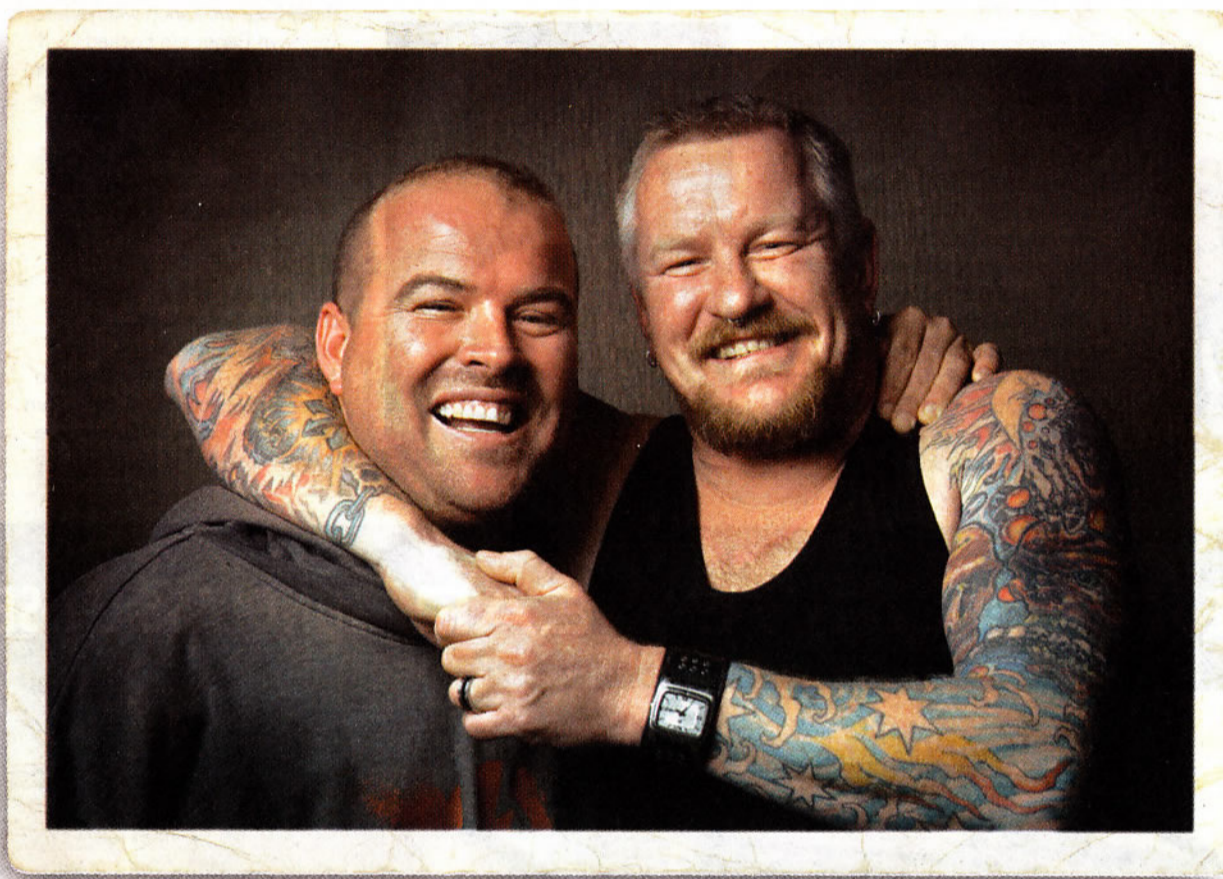


Matt "Branno" Branson, 38 (at right), from Perth, was a cult figure on the pro surfing tour from 1988 to 1991, famous for his tattoos and love of punk. He left the tour at 21 to come out as a gay man. The first person he told was his friend, Sydney surfer Will Webber, 37.

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**Matt Branson
& Will Webber**



Will: We met at a surf contest at Dee Why, Sydney, when we were about 17. Matt just seemed like a really good, friendly bloke. He was one of those guys you met and instantly liked. He didn't have any tattoos back then. I was the one who got him into tattoos. I told him I was thinking of getting one, and the next thing I knew he'd gone and had a little dragon done on his shoulder. We were both kind of shy when we were young. Perhaps we needed to be a bit scary to be accepted.

He'd stay at my family home, in Rose Bay, whenever he was in Sydney or passing through while on the tour. He'd stay for a couple of weeks or a month at a time. We used to drink a lot. One time he landed, we said to each other, "This time, we've got to do some more surfing", but within a few minutes we'd bought a case of VB and that was it. I remember that afternoon so well. We made bandannas and listened to Guns N' Roses.

When he dropped off the tour he moved in with this guy in Maroubra. I was thinking, "Why isn't he moving in with me?" But I didn't suspect anything. If you're going to be suss, you need a couple of feeder lines, and Branno didn't give any.

He told me he was gay a few months after I turned 21.

"It's not as if he's gone, 'Oh, now I'm out I can have my tattoos lasered off and get myself a Prada handbag.' We're stuck with this beast the way it is."

he wrote to one of his oldest friends, in Perth, and told him. His mate replied by saying, "You're not gay – it's Sydney that's done it to you. It's your choice." He totally shunned Branno, and Branno was just shattered. He was crying his eyes out. He said he didn't want people to call him a dirty fag. I assured him I'd be by his side forever. It was a pretty powerful moment.

When someone's world falls apart, especially for a man's man, a public man's man, it's a big fall. It's almost inevitably suicidal. I don't think he was suicidal that night, but he didn't need to feel so shattered. I told him he needed to do something solid – he had to ring his

My first response was, "Why?" He just said, "Don't say that!" I said it was all right, gave him a big cuddle and didn't mention it again. I can be judgemental when it suits me, but not when it comes to people and their partners. It didn't matter to me.

I had to keep the secret for several years, when

parents and tell them, which he did. When he got off the phone it was like a new beginning.

I just love the guy. He's my best mate. He hasn't changed a bit over the years. It's not as if he's gone, "Oh, now I'm out I can have all my tattoos lasered off and get myself a Prada handbag." We're stuck with this beast the way it is.

When he left the tour in 1991, we started a punk band called Mindcrack. Branno was on drums, I was on guitar, my brother Ben sang and my girlfriend Naomi played bass. We were really tight and really good; our music was crazy. But the band just fell apart. When we broke up in 1996, I was furious at them – I wanted to do it for life.

We finally got back together for a jam a few months ago. We drank a lot of beer and smoked a lot of cigarettes. I'm trying to live a bit cleaner these days and it made me feel really sick. It was amazing, though. I don't think the others realised how good we were.

Matt: I'm quite a reserved, shy person by nature, whereas Will is the funniest man in the world. He's got a nice, twisted sense of humour, which drew me to him. He can make light of any situation and he's quick – he's just bang, bang, and suddenly you're on the floor with your guts cramping up.

We hit it off straight away – for as long as I've known Will, I've felt incredibly close to him. I can't remember when I decided he'd be the one I'd come out to, but I always knew he would be very accepting, it's just the person he is. He probably hadn't had any close dealings with gay people before, but I found it easy to tell him.

I was living away from home, doing the tour, from the age of about 17, and the Webber family took me in. I would stay with them for weeks or months. The Webbers are incredibly giving. It's a very surf-oriented family. There's six brothers and they're all ... interesting. Mad, in their own way. Will and I used to love going on surf trips together, but we bonded over music. And beer – we bonded over beer.

Nothing is easy when you're a young bloke coming out. You're always scared you're going to lose your mates. But Will makes people feel at ease. Just hanging out with him, everything is black and white. There's no bullshit between Will and me. It's just mateship at its absolute finest.

The night I rang my parents was very emotional. I wouldn't say I was suicidal. I've never stood at the edge of a cliff and gone, "This is it."

But Will was my Rock of Gibraltar. He was there for me to lean on and help me through it. His nature is very loving.

I'm one of the lucky ones – my family and friends are just so accepting. There were a few grey years, but I couldn't have asked for better friends.

Will and I learned music together. When we formed the band, none of us had played before. We all bought instruments and started from scratch. We just went, "Right, let's make a song." I was into punk rock, but Will was also into Led Zeppelin and all this other stuff. He introduced me to a lot of different music.

Some of my fondest memories are jamming with Mindcrack. They were crazy times. We were extreme punk rockers. In our world, we rocked. But, to be honest, it wasn't a very big world. Will loves talking up the band. That's what I love about him. He's enthusiastic about everything.

I'm living on the Gold Coast now, and Will lives a three-hour drive away in Yamba, so we see each other every couple of months, which isn't enough. We talk on the phone at least once a week.

We've been trying to organise a jam for about five years and we finally got it together a few months ago. It was the first time we'd played together since the break-up. It was awesome. We went through all the old songs and when we finished, we all just sat back and went, "How good was that?" **GW**