

# Toby Shapshak

PATTERN RECOGNITION



## Geeks shall inherit the Earth

IT WAS the first Rolling Stones concert in South Africa. This mad freak in front of me screamed: "Charlie Watts, you are a god!"

It was a stand-out moment in a sublime concert, but contains a nugget of another truism about the world's paradigm. Everyone wants to be the lead singer, or the guitarist. No one wants to be the drummer.

I was reminded of this over the weekend when discussing entrepreneurship, at a gathering of Internet professionals called Geek Retreat. The brainchild of Heather Ford, the passionate woman behind Creative Commons in South Africa, it brings together a collective of geeks and journo's to discuss the future of the Internet in the country.

The obvious questions were: Why doesn't South Africa have more Internet entrepreneurs, and who can create the next online business that conquers the global economy?

Or more simply put, where is the

### 'How do we produce the next Mark Shuttleworth?'

next Mark Shuttleworth?

Shuttleworth is the greatest South African example of a concept called rockstar entrepreneurs — brilliant innovators who've made a significant contribution to the world. People like Amazon's Jeff Bezos, Google's co-founders Larry Page and Sergei Brin, Twitter's co-founders Biz Stone and Evan Williams, and even older guys like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates.

South Africa has several other remarkable entrepreneurs who've made their mark on the world, three of whom were at the Geek Retreat, demonstrating one of the truisms about great people with their humility.

Publisher Branko Brkic, who edited that thoroughly brilliant magazine *Maverick*, quietly shared his experience of the publishing industry.

Vinny Lingham, a Capetonian now living in San Francisco, could

have gloated about his latest round of funding (R162-million to go with the previous R40.5-million) for his clever site Yola.com — a web-based way of designing and building websites that now has two million users. *Business Week* just named it 19th of the top 50 global start-ups

### 'South Africa's greatest export are South Africans'

this year.

Gareth Knight, who has launched seven start-ups in London — including most recently a family networking site called Kindo — gave a down-to-earth explanation of dealing with venture capitalists, as did Lingham.

Justin Spratt, the likeable Australian and former derivatives trader now at Internet Solutions

Labs, got the ball rolling about sourcing venture capital in a country that produces many entrepreneurs but not many people willing to fund them. Even to the initiated, it was a fascinating insight into the trials entrepreneurs go through to get a good business off the ground.

Conversations about finding funding for clever start-up companies and launching services took up several sessions, along with other debates about how to get more people online in South Africa and what a bunch of geeks can do to encourage better social services.

My contention is that everyone wants to be the lead singer and not the drummer — everyone wants the glory, not to be the pragmatic guy at the back making sure the job gets done.

South Africa's greatest export are South Africans themselves.

The hottest thing right now is

"social media", the catch-all phrase for Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and other social networking sites, including that runaway success MyX.

The most significant presentation I saw all weekend, which I believe will make the greatest contribution, is Obami (obami.com). It's a social networking site with a difference, aimed at schools, allowing kids, teachers and parents to communicate with each other; keep up to date on other pupils and school events; and create mini websites for special interests like school projects or sports events. It's a closed system that harnesses the power of social networking for education. It's Facebook for school kids and teachers — and the smartest social media application I've seen all year.

The should-be-a-rockstar behind it is Barbara Mallinson.

Obami is long overdue and before long, Mallinson's name will be up there with Shuttleworth, Lingham, Knight and Charlie Watts.