

# Buckle Up

Artist Paul Pearman makes art for your hips with wickedly stylish mosaic belt buckles.

By Sonny Williams • Photos courtesy of Paul Pearman



“Have a margarita!” Paul Pearman offered as I was busy photographing him toward the end of the Augusta Futurity at his booth in James Brown Arena. What the heck, I thought. I could use a short break, and maybe a dash of tequila would even help oil the wheels of inspiration.

With his black taco hat, shoulder-length locks and stubbled chin, Pearman looks as though he would fit right in with the likes of rockers Keith Richards or Kid Rock, just a few of the celebrities who buckle up with Pearman products.

I soon found out, however, as I sipped his tasty concoction, though this gregarious artist, animated as a colt in May, exudes the personality of a partyer, Pearman is all business when it comes to his art. There is little time to roll with the jet set as he is always on the move, searching for new stones, glass, fossilized teeth and gems to use in his colorful and often whimsical creations. A single buckle can take up to 40 hours to create, depending on the intricacy of the design, and since his vibrant buckles are some of the most collected, he is assiduously making them year-round, working 16-hour days.

“I have to produce all the time,” he said. “Basically, it just turned 2010. Every piece I did for 2009 is gone.”

Even as the Augusta Futurity was winding down, Pearman was constantly moving about, busy selling his buckles. During moments of seeming respite, he would transform from a zigzagging, loquacious butterfly into something akin to a scientist, pulling his hair into a pony tail, slipping on his magnifying glasses, intently hunched over a jeweler’s bench with high-end stainless steel tweezers to micro inlay glass.

## Mosaic muse

A whirlwind of energy, Pearman’s own life is as intricately inlaid as his mosaic buckles. He holds the 1989 Guinness World Record for the lon-



Pearman is engaged in the ancient and lost art of micro-mosaic, which is the inlaying of small pieces of colored glass, tile and stone. He has reinvented the art form to create new and vibrant pieces of art, like this intricately designed butterfly belt buckle.

This life-size Glass Mosaic Horse is a Van Gogh-inspired version of the South Carolina flag. The horse was part of the project “Horseplay,” presented by the Aiken Center for the Arts and the United Way of Aiken County in South Carolina.



## Pearman's Progress

Mosaic buckle-maker Paul Pearman just completed his sixth year at the Augusta Futurity, and his booth with his uniquely crafted buckles on display always draws a crowd.

Customers buzzed around after ordering a custom-made buckle, hoping to get a peek at Pearman's progress. Part of what makes Pearman's art so desirable is that he is engaged in the ancient art of micro-mosaic, which is an art form of the Greeks and Romans using small pieces of glass, tile and stone. But Pearman has created a new school of micro-mosaic, revitalizing this lost art with his own vision.

Many people will ask for special designs or their ranch brands to be decoratively displayed, and Pearman was busy creating and selling his wares.

"The game of selling is half the fun," Pearman said. "I have loyal customers and I take care of them."

And he's sold to some pretty big names. His buckles are gaining national attention and can be found on celebrities like Cameron Diaz, Keith Richards, Steven Tyler, Kid Rock, Ronnie Wood, Faith Hill, Tanya Tucker, Amy Grant, Marty Stuart and Brad Paisley. Others who are Pearman buckle-wearers are Josh Todd of the band Buckcherry, and Patterson Hood of the Drive-By-Truckers, who are on tour with Tom Petty.

The native Augustan's buckles can take up to 40 hours to be crafted, and they come in many shapes and designs such as tooth, heart,

butterfly and paisley. The gems used include spectacular cabochons of spider-web turquoise, jasper, Australian and Brazilian opals, tiger eye, blood coral and labradorite. The recycled, reclaimed and found objects include stained glass, shark teeth, fossils, moose horn, prehistoric relics, shells, vintage jewelry and more.

No casting is used and all the metal (stainless, brass, copper) is hand-forged, including all the mecha-

nisms. Pearman's mosaic belt buckles are *entirely handcrafted*, signed and numbered by the artist. Custom design work is available. Prices vary from \$150-\$8,000, depending on the materials used and intricacy of the design.

Pearman's work can be found at [www.mosaicbuckles.com](http://www.mosaicbuckles.com) or at fine retailers like JW Cooper and Windsor Jewelers listed on the Web site. —SW

Pearman's buckles may consist of fossilized shells and shark teeth, moose horn, stained glass, and precious gems like opal, jasper and turquoise.

gest skateboard jump (over 26 barrels). He is also a third-degree black belt and has both state and national championship belts in amateur kickboxing.

"I've always been an athlete, but the whole time I was an athlete, I would always doodle," he said.

Pearman, 49, is originally from Bakersfield, Calif., but he moved to Fort Gordon in Augusta, Ga., when he was a child. His father was in the Air Force. Pearman has always been an artist of some sort, and he originally began as a painter, first working in oils.

"I did oil paintings for 20 years before I started dabbling in the glass. It's one of those things where you don't really have a choice. I've always rendered," he said.

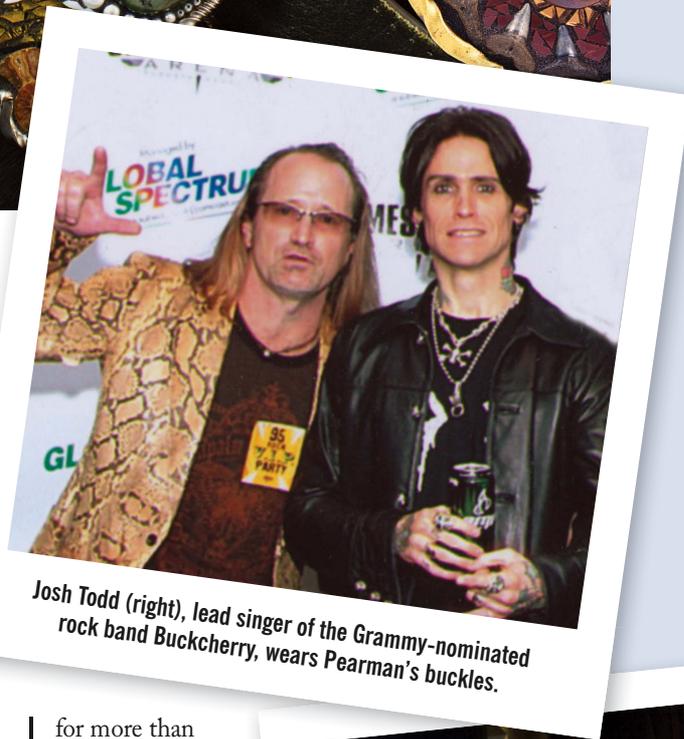
But it was when he was inspired to cover his paintings with glass and hand-nipped tiles that his first mosaics evolved.

"I wanted to do something that looked like a painting, but it was glass," he said. "It's the mixing of mediums that can create the most elegant pieces of art."

Pearman discovered his buckle-making niche when searching for a buckle to go with a '70s vintage Tony Lama leather belt he bought at a flea market. When his search came up empty, he used his experience in making jewelry and mosaic home décor items to design his own belt buckle.

"What motivated me to make belt buckles was that I couldn't find one that I really liked," he said. "I decided I would make myself the coolest belt buckle on the planet. Then people saw it and wanted it. So I made another one and another one, and that's how it started."

Pearman has worked in mosaic art



Josh Todd (right), lead singer of the Grammy-nominated rock band Buckcherry, wears Pearman's buckles.

for more than a decade, and his abilities go far beyond belt buckles. He has created designs for residential and commercial customers, making mosaic home décor items like mirrors, kitchen back-splashes, flooring, fireplace surrounds, and home and garden accents. He has also carved foam, creating an Irish castle with stained-glass windows for his dog, Pupster.

In fact, he is now building a new art studio on Lake Olmstead, in Augusta, from the ground up, which will be designed with Pearman's inimitable vision. The building will consist of brick, rock, wood, stucco, shell and high-tech architectural foam. Some of the amenities include a round foyer, an art nouveau hand-carved door he found in Chicago and a 40-foot-wide, two-story-high window.

"It's gonna be crazy," he said. "There won't be



Pearman with another satisfied customer at the Augusta Futurity



