



# Jack be chic

One of fashion's most intriguing designers steps out of the shadows for **Janice Breen Burns**.

**K**ARL Bartl doesn't want to be filmed. It's enough of a stretch that he agreed to this interview, maybe even a photograph (albeit, one that would conceal at least part of his face). But the appearance of *Age* online producer Tom McKendrick lugging tripods and camera equipment up three flights of stairs at the offices of Factory X, where Bartl designs his cool-as-cubes menswear brand Jack London, tips the soft-spoken recluse over the edge. "No," Bartl says, nervous but firm. "I'm not comfortable with this. No." There's a strained exchange and McKendrick politely leaves, more disappointed than annoyed. "I understand, don't worry," he tells an apologetic Bartl. "It happens."

But it doesn't. Fashion is a crowded, chaotic industry, bristling with strivers who'd give an arm to be filmed for *The Age* online. Bartl is unique, and not only for his reluctance to publicise himself. The gifted designer, PhD psychologist, professional band guitarist and father of one son, Edward, with former partner Alannah Hill, is complicated to the brink of eccentricity, or madness. And, he's acutely aware of it. "I know

I have a certain neurotic intensity." And there are reasons for that — very good ones — but we'll get to them later.

At 42, Bartl still has the smooth, wide-eyed and full-lipped features of a 25-year-old. He's tall and lean and slick as cooked spaghetti in one of his own Jack London neo-mod black tailored suits with softly crumpled white shirt and long-toed leather shoes. It's a key

look for the three-year-old brand, sprung from his own obsession, as a Melbourne university student, for thin, sharply tailored London-esque suits. Lately, he's pushed the look — as the original 1960s mod look was pushed — along punk and skinhead aesthetics.

Now he perches on the edge of a high-backed executive chair, a vast backdrop of swatches and sketches mapping the Jack London winter 2011 collection behind him. With disarming candour — the kind, ironically, I've only encountered with one other person in the industry, Alannah Hill — Bartl describes how, in a real-life realisation of the biblical proverb "Physician, heal thyself", he steered his education and career to compensate for a rocky childhood.

Bartl was sexually abused by a relative at age five. By age nine, he'd figured girly knickers concealed the very thing that attracted his abuser (he was a wily little chap), so he began

raiding his sister's underwear drawer. "You could say that was my very first fashion faux pas," he says now with a hoot of laughter. "My sister's pink frilly underwear!"

At this stage of the interview, I ask Bartl if he's OK with me writing about this. He is. So, aside from a couple of "off the record" comments, we talk on. By 12, Bartl was a bona fide "snow dropper", an avid collector and wearer of women's panties. By his mid-teens he wondered if anything good could come of his abuse and this subsequent perversion. "But I'd read somewhere that after trauma, certain aspects of your personality get shut off and others become more intense and extreme."

Bartl's rocket-fuelled drive to succeed was apparently one of those "aspects" that spilt into all he's attempted since. "I give everything 100 per cent, it's a compulsion to see everything through to its end," he says. "I was interested in psychology, so



I went to university for 10 years, saw it to a PhD."

His specialty area was children and families and the effect of sexual aberrations. "Well, that was obvious." He went into private practice for two years, worked in psychiatric hospital, was musing about publishing his work or further research and a friend asked him to join his band. Bartl couldn't play a note, "but, I thought, that could be fun", and launched a fanatic agenda of self-education and rehearsals, eventually playing and touring with the Morning After Girls for four years.

When the band headed overseas Bartl opted to stay in close proximity to his and Hill's son, Edward. "Then I had an idea for a cool, edgy, youthful label that was also commercially viable."

Three years on, Factory X (which also produces brands including Alannah Hill, Lisa Gorman and Dangerfield) runs seven Jack London standalone stores and five concessions in David Jones outlets.

Bartl has a crystal vision of his market. "I see the guy on stage, with a guitar, or the guy sitting in a lecture theatre, or the guy studying lines for a theatre production. When I see colours, fabrics, textures, it's about feeling: do they make him feel strong, do they make him artistic, do they make him feel sexy or like being self-reflective?"

The sum of Bartl's complicated parts underpins his talent as a designer and ability to drill into young men's needs. "I'm on track with my plans [for Jack London] but not finished yet."

## Melbourne Fashion Festival highlights

### MONDAY

Fashion Full Stop: Decades of Australian Fashion. Show 5.30 pm with Guy Sebastian. Historic segments by Prue Acton, Norma Tullo, Romance was Born. The Plenary, South Wharf, tickets \$39 to \$79.

### TUESDAY TO SATURDAY

■ LMFF Sidewalk Shows by city retailers (daily except Friday), main stage, noon, 4.30pm, Fed Square

■ The L'Oreal Paris Runway Show series, twice nightly, Peninsula, Central Pier, Harbour Esplanade, Docklands, tickets \$49 to \$95.

### THURSDAY

LMFF Business Seminar, 8.30am to 4pm, Sofitel Hotel, hosted by Robyn Holt with Dazed Group editorial director Jefferson Hack, Bally creative directors Graeme Fidler and Michael Herz, and others. \$450.

■ Menswear Runway, with Helena Christensen, 10.30pm, Peninsula, tickets \$49 to \$95.

### SATURDAY

Offsite runways with Penthouse Mouse, 8pm and 10pm. Shed 4, Docklands, \$30 to \$45.  
[www.lmff.com.au](http://www.lmff.com.au)





Karl Bartl's Jack London trunk show *Urban Warriors and Dandy Lions*, Wednesday, March 16, 8.30 pm at the Prahran Town Hall, will be onstream on [www.jacklondon.com.au](http://www.jacklondon.com.au)  
Far left and left: From the winter 2011 Jack London collection.  
Below: A rare portrait of the reclusive designer.  
Picture: SIMON SCHLUTER