



All good in **THE WOOD**

From Big in Japan to Japanning tables, Andrew Matthews is Cambridgeshire's king for furniture. Oliver MacKenzie went to talk to the roadie turned restorer

Pictures by David Johnson Photographic

F

or lighting technician turned furniture restorer Andrew Matthews, woodworking has given him a new lust for life.

Walking into his workshop, in Arrington, near Royston, for the first time feels like a cross between HMV and a woodworking classroom.

Rasps, chisels and a try square lay neatly on the wall – next to them is two large stack of CDs, Van Halen, Jeff Beck, The Human League to name a few on it.

It's difficult to imagine David Lee Roth pondering the best way to Japan finish a gateleg table, so how on earth did Andrew end up in woodworking after going up and down the country supporting the dominant bands of the 80s?

"The idea came from a mate really, he chucked his job in at a credit card firm to become a roadie for The Stranglers.

"I'm a qualified electrician so I knew I could get into

the business and asked him for some names and addresses of lighting companies who supported bands."

Back then, the lighting sector of the music industry was much more competitive, with loads of small companies supporting bands.

After a couple of attempts, Andrew got a job changing 300 plugs for 300 stage lights. "It's like anything once you get your foot in the door and you do OK, you're in," he muses.

"That's how I started, after that I mostly worked as a freelancer with all sorts of people."

Highlights include The Human League in 1981, Culture Club in 1983 and Elton John in 1984.

The transition from music to wood though, involved a college education, working for a furniture



“

I don't earn much of a living doing this but if I wanted money I'd have stayed in the music industry. But I like what I do, it's something I take pride in doing and that's the most important thing in life



manufacturer and then finally going freelance as a restorer.

“One of my old friends worked for the Royal Shakespeare Company while I worked in music, he was supposed to do a tour but pulled out.

“He recommended me for the job as I had touring experience and I really enjoyed it, going all over the country but staying at each place for a week rather than overnight, so you got to go out and have some fun.

“I got a job there but I didn't settle. So at that time I moved back to Kent and after saving a bit of money, bought a house in Canterbury. I did it up, and I got really into doing the decorating and refurb work – it was from there that I went to London to do a woodwork course at the London College Of Furniture. After that I worked with a pretty big furniture company assembling chairs and tables but I found the process so fast, it was hard to put your passion into it.

“That's when I went freelance as a restorer because I can put the passion in and not feel like I have to put strict deadlines on my projects.”

Since starting out and finding pieces at auctions, Andrew has had a number of big projects, including

restoring the Cambridge Union Society debating chamber and Kettle's Yard. He's also enjoyed high praise from the likes of Sir Michael Marshall who has described his work as “exemplary and meticulous”, highlighting his “craftsmanship and expertise”.

Despite all the praise, it's not a job he does for the money or fame, saying “I don't earn much of a living doing this but if I wanted money I'd have stayed in the music industry.

“But I like what I do, it's something I take pride in doing and that's the most important thing in life.”

Furniture restoration is quite on trend now, with bars and clubs popping up with creative and unique chairs and tables.

However, Andrew doesn't believe the industry is growing, or at least his part of it.

Asked what advice he would give to people wishing to pick up the try square for the first time, Andrew says: “The best thing to do at first is to go on a woodwork course and see if you can pick up any experience from an old hand like me.

“Although I'd love to take on an apprentice, I just can't afford it at the moment.” ♦