



Back to the Beach

Surf style has become an American vernacular, like jeans. New books revisit its roots.

By GUY TREBAY

WHEN Jimmy Buffett hit Rockefeller Center plaza last week, to plunk away at his guitar for the "Today" show, the Bard of Margaritaville came barefoot and wearing vintage-looking board shorts and a T-shirt, as if to signal that summer had officially begun. Make that the Endless Summer. It has been decades since Mr. Buffett first tapped into the cultural sweet spot that is surf culture. And, while his take on beach bum narratives typically leads to a bar stool and the sun slipping behind the Key West horizon, that his philosophical roots are in the culture of wave-riding seems perfectly — one could almost say, gin — clear.

Lately, the octopus grasp of surf culture has become so inescapable that it is hard to contemplate a time, just over a half-century ago, when surfers were legitimate counterculture types, a wave-riding minority of oddballs, semi-sociopaths, dropouts, athletically gifted isolates with the occasional drug or messiah problem, or just all-around good-time freaks.

That was long before the waves at Ditch Plains on Long Island became so crowded after Memorial Day that one practically has to take a number before paddling out; before those Americans who call themselves surfers rose 90 percent

to 2.7 million between 1987 and 2005; before Quiksilver, the surf wear behemoth founded by two surfing buddies, started clocking revenues of \$541 million a quarter, as it did in the first months of 2006; before Laird Hamilton, the big-wave riding Adonis whose ego is commensurate with the 30-footers he routinely attacks, went from being the sport's Evel Knievel to being a spokesman for Davidoff cologne and American Express.

Describing the surfer "denizens" of Windansea Beach in San Diego in his 1965 book, "The Pump House Gang," Tom Wolfe wryly noted that "surfing was just 25 percent sport and 75 percent way of life." It was, Mr. Wolfe wrote, "a curious thing to build a communal life around." Even more improbable, it would have seemed then, was that the sport of ancient Hawaiians would one day provide the basis for a multibillion-dollar clothing business, which was celebrated last week at the Surf Industry Manufacturers Association's ninth annual conclave, its largest ever, held in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico.

"It's about the big brands that continue to dominate the core retail landscape and the small brands that bring newness to the younger core kids," Dick Baker, the association president, told 410 attendees, according to a fashion trade publication. Curiously, though, it may be that fewer of the fabled "younger core kids" are driving the surf style business

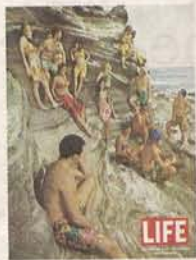
HAWAII ONE-O
Above, Butte Kaluhiokalani Velzyland in and in left ph surfers in Wa Bay in 1975, "Surfing Pho graphs From Seventies Ta Jeff Divine," lished by T. A Books.



Photographs © Jeff Divine

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an one might imagine. This is hinted at in the silver's current description of itself as producers of clothing, accessories and related products for young-minded people and developers of brands that represent a casual lifestyle driven from a board-riding heritage.

"Young-minded" and "board-riding heritage" seem to suggest that one qualifies as a surfer if one has seen "Step Into Liquid," the 2003 documentary on surfing's elite athletes and their secret haunts, and purchased a pair of Billabong shorts. And there is nothing wrong with that. But before the last remaining shreds of original surf style and culture are crammed into the grinder of commerce — made from equal parts flip-flops-and-board-shorts and T-shirts-and-oddsies and flat-fronts-and-Hawaiian-punch-bucket-hat — it may be worthwhile to revisit the original spirit of the sport.

"I think with surfing, there was this absolute moment of almost innocence after the war," said John McWhinnie, who in 2001 organized a fine show of surf-related art titled "Surf's Up" in East Hampton, N.Y. He was referring, of course, to the Second World War and the rebellious surf culture that emerged at its conclusion.

Almost concurrent with the arrival of the Beats on the cultural landscape, surfing produced its own array of rebels, dropouts and outlaws, albeit these radicals tended to have a tan. "That was all transformed totally by Gidget," Mr. McWhinnie said, referring to the unkillable 1959 Sandra Dee movie that was made from a novel Frederick Kohner allegedly based on the antics of his teenage daughter and a passel of her surf-crazed buddies at Malibu. "That's when the commercial engines that drive the economy seized on this as another form of teenage rebellion they would commodify."

Who can blame them? It is possible that no sport practiced by fewer people has ever had the influence of surfing on American style. This proposition is put to the test this month as a batch of new books about surf culture arrives in bookstores, along with a gallery exhibit pitched at the surprisingly large cohort of secret surfers who happen to live in New York, the least obvious of surf-

Among surf cultists (and rare book dealers) the handful of books put out over the past decade by the art director and surfer Tom Adler are genuinely coveted objects, beginning with "Don James: Surfing San Onofre to Point Dune: 1936-1942." This modest volume compiles the photographs of Mr. James, a Los Angeles neighbor of Mr. Adler's who was an early beach boy turned surfer turned dentist. Mr. James's neglected scrapbook of photographs was ultimately



Above, © Leroy Grannis and Taschen; top left, courtesy Dave Rochlen, from the book "California Fashion: From the Old West to New Hollywood" (Harry N. Abrams)

MAKING WAVES Left, Ocean Beach in San Diego in 1966, from "Surf Photography of the 1960's and 1970's" by Leroy Grannis. Far left, a Life magazine page from the book "California Fashion." Below, David Nuuhiwa and John Gail in 1971 at Laguna Canyon in California, from "Surfing Photographs from the Seventies Taken by Jeff Divine" (T. Adler Books).

enshrined in Mr. Adler's 1997 book, the pictures of surfers and board shapers and bathing beauties (both female and male) offering an enchanted view into the hedonistic promise of surf life along the southern California coastline at a time when there were probably no more than 200 practitioners of the sport. The effect of the book is like looking at flashcards from an American Eden.

There used to be handmade pamphlets; now there are \$400 books.

Did Bruce Weber base his entire late oeuvre on these photos or does it just seem that way? "I showed Bruce Weber the photos," Mr. Adler said. "He had me print archival prints as Christmas gifts in 1995 and he encouraged me to publish the book."

Having stumbled onto the James prove, Mr. Adler soon realized there must be others and since then his T. Adler Books in Santa Barbara has published "Surf Life 32 to

02" (2003); "Dora Lives: The Authorized Story of Miki Dora" (2005), about the most renegade spirit the sport has yet to produce; "Surfing Photographs from the Seventies Taken by Jeff Divine" (2005); and "Surf Contest" (2006). Graphically handsome, occasionally maddening in their reliance on images without captions or other information, the Adler books are nevertheless Aladdin's caves in terms of pure style.

If the surf scene lately has "taken on a commercial competitive look," one in which surfers appear branded and generic, said Mr. Adler, the books make obvious that this was anything but the case at the start. "In the 60's there was a surfer uniform, but it was an outsider uniform" that telegraphed cool, said Mr. Adler, whose show opening June 6 at Danziger Projects on West 26th Street pairs surfing pictures from his archive with graphic works of his own.

"The look was 501 Levi's, Jack Purcell tennis shoes or Jesus Christ sandals made by Clarks," Mr. Adler said. "You wore white crew T-shirt from J. C. Penney, which had a higher neck than other makes, short-sleeved button-down Madras shirts and plaid shorts that were slim legged and knee-length." In cold weather, surfers added woolen Pendleton shirts or else waterproof windbreakers made by McGregor under the



© Jeff Divine

label Scottish Drizzler. Anyone dubious of the alluring appeal held by this particular style might consult the pages of, say, GQ, whose June issue highlights a variety of looks that might have been lifted intact from "Surf Life 32 to 02."

If surfing can be seen as a sport of fugitive grace and improbable physics and among the only athletic pursuits undertaken in a medium that itself is always in motion, then there is surely something futile in attempts to pin down its poetry. Still, Michael Halsband's "Surf Book" attempts this feat in low-key fashion by tracking down the legends who inspired the long-board surfer Joel Tudor, a legend himself, photographing them in deliberately artless fashion and, most important of all, getting down their stories of what may be a vanishing world.

This world often enough was built on randy, stoned, youthful antiauthoritarianism and a deeply American distaste for undertakings involving a group. Before the sport was served by huge-circulation magazines, it had its own kind of samizdat, pamphlets and fliers put out by garage publishers whose early graphics and grainy photos are now traded avidly on the Internet.

It might seem that the physically blessed soul that is the typical pro surfer would not be well served by enshrinement in a volume as hefty (and costly) as a headstone. Yet that is how the publisher Benedict Taschen

has seen fit to commemorate the work of Leroy Grannis, godfather of surf photography, whose "Surf Photography of the 1960's and 1970's" comes in a pretentious slipcase, weighs more than 10 pounds and carries the rather daunting price of \$400. Despite its bloated production, the book retains some of both the ornery pluck and the enduring sprightliness of the 88-year-old Mr. Grannis, who took up the sport 75 years ago in Hermosa Beach, Calif., and only stopped in 2001 when a doctor advised him that knee paddling was probably not the best thing for the hip he had just had replaced.

"Back when I started out, money never entered into it," said Mr. Grannis last week by telephone from Carlsbad, Calif. "It was a lot more relaxed before 'Gidget,' which changed everything, and when there wasn't all the movies and television programs bringing more and more surfers into the fold."

As much as for their images of perfect young bodies framed in the flat light of Southern California or the lambent aura that seems to characterize Hawaiian days, Mr. Grannis's pictures are most startling because the scenes they record and breaks they document are pristinely beautifully and impossibly vacant. "It's getting to be so crowded now," said Mr. Grannis, referring to today's nearly three million surfers. "It probably isn't as much fun." Unless, of course, it is.



Seen Dunes for The New York Times; left: © Leroy Grannis and Taschen



BIG KAHUNA Leroy Grannis, whose work is the subject of "Surf Photography of the 1960's and 1970's," published by Taschen. Out last month, the book weighs more than 10 pounds and costs \$400.