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Justin van Breda (second left) with fellow interior designers who have created pieces for his collection: Veere Grenney sits on Justin's 'Hourglass Stool' next to his own pedestal design; Nina Campbell has designed several items including a dog bed (shown opposite with Justin's Labrador Margot); and Nicky Haslam is on a dark rattan 'Drum Stool' by Justin



CAPE CRUSADER

For his new furniture collection, Justin Van Breda has collaborated with an organisation for the blind in his native South Africa – and some of the biggest names in interior design

TEXT DAVID NICHOLLS | PHOTOGRAPHS SOPHIA SPRING



Justin Van Breda has an imposing presence. It is not only the fact that he stands 6ft 7in tall but the South African designer and shopkeeper is also hugely charismatic and almost cartoonishly effervescent, speaking at lightning speed and with the kind of enthusiasm that can make something he describes as a 'complete disaster' sound really rather good. It is no wonder that, within a matter of weeks, he managed to convince a roll call of internationally acclaimed interior designers to contribute to his latest venture. They must not have known what hit them.

Last year, Justin saw and admired a rattan dressing table that the American interior designer Frank de Biasi had had made in Morocco. It triggered a memory about the canework produced by Cape Town Society for the Blind (CTSB), an NGO that was founded in 1929 to provide training in various skills and development programmes for the visually impaired. Today, these include office administration, public speaking, computer skills and more, but it remains best known for its original role: helping the blind attain financial independence through cane weaving.

'The CTSB was part of my childhood,' says Justin, who was brought up in Cape Town. 'Back there, everyone seems to have something from its shop in their homes. We had dog beds and laundry baskets – and for years, my mother had a woven cane chair that dated from when she was first married.'

'I'm always wanting to do new things,' continues Justin. He phoned his mother, Cilla, who still lives in Cape Town, to see if she knew what the CTSB was up to and she (like mother like son) sprung into action. 'She forwarded me all this information and I read that there was a problem with funding, and I thought, I could really do something with these people.' A plan for a collection of rattan furniture made by the CTSB started to percolate. First, though, he set about adding a bit of interiors stardust to the concept.

A lunch with Nina Campbell resulted in his first signing. 'She loved the idea of contributing to the collection and said yes straight away,' he recalls. And, of course, where Nina goes, many are bound to follow. Two days later he was on a plane to Atlanta (where his company has its American head office) and gave up the opportunity to sleep in an empty row of seats to chat up the Bahamas-based designer Amanda Lindroth. By the end of the flight, she was on board, too. Then, a trip to the annual Los Angeles design show Legends saw him enlist the West Hollywood designer Joe Lucas and Toronto-based Cynthia Ferguson. In three weeks, he had 10 designers signed up, including Veere

Grenney and Nicky Haslam, who gave Justin his first job in London 21 years ago.

'None of this was in the business's budget or part of our planning for the year, but I felt that it was right – it was right for the zeitgeist,' he says. Incredibly, it took just six months to go from the initial concept to the fully realised Cape Weaver Collection of 24 pieces, which is now on display in the new Justin Van Breda showroom on the King's Road, SW10.

The designers were given very little steer on what their contribution should be. Veere came up with a bed, bench and pedestal, and Nina a dog bed, mirror and urn. Justin designed several items himself, including a dining table and chairs, a dressing table and a trolley: 'I filled in the gaps – the pieces that would pull the others together into a cohesive collection.' His green 'Octagon Sideboard' is a highlight of the range.

Once the designs were submitted, Cilla 'took complete control' of things on the ground in Cape Town. 'For years, my mother did all the quality control for my product development, so it was perfect having her there to keep an eye on things,' says Justin. The biggest challenge, he recalls, was a programme of electrical load shedding to protect Cape Town's power system, which meant the craftspeople could not do anything for two weeks. They got there in the end.

'There are about 30 craftspeople at the CTSB and they are amazing,' says Justin. All the pieces – created from cane, grasses and banana leaf – are made to order in a range of colours, or in their natural tones. But he also points out that it is important to understand that each one is an individual, handmade item. 'They aren't the perfect, finely crafted pieces of furniture that we usually make, as it just isn't possible to achieve the level of precision you would expect from a top-of-the-market producer – and I had to get my head around that at first.' Some of the pieces might indeed be a little wonky, but they have an undeniable charm.

To say the collection has been well received would be an understatement. The interior designer Beata Heuman bought one of Nina's mirrors at the launch party, there are dining chairs being shipped across to Tennessee to luxurious foodie resort Blackberry Farm, and interior designer Joe Lucas is stocking pieces in his Harbinger stores in New York and Los Angeles.

The collection is providing valuable business for the CTSB and many of the designers have given their royalty fees to the organisation. 'Working on a project like this means we can produce interesting things in small numbers and be more design-led,' Justin says. 'And it's good to give back a bit. It's just a nice thing to do' □

Prices for the Cape Weaver Collection start at £610 for an 'Hourglass Stool'. Visit justinvanbreda.com



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The rattan 'Nina Campbell Urn' with the 'Veere Grenney Pedestal'. The 'Michael Cox Table' has a cane base and woven rattan top with feathered edges. Justin's 'Octagon Sideboard' with the 'Mally Skok Petal Chair'. The vintage-inspired 'Dolly's Trolley' designed by Justin



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