From rock to rockers

WELL, NOT QUITE. FORMER BLUES MUSICIAN **MORTEN STENBAEK** EXCHANGED A LIFE ON STAGE FOR ONE BUILDING ARTISAN, ORGANIC-INSPIRED FURNITURE IN AARHUS, DENMARK

Morten Stenbaek has made a name for himself through his handcrafted, organic-inspired, artisan furniture. But in a previous life he was known as Lightnin' Moe and was the singer, songwriter and harp player (that's harmonica player in hip blues language) for his band of the same name, which toured northern Europe playing around 50 gigs a year. 'It was a huge part of my identity at the time and a place to be creative,' Morten tells *F&C*.

So how did he go from rocking out all over Scandinavia to building Maloof-inspired rockers in his Aarhus workshop? It turns out, furniture is in his blood. 'My grandfather was a cabinetmaker – although sadly I never got to share the passion with him, as I was in my mid-thirties before the interest hit me,' he says. 'It all started with me deciding to build a sofa for our new house. We couldn't find one that fitted well into the measurements of our living room, so we decided on a temporary homemade solution.' After a couple of years with the makeshift sofa, Morten still hadn't found a sofa he loved and could afford. 'So I had a crack at building something nicer than the first attempt,' he says. While researching sofas, he fell in love with the idea of building a Wegner Butterfly Chair. 'I thought it looked fairly easy or at least possible,' Morten recalls. 'Once the sofa was done – a rough construction with the measurements and angles we wanted, covered up with a lot of upholstery – the woodworking started.'

It took him months to build the chair. At that time there weren't the ubiquitous woodworking videos you can find on YouTube today, so he taught himself from online articles. He also realised he would have to invest a bit more in good quality tools than he had expected. Once the Butterfly Chair was done it didn't take him long to set himself another challenge, and things progressed from there.

At that time Morten had a full-time job working with young offenders and socially troubled young people. It was shift work, including 24-hour stints, weekends and evenings, and while it was cramping his style as a musician, it gave him plenty of free days to study and practise woodwork.

'With my work now involving weekends the music was slowly shutting down, and I moved more and more of my energy over to woodworking, which also served as a space for creativity and to explore new ideas and techniques,' Morten recalls. 'In the end the woodworking took over, and in 2010 I made my first chair design.' The seat featured a steam-bent backrest and webbing, and took inspiration from Hans Wegner and Scandinavian design. Morten made a few more pieces in a similar style and started to make sales. 'All the money went back into the shop, and slowly my tools and machines reached a decent level,' he says.

In 2014 Morten challenged himself to make a Maloof-style rocker – 'the best thing I ever did,' he says. He bought Hal Taylor's book on the subject along with some templates. 'I liked that he had added his own ideas into the chair so that it was more than just a Maloof clone,' Morten says. 'I ended up building this chair many times with my own ideas and interpretations added to the design, and with Hal's blessing. Building this chair taught me so much. Hal's book is not just an instruction plan to build the chair, but also a place to find a lot of knowledge about wood and woodworking. I have kept in touch with Hal over the years and am proud to call him my friend today, as his book and chair laid the groundwork for me making a living from my passion today.'

One rocker led to another, and then to other designs for chairs and tables. After a while Morten started taking part in fairs and selling more than before, with all his income going back into the workshop. 'Then in the summer of 2016 I received a big order for 20 pieces of my Flamingo Beak dining chair and eight bar stools, so I decided to ask for a leave of absence from my job,' he says. More orders followed. 'It was time to take a chance and follow my woodworking dream and passion full time – and I never returned to my job with the youngsters,' Morten recalls.

SLOW FURNITURE

Morten works from a small and basic workshop on the same property as his home in Aarhus, where he doesn't have quite enough room for all the machines he is tempted to buy. 'The "machine park" consists of a Delta-style tablesaw, a decent Hammer A31 planer-jointer combo machine, a pillar drill, a disc and a belt-sander, and a bandsaw.' Then he has routers, angle-grinders, sanders and his hand tools. 'I work with simple tools in my workshop,' he says. 'After completing the joinery work on a component, I move to the bandsaw for initial curve work. I then use a combination of angle-grinding, rasps and spokeshaves to refine the curves. I particularly enjoy using rasps, as they effectively eliminate any bumps in the curves. My preferred rasp is the Iwasaki carving file, which provides a smooth surface like a file but can remove material quickly like a rasp. Sanding is the final step in the process. For larger pieces like tables, where I use stacked lamination, I often begin by using a chainsaw before switching to the angle-grinder.'

He doesn't own a CNC machine and doesn't do template routing for his curved work. 'If my designs were less organic, template routing would make more sense, but most of the time I'm making single pieces or batches that are so small – say six to 12 dining chairs – that slowing down and sawing with a little more care on the bandsaw doesn't make much difference in terms of production time. The final 3D has to be made by hand and eye.'

Morten finds himself naturally drawn to curvy, organic shapes. 'While details play a crucial role, I prioritise achieving a balanced overall silhouette, then add the details as a finishing touch,' he says. 'The flow of lines is a crucial aspect of my designs, and I put significant effort into ensuring they appear natural.' Inspiration comes from all over: 'From modern organic-

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shaped architecture to small sculptures and obviously other furniture designers,' he says. 'Often inspiration finds me while working on a project. Seeing a piece of furniture or a sculpture from a different angle just might ignite a new idea or bring the vision of the missing piece in the puzzle of another design I might be working on.'

He uses stacked laminations as well as conventional joinery to create the organic curved shapes in his pieces. 'These are layers of wood glued together into a rough shape before the final sculpting and shaping,' he explains. 'Lately I have also been using a lot of 3D bent lamination for the curves, which might be finished off with carving for that extra organic look and feel.' Morten's favourite woods to work with are ash and walnut. 'Both woods are very beautiful, with rich grain patterns,' he says. 'Both have long fibres and are not as hard, and eventually brittle, as oak, for instance. Walnut looks very classic and ash is great for staining, which is how ash is almost commissioned – as either white or black – although I have on occasion delivered a piece in ash with a pure oil finish, which makes it warmer and more golden.' Elm is another favourite, but not one his clients choose very often. He prefers to finish with oil. 'I like the natural look,' he explains. 'For a high shine oil won't do, although high-grit sanding and extra buffing will add shine to a piece. For a glossy finish I use a wipe-on finish called Tru Oil, which is a variation of Danish Oil. But it's very rare for clients to want a high-sheen, glossy finish.'

CREATIVITY AND PRODUCTION

Morten tries to schedule around 15–20% of his time to explore and be creative, but the rest of his work goes on commission. When he is designing, he likes to give himself plenty of time so that he can leave ideas to settle before going back and evaluating them. He does a lot of sketching and often makes one or more scale models before building a piece. So does he prefer working on commission or on his own collection? 'I embrace both aspects of my craft equally – the technical proficiency and the creative freedom,' he replies. 'The allure of this lifestyle lies in the combination of both. Commission work often requires a blend of repetition and innovation, whether it's reproducing a well-known design or creating a new piece based on a previous one. I cherish all the orders I receive and find comfort in the familiar processes, even when working on designs I've done numerous times before. The repetition allows my mind to relax and new ideas to emerge, leading to inspired breaks and sketches.'

He goes on: 'I have a deep appreciation for both the creativity and production of my craft. If I could not have both, I would surely miss the unique thrill and satisfaction, the rush of adrenaline and excitement of the creative process. The uncertainty of whether the outcome will be a hit or miss, the moments of frustration and the eventual triumph of bringing a new piece or design to life, are truly unmatched experiences. And while stepping outside one's comfort zone often leads to setbacks and revisions, the reward of success is worth the risk and effort.'

When asked about his favourite project, he says that would be like choosing between his children. 'I have been lucky with quite a few memorable commissions,' he says. 'First, the big commission of 20 Flamingo Beaks and eight bar stools that made me take the leap to full-time furniture making. In 2020 I had the pleasure of making three unique tables for Peter Marino Architect for the stunning remake of the Louis Vuitton flagship store in Namiki, Tokyo. And lastly the latest two DeleciaCurv dining table commissions, in which I have used 3D bent lamination to the extreme.' These tables were also the most challenging project he has ever worked on. 'First of all it took me a long time to learn this technique, with lots of experiments spread over more than a year,' he explains. 'Then the designing and making of the individual pieces: wrestling around projects this size, mostly single-handed, in a shop as small as mine really is quite challenging, just from a logistical point of view.' He is currently working on a coffee table in the DeleciaCurv style.

Morten takes great pride in producing furniture that is arty, but still functions as furniture. 'Traditionally it's said that art can't have a function like furniture, or it will be considered applied art,' he says. 'Nowadays I often hear furniture referenced as pieces of art. Some of these pieces put far more weight on their aesthetics than their function, so it seems right to categorise them as art. Personally, I find great pride and satisfaction in merging the two. And whether they are categorised as art, applied art or unique and original pieces of furniture doesn't really mean all that much to me. The important thing for me is that the clients will be happy with the pieces every day, whether they look at the piece or use it as the piece of furniture it is.'

He doesn't look far ahead in terms of his work, usually creating something from curiosity and inspiration, then showcasing it on his website and Instagram. 'Some ideas result in commissions and others don't,' he says. 'Sometimes a design or a one-of-a-kind piece might not attract interest at first, but then out of the blue a year or more later, all of a sudden it might be just what a client is looking for. So the direction my work will take in the future depends on the ideas I will have in the future and how well those ideas will be received by the public. I will make new pieces and designs I'm inspired to do, but in the end, further development of any concept is very much helped along by commissions, which are out my hands.'

Having his workshop on the same property as his home has helped Morten balance work with family life, even though he works seven days a week, and often long hours. 'I'm very fortunate to be living right next to the forest, which is a great place to walk or run. I like to get regular excise and live a fairly active life. I'm the chef in the household, so some days cooking can turn into a project. But truth be told, when you are making a living from your passion, you end up working a lot – which is fine, since it doesn't really feel like work anyway.'

mortenstenbaek.dk
@mortenstenbaek