



# POP The Perfect Pitch

Sculptor **Guy Portelli** garnered an £80,000 investment when he entered TV's *Dragons' Den* looking for potential backers. Now his Pop Icon collection is about to hit the wider world. Words: Nick Dines

**G**uy Portelli has achieved what many people have dreamed of but failed to do: grab the attention and support of the entrepreneurs in TV's *Dragons' Den*. Portelli secured an £80,000 investment from businessmen Peter Jones, James Caan and Theo Paphitis in *Dragons' Den* last September in exchange for 25 per cent equity in his sculptures of pop music celebrities.

Although he had originally asked for £70,000, Portelli rejected a £90,000 offer from entrepreneur Duncan Bannatyne in favour of benefitting from the backing and contacts of the three other 'Dragons'.

Portelli's success proved that despite a recession, should an opportunity prove alluring enough, art remains an attractive proposition for investment.

Peter Jones emphasises the importance of art in the current economic climate. "We know factually that non-necessity luxury items are decreasing in value, so what a

great time to launch a business when we've now seen the bottom. I looked at the quality of his work and thought Guy could be the next Damien Hirst. If he is, I want to be in. For me it was something with real intrigue, which captured my imagination."

## Musical passion

The collection is a unique concept of art through six decades with a variety of 18 sculptures. Portelli's work has always proved immensely popular due to its quality and originality, as he uses a wide range of fine materials, from traditional bronze to acrylic and aluminium. In a surreal scenario, where else have music legends such as Frank Sinatra, John Lennon, The Who and Madonna co-existed in one room?

This idea germinated when, at 17, he created a piece in which two points of

interest – art and music – crossed each other. "Music is such a powerful form of communication," he says. "It moves you in a way that's very hard for art to do. I was trying to capture what it was in music that generated this passion."

In 1985 he realised a collection of pop icons was a project that could gain him public recognition. He and his team have

dedicated the past year preparing for the huge show at the Mall Galleries in June, an achievement very few artists fulfil in their lifetime.

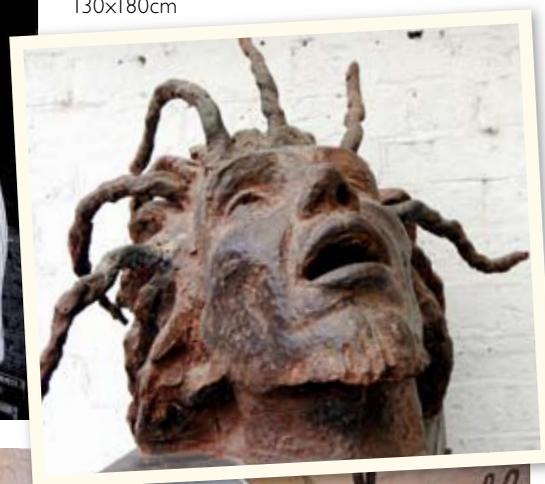
It's the visual imagery around these icons that Portelli finds fascinating. Whether it be the Mafia culture surrounding Sinatra, the flower power and anti-war movement associated with the Hendrix era or the ▷

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**ABOVE, FROM LEFT** Theo Paphitis, Peter Jones, James Caan and Guy Portelli in front of *Mod Rock*



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** In the foundry; Bob Marley, bronze, 60x60x65cm; Guy working on Mod Rock; Post Punk (Sex Pistols), aluminium, bronze and glass, 240x66x114cm; Hey Joe (Jimi Hendrix), bronze, aluminium and mosaic, 130x180cm



dysfunctional champagne lifestyle of Amy Winehouse – with each decade a unique fascination is discovered.

“I love all of them because of their individuality. I think the bronze John Lee Hooker is a classic piece, as is the Grace Jones in acrylic – but then we’re always excited by any new work.”

The collection is sure to spark debate, with a number of obvious omissions. “I’m avoiding people like Michael Jackson and Elvis Presley because they’ve become caricatures and there’s very little you can do with them once they’ve got to that level.”

### Calculated pitch

The encounter in the Den could have worked both ways. “The strategy going into the Dragons’ Den was very well calculated. If I had gone in and got totally rejected it would have set my career back 20 or 30

years because the infrastructure that I’d created would have walked away from me. But you may also find you get yourself tied in with a team that you’re not compatible with, so all those things were a risk; losing your control of the ship you’ve steered for all these years.

“I wasn’t only there for the money: the money was a major part, but I wasn’t going to take it any cost. The project costs a lot more than £70,000 but I knew the Dragons didn’t like people going in showing a lack of commitment. I could have easily done with £120,000 on this project, so the fact I was prepared to subsidise it myself, asking for half that amount, reassured them that I had confidence in it.”

Portelli has geared the collection towards a particular audience. “My audience is really 30- to 50-year-old men who are fascinated by music and collecting, and

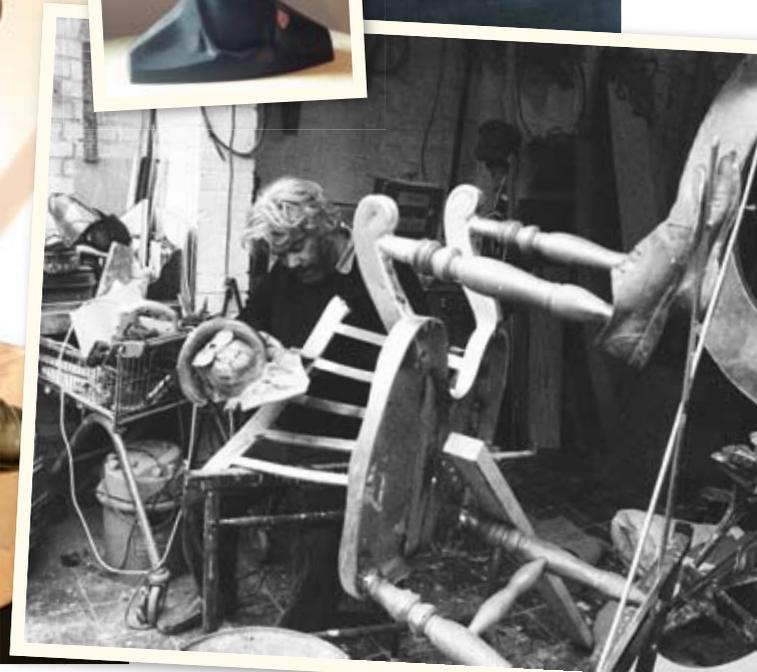
there’s not a lot of art in the market place for them. The male is an obsessive collector.”

He puts his success with the Dragons down to appearing confident and passionate about the project. “I wasn’t going in from a point of weakness; I was going in from a point of strength. I’m already out there, already exhibiting, already making, already selling, I’m not going in with a begging bowl. I think they sensed that I wasn’t desperate and vulnerable.”

This was an aspect picked-up on by Peter Jones. “It was very clear that Guy was non-negotiable. I think that made me feel this guy knows exactly what he wants.”

### Developing your style

Portelli is passionate about encouraging art lovers to support future generations of artists. “I would like people to start to realise that you invest in someone from an



PHOTOS: GUY PORTELLI, JAMES GILLHAM AND BRAD LUCAS

early age and support them, follow their career, like them as a person, like their work. That is a fascinating marriage and a constructive way of enriching our culture. Every time you're buying a piece of work from an artist you're sponsoring that artist to maintain that cycle of creativity."

Instead of producing prolifically, he does not release his work unless he feels it can sell at a reasonable price. "My advice would be, produce a few good pieces of real good quality and spend time on thinking about how you can market what you do. Don't produce a lot of work because people don't remember 50 paintings, they remember one good painting. There's a point where you have to embrace that you're running a business. When I make a sculpture I think 'How can I get this in front of people and generate public interest without selling my soul at the same time?' It's tough, but if you

want to earn money from it, you have no option but to adopt a formulaic perspective."

Portelli's philosophy and pitch certainly convinced investor Theo Paphitis, who is in no doubt that his investment is sound.

"There are so many great pieces, I thought that maybe if we gave Guy some money, we could keep the pieces in exchange!"

James Caan echoes this sentiment. "The Jimi Hendrix is a fabulous piece. We all felt we would love to own Guy's work. I was sitting there thinking it would be an amazing investment, but that I would also love to have any one of those pieces in my own home."

Portelli envisages taking his Pop Icons to another UK base, such as Manchester or Edinburgh, and also hopes to capture the potentially huge international audience. The question is, with the Dragons involved, will there be any left for others to buy? 

**ABOVE CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT**

Guy with *Rocking Chair Blues* (John Lee Hooker), bronze, lifesize; *Grace Jones*, acrylic, lifesize, and prototype; Guy working on *Rocking Chair Blues*.

South African-born **Guy Portelli** moved to England in 1969 and studied Interior Design and 3D Design at Medway College of Art. He then worked as a sculptor in the special effects department at the BBC before moving into contemporary sculpture. Many of his pieces are displayed in public, corporate and private collections. He was elected as a council member to the Royal Society of British Sculptors in 2000.

*Heart-throb: The Golden Age of the Pop Icon* will be at The Mall Galleries, London, 25 June – 3 July. [www.portelli-sculptor.co.uk](http://www.portelli-sculptor.co.uk); [www.mallgalleries.org.uk](http://www.mallgalleries.org.uk)