

The Future Looks Bright

This San Rafael-based interior designer prides herself on a more-is-more aesthetic.

By Amber Turpin



Bright's bold use of color and patterns is what sets her apart.



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UNLESS YOU’VE LIVED IN THE BAY AREA for four decades and were lucky enough to attend a Silicon Valley corporate event back in the day, you probably don’t know about the cover band SRO. This group, made up of a staggering 19 people, was wildly popular with tech and pharmaceutical companies looking to book the band for their extravagant parties in the 1990s. There were four singers, three classically trained symphony violinists, a three-person horn section, a rhythm section, three dancers and a guy that wore a fez, suitably called the fez guy.

Even longtime clients of local interior designer Barbra Bright might not know that she was in that band, and married to the bandleader and master of ceremonies Dick Bright. But why should this article about a leading design industry professional bring up a ‘90s cover band? It turns out that her experience in SRO was a pivotal chapter in what became a thriving design career and eventually the founding of Barbra Bright Design (www.barbrabrightdesign.com). “You can only dance for so long,” explains Bright, and there came a time when her creativity and childhood sewing hobby served as a transition to costume design.

“With 19 people onstage there was a lot to look at. The band radiated a fun, colorful, sexy vibe. Dick wore a top hat with custom coattails in sequins. The violinists wore black sleeveless coattails with sequin bras, hot pants, bow ties, cummerbunds and wrist cuffs. And they wore matching wigs in different colors. And the dancers wore everything — glitter, feathers, spandex and leather,” she recalls.

She was in the group for about eight years, and during that time she styled the look of the band and also enlisted others to make costumes that she designed. After she retired, she thought it made sense to go back to school to learn fashion design. But an offer to become a design assistant at a kitchen showroom detoured that plan. “At the time, I said I would try it for six months since I didn’t cook,” she says. “But it turns out that design is design and you either have a ‘good eye’ or you don’t. I loved it and took classes at Cañada College in kitchen design.”







The studio is set up like a model home.

Christopher Stark (this page and opposite)

Bright's next chapter came in the form of a divorce, an obvious turning point in many ways. She had been working part time while married and continuing to discover design, but then 10 years ago when the marriage ended, she knew she wanted to be able to support herself. "So I dove hard into creating an interior design business," she explains.

That leap of faith has led to the completion of Bright's own studio, which she finished last August. A former comic book store in San Rafael that she slowly remodeled over the last five years as her pocketbook would allow is today a unique showroom that illuminates Bright's keen eye for design. She wanted her studio, set up like a "model home," to reflect her design sensibility as if it were in an actual home. "You come in and there's a bar, there's a living room, there's a closet. The whole idea is to show how cohesive the whole house can be, but very livable. For it to be beautiful and also to be functional," Bright explains.


This layout changes the client experience in two ways, she says. When clients come in they see that she is a serious designer in a fully realized space. And there is also a sense of comfort in seeing a design style that is exciting and gives direction and permission to go bigger, even if it's not the client's specific design style. "I'm so grateful to be able to show clients concepts in a space. The pictures look great, but it really doesn't do it justice. I love having people visit. I'm very proud of the end result and was lucky enough to have talented friends to help my vision come through," she says.

Inspiration is everywhere for Bright, from architecture to museums to fellow designers' work. She loves looking at Instagram, and she celebrates how many points of view

people can access from that platform all over the world. She believes that design rules are meant to be broken and that innovation and risk are important tenets for every project.

"I feel like you can mix things that you wouldn't normally put together," she adds. "It's a maximalist theory: you can mix colors and patterns. But what happens is that people get frightened that it's too much. My job is to hold their hand and assure them that too much is just right. Really, what I'm trying to have my clients do is to be brave. Having a beige wall is not brave. Having a red wall is brave. It's just paint, we can repaint it. Don't be afraid to try new things because you assume that the outcome will be not to your liking. You might be pleasantly surprised."

This brave notion comes, in part, from Bright's earliest creative endeavors and the support she received as a child to pursue her artistic proclivity. "I attribute all of my style to my mother. She knits, sews, paints, gardens, she does it all," Bright says, adding that her parents gave her a lot of leeway and time to explore these hobbies. "I did a lot of reading and I looked at a lot of pictures," she reflects. "My parents gave me full access to my artistic ability. It just sort of grew. I remember lots of glitter, lots of dried noodles and glue. That's kind of how I got started ... I just use nicer products now."

Bright's upbringing and her sense of culture have been influential. She explains that being biracial (her mother is Korean and her father is African American), as well as being an only child, instilled a unique outlook. "This gave me a lot of time to think, to play, to see both cultures in terms of food and objects, yet being kind of different from both of my parents, and to be free as myself." 



Bright draws inspiration from myriad sources for her designs.