

# Andrew Muller

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If he was not wearing a helmet, Andrew Muller, owner of Custom Gobos would have the wind in his hair delivering gobos on his motorbike and a typical onlooker may think, "Now there's someone who's got it made."

With hardly any competition, it would appear that Andrew is in a league of his own. Offering a high tech product and service second to none, he can be excused for upping his price on a rush job. One thing's for certain though... he always gets the job done right and on time. Take the time to visit his website gallery, and you realize that gone are the days where gobos were just metal stencils. Today with colour and laser you can just about create a painting on something that is not much larger than a five rand coin.



Andrew Muller (8)

But life in the fast lane did not fall into Andrew's lap. Douglas Franklin\* once said, "My theory of self-made men is, then, simply this; that they are men of work. Whether or not such men have acquired material, moral or intellectual excellence, honest labour faithfully, steadily and persistently pursued, is the best, if not the only, explanation of their success."

With his offices based at his home in Highlands North, Johannesburg, Andrew lives one street away from his parent's old home. "In my late schooling years, I started a little disco. I got into sound early and started doing school parties in garages," he reminisces. With only a couple of speakers he got the job done.



Andrew completed his matric through Damelin and then worked as an apprentice mechanic for Toyota Rivonia. Realizing that he needed theory as a back up, he completed his N3 Motor Trade Theory at Wits Technicon. Then in the middle of winter, in July 1984, the South African Air Force beckoned and Andrew found himself at Mariepskop where he became a Radar Operator.

Returning home two years later, Andrew worked as a programmer and assembler in the R & D Department for a company called Computer Sciences, running a mobile disco on the side. "It was tough," he says. "Every cent I put into the business and I wasn't making anything. I couldn't even afford to advertise in a newspaper!"

A company who did advertise on a daily basis caught Andrew's attention. Exasperated, Andrew phoned them - Cream Cheese Discotheques - and spoke to owner Colin Slater to find out how they managed to afford the constant advertising. Colin, in turn, invited Andrew to come and see him.

"I bought a pair of shoes for the meeting because I always used to walk around in a pair of tekkies," says Andrew. "On that day, my dad was working on a car and commented on my nice shoes, warning me to watch the oil pan. I don't know how I did it, but I stepped into the oil pan and ended up going to the meeting in my old tekkies anyway!"

Colin Slater was always on the look out for new DJs, and Andrew, who found himself retrenched after a year from Computer Sciences, was now spending more and more time at Cream Cheese.

In those days you had to work as an apprentice before becoming a DJ and Andrew was initially hired to set up and collect gear before he could do his first gig - which ended up being a matric dance at Northview High.

At that time Strike Productions was new and also belonged to Colin Slater. "David Hossey was a DJ, and suddenly Colin had to buy stages and lights - it was early days for rental companies - and David ran the sound, Colin did the lighting and I drove the gear, helping to off-load and set up."



On a day Andrew was at the Johannesburg Sun sitting behind a control desk at a fashion show. "It was a Zero 88, 12 channel manual light desk and I'm not sure what happened, but I had been watching rehearsals when Colin went out. It was in the day before cell phones and Colin went back to the office to make some calls. The client asked me to run a couple of scenes, and when Colin returned and wanted to take over, the client said, "Let Andrew do it".

From that time on, David would do the lighting, I would be on sound and Colin would be at the office. David and Andrew took Strike Productions from strength to strength, but Andrew felt it was time to move on. He was hired by Debbie Batzofin from the Sound Stage in Midrand. "She asked if I had run a live band before and I just said "Ja" and I stayed for a season with Dianne Chandler's "We'll Meet Again", he says. "It was lovely and I learnt a lot in a short period of time but it was something I couldn't do for too long. I would be longing for something to go wrong for the actors, and then one day it did. I remember Dianne's radio mic was dead and she did her first song with it held behind her back. Boy, did I get into trouble and from that day on we always kept a back up cable mic on stage just in case."

Andrew missed working at Strike and rejoined the company. “Things were going very well and eventually David and I were running the business. David said, “Let’s buy Strike” and he offered me 49% shares. I decided it was better than nothing, but as I did not have the money, my dad came up with the finances. David and I now owned Strike and remained his business partner for three years.”

Within the first year, Andrew was able to repay his dad, but while business was booming, it took its toll. “I got divorced from my wife Vivienne and got remarried. Those were the dark years of my life and I realized that there was more to life than working like this.”

Andrew threw in the towel and freelanced as a sound operator. He was at a show for the Audi Fashion Week in Sandton when Bernard Tilanus from Micro Etch popped in to deliver gobos. “At that time he was the only person in the industry making gobos. “I looked at them and thought that I could do these... there’s definitely a gap in the market. That was in 1998.”

Researching the market, Andrew found a company in Benrose South who had equipment to chemically etch gobos. The company made PC Boards, and after a great deal of persuasion they finally gave in to allow Andrew to make his first sample. Subsequently he wrote out letters to everyone he could think of in the industry and sat back and prayed. Slowly the jobs came in, one by one, all the while Andrew was freelancing and doing the odd disco event for Roy from Starry Night Discotheques.



More and more jobs came in and in 1999 Andrew started a proper accounting system. After 2 years of doing everything myself “I was running around like a headless chicken, doing the gobos, buying the film, doing the artwork, running to collect film, driving back to the factory, making the gobos and then delivering them. I was physically exhausted and that had gone on for about two years. With things getting busier, I hired Lorraine “daughter of Fred the owner of the factory in Benrose where we etched” and soon she was in charge of making and delivering gobos and running around for me.”

Not long after though Jason Hayne, Andrew’s right hand man, joined Custom Gobos. “This was Jason’s first real job and he has just grown. He makes sure things happen, is honest and dependable.”



Jason Hayne who works alongside Andrew

Andrew’s next milestone was glass gobos. Surfing the internet, he found Beacon in Sweden who made them. “The benefit of glass is that you get the exact replica, we didn’t need tags to hold them together and we could use colour.”

Andrew ordered blanks from Beacon and started experimenting. “Then out of the blue one day, I got a call from the Swedish Trade Council. They wanted to meet me and said they were doing a market survey for Beacon to research the viability of the South African Market. Easter five years ago, Beacon, based 600 km north of Stockholm in Sweden, South of the Atlantic Circle, invited Andrew over. He spent a week finding out how to make gobos properly. He also purchased equipment from them which enabled him to churn out top quality gobos.



“Custom Gobos now offered Full Colour CMYK glass gobos and a service to collect and deliver to a show, seven days a week and we never blotched up. We followed through right to the end... and I loved driving my bike to deliver.”

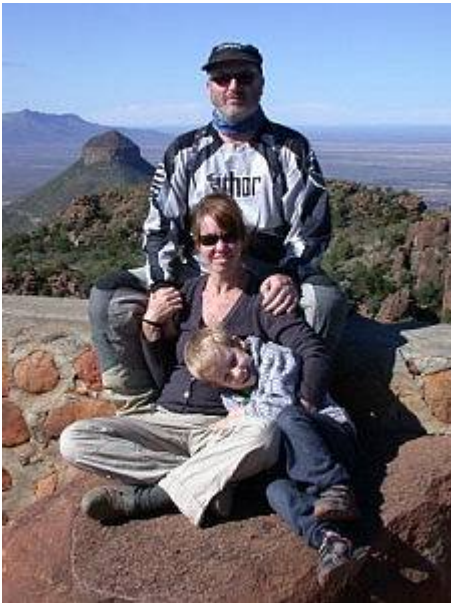
Metal gobos are fading out, but a huge turning point came about three years ago, when Andrew attended PLASA. “There are only a handful of us gobo makers in the world. In fact it’s very seldom to meet people who make gobos. It was wonderful to meet and share our knowledge.” At PLASA Andrew also met Dutchman Aad Vogel, owner of Gobo-Image in Holland. “He was a brilliant man and we got on like a house on fire,” says Andrew. “He invited me to see his set up in Amsterdam.” Visiting Holland as well as a UK based company Projected Image, it became apparent that all the gobo companies seemed to run parallel technology wise. “But Projected Image was cooking busy and made us look like small fry.”

In Holland, Aad Vogel opened his home to Andrew. He spoke about a new laser machine that at the time would cost close to a million Rand, and a year later contacted Andrew to say he had actually bought it. “He sent me some samples and I was amazed at the quality. I caught the next plane to Holland to see this new laser.

“I spent a week in Holland, and on the second last day, I phoned London and placed an order.” Initially hoping for help from the bank, Andrew eventually had to finance the equipment himself. The laser arrived, and for the Custom Gobos team, who were so used to etching, it was a huge learning curve.

The laser allows everything to be done in-house and there is no longer a need for film. Custom Gobos can offer extra things like 18 spot colours which means the process is a lot quicker. For

someone who some years ago thought gobos would fade out in the next decade, Andrew has proved himself wrong and has just kept upping his game.



Andrew with Vivienne and Keagan

Andrew says his partner and former wife, Vivienne, and their six year old son Keagan are his reason for living. The family planned to migrate and bought a house in Perth two years ago, but Andrew says he loves it here. “Every Sunday I go ride with my mates on farm roads around Johannesburg,” he says. “What freedom with the wind in my face, out of the crowds and in the country with the dirt road underneath.”

\* Douglas Franklin (1818 - 1895) was one of the most prominent figures in African-American and Unites States History)



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