



# The Golden Age of the Pop Icon

By Drew Wilson

*"The Heart Throb is the pulse that connects all of us, across religious divides and continents; it is a unifying element that opens our eyes and ears to other cultures and their aspirations. It is a musical journey we all can share."*

**I**n the early days Guy Portelli was happy working alone in a shed at the bottom of his garden sculpting for the advertising and film industry. But, as success built, he had to take on extra staff, had to work out PAYE, VAT and keep accounts. He found to his horror he was becoming a businessman not a sculptor; this was not what he had set out to be.

So, he took the radical decision to try to look upon this state of affairs in a different way, to try to make the running of his business an art form in its own right, to include the creative process in his everyday business practice. It was this attitude that led to Guy taking his project to the Dragon's Den. It was the 'Eureka Moment', when, by thinking

creatively about how to promote his business, Guy was able to take his art up to the next level.

"I had been exhibiting with some of the top galleries, but still felt that I was a jobbing sculptor. What I needed was a framework where I could experiment with concepts and materials, knowing that the pieces would be exhibited in the public domain with the publicity in place to attract an audience and, to be honest, I am thrilled with what we have achieved."

The Dragons' input has given Guy the framework and structure within which to work, whilst still allowing him complete creative freedom. Which is good news because Guy won't be put in any

pigeonhole: he's always evolving, always re-inventing. He creates art in countless original ways, with new work often looking quite different to his earlier pieces.

But, upon closer scrutiny, you can find certain recurring themes. There is often an element of narrative in Guy's work. *Within the Heart Throb* suite, the Tupac piece is a biography in three dimensions, similarly the Hendrix sculpture illustrates the reaction to the Vietnam War, whilst the tribute to Frank Sinatra is steeped in the folklore of the Rat Pack, Las Vegas and the Mafia.

The use of positive and negative interlocking shapes is another stylistic trait that flows through Guy's work. That these shapes are frequently made of lines drawn in space and avoid enclosing the form also adds coherence. It is a subtle consistency of approach which brings a harmony to the whole collection.

Think of this exhibition as the visual equivalent of a rock band's concept album. If the eighteen

individual sculptures are the tracks, then the album is a hi-fidelity social history of the last six decades.

This is the attraction of the *Pop Icon* theme to Guy: it gives him the perfect excuse for controlled experimentation.

"I feel that Grace Jones most certainly shouldn't be treated in the same way as Bob Marley. In interpreting David Bowie's role in youth culture I wouldn't use the same vocabulary as for The Spice Girls; they require a different approach."

The Dragons' support has also allowed Guy to indulge his whims, to fully express himself, even to make some mistakes. The timing was good too. Guy has been working on his *Pop Icon* suite for the past thirty years. At times it has lain dormant, at times re-visited. But without the financial backing, the infra structure to fabricate large pieces and his now fully developed skill set, Guy couldn't see how to pull it off, so he has had to wait till now.

*opposite:* Guy and Frank Sinatra in construction

*below:* Bob Marley, bronze, dim. 70 X 70 X 70 cm. Edition of 5. (1985)







"Now is exactly the right time for *Heart Throb*, not too early not too late. I wasn't ready a decade ago, and in another ten years' time I might not have the energy!"

The pieces in *Heart Throb* aren't portraits in the traditional sense, indeed Guy is relieved that his chosen icons haven't physically sat for him in his studio. He's not that interested in them in real life. It's the celebrity persona, the stage presence that intrigues him. Through meticulous research Guy builds up an in-depth view of his subject: the background of the political climate; the prevailing social and cultural moods. He absorbs their visual imagery, symbols and metaphors. This is what Guy calls 'The Shadow'.

"Without the shadow you can't see the form in its true light. Take the Jimi Hendrix sculpture: the whole ideology of the time came out of the Vietnam War, so to look at Hendrix without superimposing him against that backdrop doesn't give enough sense of time and place. You need the shadow to give form."

Knowing this, we start to see these shadows elsewhere within the collection: Sinatra and the Mafia; Amy and excess; the media's pre-packaging of the Spice Girls; the Sex Pistols versus the Establishment - the shadow giving form.

Guy's broad palette of materials and methods leads him to some vibrant, sensual and diverse outcomes. As a boy Guy wanted to be a treasure hunter (think a slightly tubby Indiana Jones), but it seems that a strong sense of self preservation and a low boredom threshold led him into staying at home and making his treasures for himself. He's still at it, religiously polishing, and adorning his creations with mosaic: it's contemporary idolatry.

And, you can't help but wonder what future generations might make of these objects of

adoration when archeologists dig them up in a thousand years' time.

Who were these people worshipped as gods? And what sort of society created them?

*Heart Throb, Sculptures by Guy Portelli RBA FRBS, runs 25 June - 3 July at the Mall Galleries, London, SW1Y 5DB*

*opposite: Frank Sinatra - Night and Day, perspex, gold plated aluminium and diamante, dim 1m X 1m X 70cm. Ed of 5. (2009) Photo by James Gillham.*

*above: Guy and the Dragons: Peter Jones, Theo Paphitis and James Caan*

*below: Sex Pistols - Post Punk, aluminium, bronze and mosaic, dim 2.2m X 1.2m X 80cm. Ed of 3. (2008)*

*bottom: John Lee Hooker in workshop*

