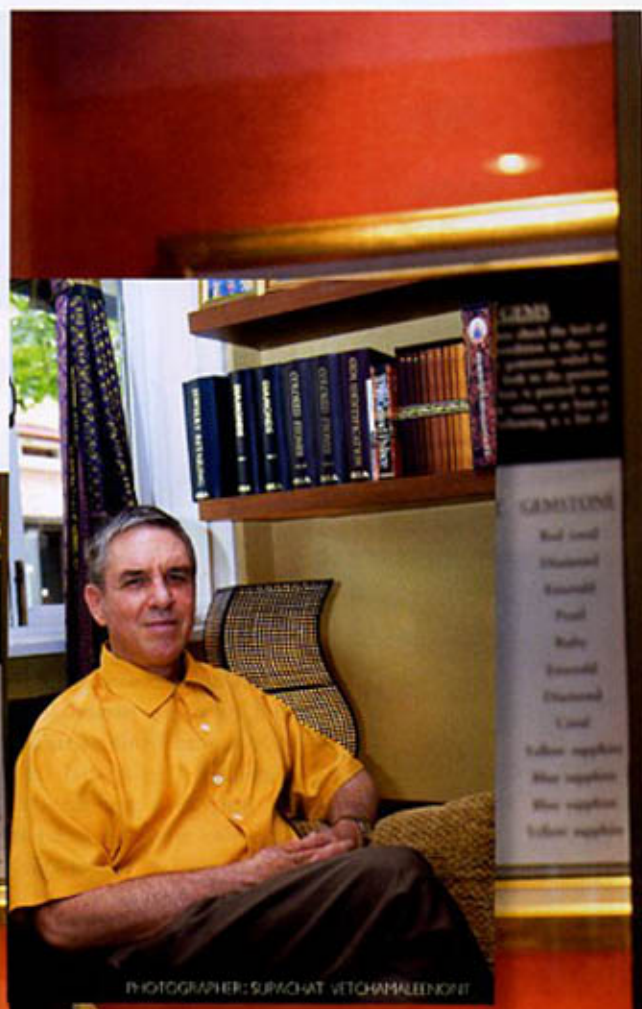
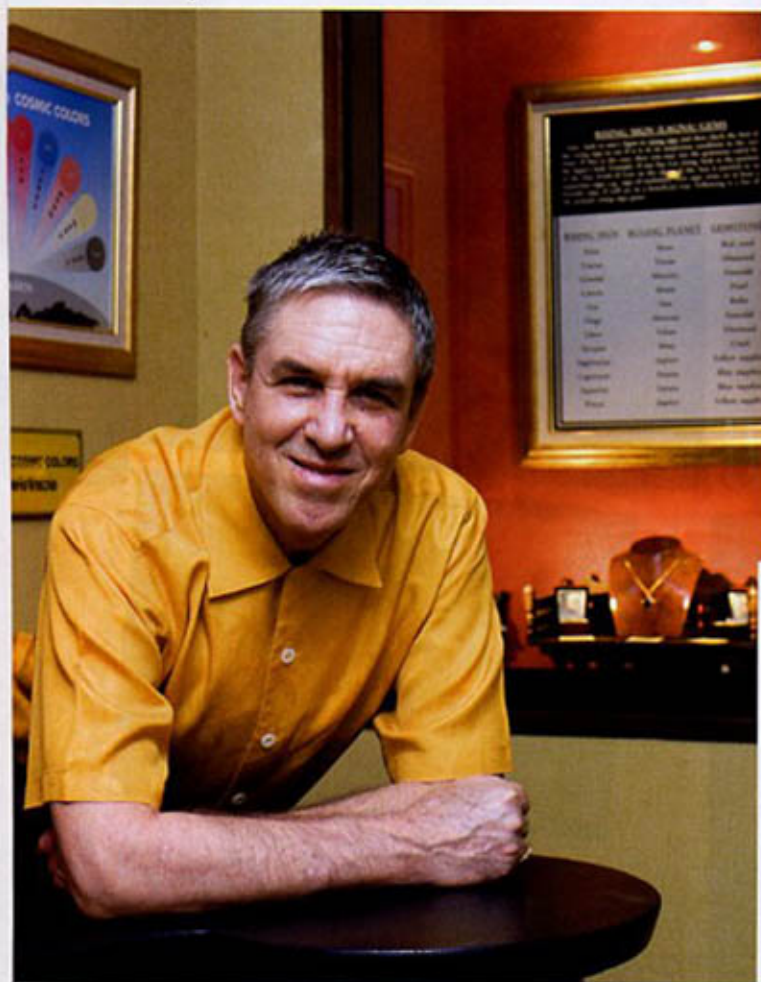


T h e E x F i l e s

Living in Thailand
EXplores the
EXpatiate
EXperience



Successful musician, Hindu Swami, philanthropist, linguist, gemologist, author, designer, and businessman – is there anything Richard Shaw Brown hasn't done? Having spent most of his life in the Far East, Richard has adopted Thailand as his home, and it is clear there is no other place he would rather be.

Richard's life to date has been nothing short of fascinating. After spending most of his early youth in California, enjoying water sports and playing music, Richard's singing talent was recognised at age 18. He went to London, where he found considerable fame as the lead singer of the band named The Misunderstood.

At the time, his future success seemed assured. But destiny had other ideas. Richard was drafted by the US military for service in the Vietnam War. An outspoken anti-war advocate, Richard fled to India where he spent the next twelve frugal years living in a Hindu ashram. Trading the comforts of a western material existence and the ego-driven lifestyle of the music industry, Richard studied alongside respected gurus and devoted himself entirely to religious practice and comprehensive public service.

His time spent in India was a period of great learning, and he gained proficiency in the Sanskrit, Hindi and Bengali languages, as well as developing an interest in Hindu mysticism. Through a strange twist of fate, Richard became involved in a ruby mine in Southern India.

Romancing the Stone

If your karma is in need of attention, long-term Thailand resident Richard Shaw Brown has the solution. **Bronwyn Ure** met with Richard recently to discover why he proudly calls Thailand home.



This inspired him to study the ancient Sanskrit wisdom of gemology, where certain gemstones are thought to have power to influence one's karma, depending on celestial aspects at the time of birth.

Richard returned to the US in the late 1970s and cleared his legal status following the end of the Vietnam War. At that time, he completed a Gemology degree, and took frequent visits to Thailand to buy gemstones. In 1986, he moved to Thailand permanently and married his wife, Kanitha. They have an eleven year-old son, Jiva, who is a student at the prestigious Chitralada School.

Combining his knowledge and skills led Richard to establish a successful business, Astral Gemstone Talismans. As Richard points out, Astral Gemstone Talismans are more than simply decoration. "These are original designs, they have meaning, and are of the highest quality," he notes. "I want to be known as the Jim Thompson of gems." In other words, someone who takes the best that Thailand has to offer, and showcases it to the world. Even though the talismans are based on an ancient system, they look futuristic in style – a unique combination. "I want to make the hippest jewellery in the world," laughs Richard.

Richard describes Thailand as "the smartest Asian country" and he would not want to live anywhere else. "Thailand outsmarted the Portugese, the French and the English," he says. "It is the only country in this part of Asia not to have been colonised and I respect Thailand for that." He goes on to add, "I'm proud of Thailand and I want Thailand to be proud of me, in the same way that the Romans are proud of the Bvlgari brand."

With six retail locations in Bangkok and a factory in Thonburi, Richard has a substantial team of staff to manage. He describes working with Thai people as "Fantastic – as long as they are not men. I wouldn't hire a Thai man to work for

me, as they are always trying to take over," Richard states candidly, with a smile. Not that he has anything against men in general, Richard counts many Thai men among his friends and business partners. He also describes His Majesty the King of Thailand as "the greatest man in the world".

Richard goes on to compare Americans, who he describes as "uptight, stand-offish and unfriendly" with the Thais, whom he observes as perennially smiling, whatever the occasion. "It seems the bigger disaster, the bigger the smile – as if smiling is the only way to survive it," notes Richard with a tone of admiration in his voice. The only thing Richard misses about the US is seeing his parents, who are finding travel more difficult as they get older.

Despite his proven language capabilities, Richard admits that he can speak some Thai but has not found the motivation to read and write it. "I don't want to speak bad Thai when I can speak good English," he explains, logically. He goes on to explain that it depends on the audience, and speaking less-than-perfect Thai could seem inappropriate in some circumstances.

Is there anything Richard doesn't like about his adopted country? "I don't like the politics in Thailand, the instability." He adds that he doesn't like seeing 'Thai versus Thai', as it is unappealing and seems out of character for the Thais. "I also don't like any attempt to globalise Thailand, to make it like the US." He adds, "I would like to see the Rama dynasty continue, for Thailand to remain independent, and to keep things the way they are."

The other sticking point is the traffic. At 61 years of age, Richard is still willing to drive himself, but he admits he is less intrepid than in years gone by. "Driving home is a ten-part adventure," he jokes. He humorously describes his drive home from the Siam Society each day, where he is forced to negotiate several lanes of traffic to get to the other side of Asoke Road. Then it is onto Sukhumvit Road, then the expressway, and so on.

When I ask Richard the sort of activities he enjoys when he is not working, he gives me a slightly puzzled look. "I don't really work," he states matter-of-factly. "I have everyone else working for me. I used to be a one-man show but now I'm not involved in the detail, such as buying gemstones." He adds that he spends a lot of time on the internet – mainly for reading and learning, but also as manager of fifteen websites, including General Prem's, for which he is Webmaster.

With a life as interesting as Richard's, it is no surprise to learn that a biography of his early life has already been written. UK music historian Mike Stax has written a movie screenplay based on Richard's biography, which may one day be developed into a motion picture. And so it seems Richard's fascinating life has a few more chapters in it yet. ●