

# Irish Jigsaw

Woodworker and musician Ian Byrne refuses to be put in a box, but he'll build you a nice one.

words BRANDON R. REYNOLDS

Deep in a cave in Lenexa, Ian Byrne builds ornate things out of wood.

It's just the damndest thing. There's Byrne, all Irish good cheer and lilting accent (and you won't be surprised to hear later on that he's the singer in a band) walking through his 30,000-square-foot wood-shop in this limestone cavern, saws going, and talking about how his dozen or so employees are all "good lads." By way of expressing the distance he's come in life, he says, "I've got a lot of sawdust and glue underneath my fingernails." I'm reminded about how Ireland produces a disproportionate number of poets.

Byrne is the Byrne of Byrne Custom Woodworking, crafters of high-quality cabinets and beds and long shining tables for respectable homes and offices and the kind of dark-wooded library you'd wear a silk robe and sip a tumbler of Redbreast in. This isn't a particleboard kind of operation: Cherry, walnut, durable African mahogany for the exterior shutters (a recent addition to the operation). Alder is currently popular, a more affordable alternative to cherry. And the designs represent the meeting in wood of a customer's perhaps-vague idea about what they want and Byrne's ability to coax it out with lathe and saw.

"I'll try and get in their mind and see what they want," he says. "It gives me a kind of template of things they like." This kind of finery isn't pre-fab and consequently isn't cheap, but here too Byrne has a kind of worldly philosophy on the thing.

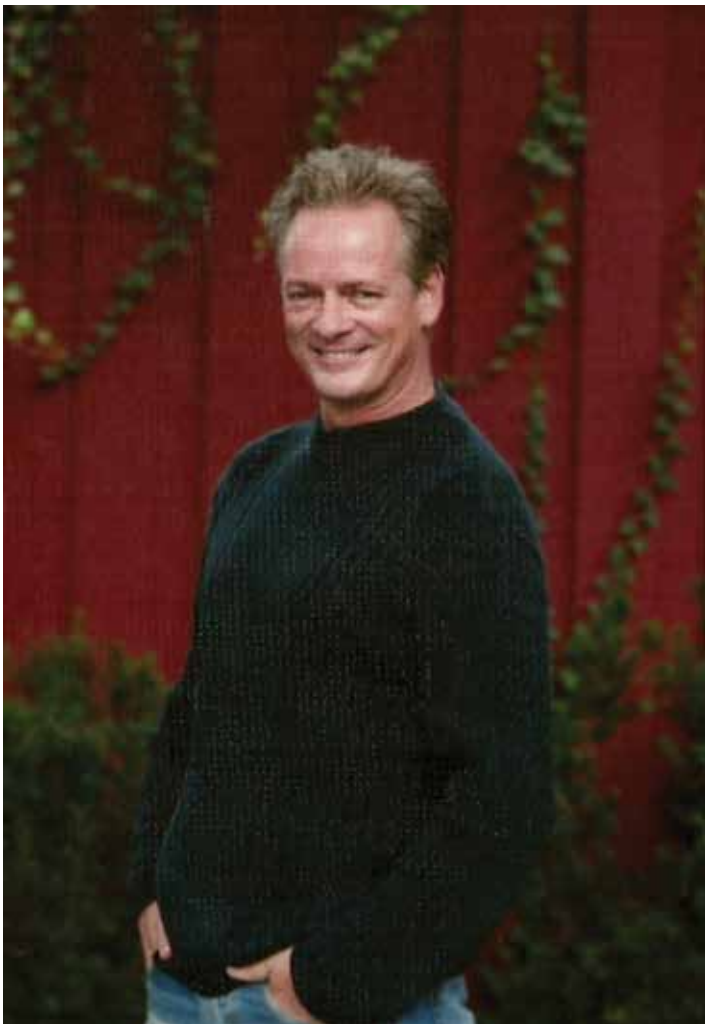
"It's become such a mass-produced world and I don't think people mind spending the extra dollar to have something they really own," he says. "Plus I think it's fun to do it that way, too."

Byrne's work is found in homes in Texas and Colorado, adorning the entryways of Irish pubs and around the stations of the cross of at least one church. Churches are good customers for Byrne. "Being a Catholic Irish boy, I seem to get a lot of church work to do."

A look at the work board in the office of Byrne Custom Woodworking gives an idea of the business' range. There are wine-barrel chairs, a votive wall, a bar, shutters, an evocatively worded "house of cabinets." Byrne's also developing a line of furniture with Celtic designs, a limited run. Like a print. He'll make a hundred, say, signed and numbered.

Brent Vanlandingham, owner of the recently opened VaKo Jewels in Leawood, hired Byrne to build a jewelry cabinet for the store's VIP room. The results, he says, were "magnificent." "I wanted a piece that looked like an antique," he says, "like it was from the 1800s." Byrne gave him such a piece, going the extra mile to distress it himself with chains and hammers, probably smiling the whole time.

Byrne began learning his craft at his father's side in Ireland. His father was a geologist—a drilling engineer—but also had an innate skill at woodwork, which obviously passed on down the gene-line to



Top: Ian Byrne *photo Adrienne Maples*  
Bottom: Custom kitchen cabinets with a stain and glaze finish *photo David Shaughnessy*

## INTERIORS



his son who, it must be said, was an avid student. “Ever since I was a little lad I helped him,” he says.

Byrne began a woodworking apprenticeship at 16 and learned his craft over five years. “It was just very natural to me,” he says. He immigrated to the United States in 1987, doing remodeling work while buying tools and getting ready to launch his own business. In 1990 he opened a shop in the West Bottoms and then bounced around as a growing workload forced him to find bigger and bigger spots. “Now the hard part is trying to keep the love of woodworking and the frustration of business separate.”

He was doing some woodwork for a commercial casework company that was starting to fail and owed him some money. They offered to give him a giant panel saw as payment, but the monster was set up in the company’s cavern workshop in the Meritex Caves, an underground business park built out of a spent limestone mine. The company ended up folding and Byrne slid right in. To paraphrase Dickinson: Because the saw could not move for him, he kindly moved for it.

And, of course, it meant Byrne suddenly had a much bigger workshop. “So the infrastructure was already here and it kinda gave me a boost on my business plan,” he says. Plus it’s just cool. “I love it when friends of mine come over from Ireland. They say it’s like a James Bond movie.”

Being an amiable sort with a headquarters 85 feet underground, Byrne recognizes its value as a place to wait out the apocalypse and, being also a business-savvy sort, he will accommodate you: “This is the spot to come,” he jokes. “I only charge a dollar cover charge.”

At least there’d be entertainment. In 2002 Byrne joined the Celtic rock band The Elders. Somehow Byrne manages to leave his cave long enough to do 100 shows a year. His son plays in the band now, meaning, he says, the band’s name is one they can grow into. The band has fans (“Elderberries”) all over the country, and so when they started touring in Europe, and especially in his native Ireland, people wanted to come along. Which is how The Elders are about to embark on their seventh tour with an entourage of 120-150 Elderberries who enjoy Byrne without ever even seeing his secret cave. This year, he says with a grin, the downturn in the economy over there will allow them to rent out castles for part of their stay.

Performing with friends and family or working in the dusty cavern with his good lads, Byrne recalls his father’s advice for life: “Surround yourself with good people.” ❖



Top: Custom A/V cabinet featuring a crackled finish *photo David Shaughnessy*  
Middle: Custom-made table for KC Southern Railroad Corporate office *photo Ian Byrne*  
Bottom: Custom dining room table *photo Ian Byrne*