client, every piece of jewellery would be perfect. It's an approach I've maintained ever since."

Calleija operated the Sydney workshop for 12 years before relocating to the Gold Coast, where he manufactured jewellery from his home. Barely making enough to cover his rent, he was about to pack it in and return to Sydney when he experienced a series of Lotto wins that he interpreted as a sign he should persevere up north. "Over the course of four weeks I won \$6.66, \$666, \$6.66 and \$666, which I took it as a sign I was meant to stay put," he says. "Shortly after that, I opened a shop in Sanctuary Cove and when I got in touch with Telstra to put the phone on they offered me a number ending in 666, which I took. To top it all off, six months later I met the woman who became my wife."



John Calleija's astonishing rise saw him go from a \$60 a week apprenticeship to attending soirees at the Louvre with David Bowie; Used to unlock the Majestic Light sculpture at Kensington Palace this Sapphire and Australian Argyle Pink Diamond key is just one of the interesting jewels John Calleija has been honoured to design.

Calleija operated at Sanctuary Cove for a number of years before relocating to Marina Mirage on the Gold Coast's Main Beach. While he was by this point doing well enough to indulge his passion for nice boats and fancy motors, the Italian-Maltese Australian who might easily have ended up at the MSB or running the family trucking business had no idea that he was about to be catapulted into the uppermost reaches of the global A-list.

"Business was going fine before then but when I won the De Beers International Diamond Design Award in 2000 everything kicked up to another level," Calleija recalls. On the night before his wedding Calleija received a call to say he'd won the award – the jewellery industry's equivalent of an Oscar – for a face mask called 'Virtual Eros' he'd constructed out of \$500,000 worth of diamonds. The award was presented at a private party at the Louvre attended by guests such as David Bowie. An Australian television crew from Channel Nine accompanied Calleija to Paris and the footage of the awards night and Virtual Eros was shown on TV networks around the world.

"It was two million dollars worth of free publicity, it put us on the map," Calleija recalls. "We went from a little tin shed on the Gold Coast to international acclaim and clients from all around the world seeking us out."

Thirteen years later, Calleija has three stores, the honour of being an Argyle Select Atelier (enabling him to sell Australia's most prized jewel, the highly collectible pink diamond), a long-term contract as Aston Martin's official jeweller and the resources to indulge most of his boating passions.

"You have to be both an artist and a businessman in this game. We've got the store on the Gold Coast and one in Sydney's Westin Hotel, which funnily enough is only 50 metres or so away from the workshop where my career started. And five years ago I opened a store in London, which is something no Australian jeweller had ever done. I'm still very hands on and design 95 per cent of all the jewellery we sell. I'm not keen to expand further because then it inevitably becomes more about the business than the art; you're under a lot of financial pressure to just keep replicating popular pieces."



Crafted in 18ct Rose Gold this bulldozer sits atop two pieces of iron ore set with Australian Argyle Pink Diamonds. Calleija was commissioned to create a special piece to signify the important aspects of the clients life. The sculpture has a Princess Cut diamond set into the base to represent the clients Princess Yacht; Calleija's presentation of 'Virtual Eros', a futuristic diamond mask featuring nearly 44ct of diamonds shot John Calleija to fame when it won the De Beers International Diamond Design Awards.

While Calleija has had no shortage of celebrity clients, it's his relationship with a car company CEO that seems to have him pinching himself to make sure he's not in the middle of a dream. "I've been a huge fan of Aston Martins since I was a kid and have owned several over the years. Five years ago, while I was liaising with them over a DB9 I had, I sent them over a brochure of mine. A few days later the head of Aston Martin, Dr Ulrich Bez, rang to say he was a fan of my design philosophy and ask if I could meet with him for lunch in London. I was pretty much on the next plane! After lunch, Dr Bez proposed a partnership and suddenly I was Aston's Martin's global jeweller making, for example, rings and pendants incorporating cutaways that mimic the distinctive lines found on the grilles of Aston Martins."

Calleija has since put on events where he showcases his wares alongside the latest Aston Martins, as well as boats from Princess Yachts. "You have over \$100 million dollars of luxury goods in the one spot. The women look at my jewellery while their partners check out the yachts and cars," Calleija laughs.

When talk turns to the future Calleija launches into his maritime-themed bucket list. "I've lost count of the number of boats I've had. It's probably around 15, starting with a stray dinghy that washed up on the shore of our backyard when I was 11. During my teens I had a Savage Kingfisher tinnie with about 15hp on it, as well as the Haines Hunter I later sold to buy out my boss. When I got to the Gold Coast I bought a 2100s Haines Signature, which I'm embarrassed to say I ended up sinking after a siphoning mishap. I've had a Wellcraft, two Mustang 32s, a couple of Princess Yachts, and I'm negotiating on a Palm Beach 52-footer.

"I live and breathe boats, I'd live on a houseboat if I could talk my wife into it. I don't care if it's a canoe or a superyacht, I just find it incredibly enjoyable to be on the water. Apart from taking part in the bathtub races they used to have on Sydney Harbour when I was a kid, boating has never been about competing for me – it's either about socialising with friends and family or having some alone time. I get a lot of my ideas when I'm on the water; a lot of my jewellery comes out of me sitting in a boat with nothing but my sketchbook."

While it may have to wait until he retires, Calleija is also keen to try his hand at yacht design and, ideally, sail the end result around the world. "I'd love to design a yacht!" he exclaims. "At present I'm toying with the idea of how I could make bejewelled, precious metal sculptures – possibly resembling a sail or propeller – that could go on superyachts. But I definitely have the perfect yacht in my head and would love to get that down on paper one day when I'm not so busy. Maybe in a decade when I've finished putting my daughter through school.

"I was lucky enough to recently be invited on a 400-foot superyacht with two helicopters, two subs and 70 staff but I think I'd be more than happy sailing a 50-metre tri-deck around the Mediterranean."

JOHN CALLEIJA'S TOP 10 BUYS

1. We moved into a new home at Sanctuary Cove a year ago and I'm absolutely loving it. It took six years to design and build and its really special to me.
2. I turned fifty recently and decided to spoil myself with something I've always wanted – a vintage Aston Martin DB5. It's the iconic model that was made famous in Goldfinger and again in Skyfall and it's as old as I am.
3. Unusually for me, I'm currently boatless but am eagerly awaiting delivery of my new Palm Beach 52-footer. I'm a longtime fan of Princess Yachts but at the moment I feel really connected to Palm Beach and love what Mark Richards is doing with his boats.
4. I'm the proud owner of a very rare Armin Strom watch. It's solid gold and a bit vintage in that it's got a restored movement from the 1920s that's been jewelled and skeltonised. It's one of only 25 in the world – up until a few years back Strom only made five watches a year.
5. Any Tuscan holiday I ever had. Even though I was born and raised in Australia, I'm half Italian and I feel a connection with the country of my ancestors. Tuscany is my favourite spot in the world. I love the hills and, of course, the beautiful coastline.
6. Asking me to choose a favourite piece of jewellery is like asking someone to choose a favourite child but I've always loved pink diamonds. I made the first pink diamond I ever bought, 20 years ago, into a ring for myself that I wear to this day.
7. Though I do get some suits tailor made in Italy my favourite place to buy clothes is Latitude Clothing Company in Sanctuary Cove. Pretty much every item of clothing I enjoy wearing I got from there.
8. Jetskiing is the best form of stress relief ever invented and my Sea-Doo RXP is the best fun in the world. It's about five years old now but it still goes like hell.
9. People are surprised to discover how little interest I have in technology – I don't even use a computer. I manage to run my business and life with just my little iPhone 4s.
10. I – or more accurately my eight-year-old daughter – have just come into possession of a puppy called Minty. He's a mixture of bichon, silky and something else and looks like a miniature English sheepdog.

www.calleija.com

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