

The Next Wave

COMING UP OVER a small rise on Highway 101, I pull the Subaru around an eighteen-wheeler, and the Pacific blazes into view. The early-morning sun shows gold; the offshore breeze shimmers like sheets of rain on the water. Wade, my brother, lets out a soft whistle. In the backseat my six-year-old son, Wes, attempts to pacify Sit, our carsick Labrador retriever, by belting out his version of "Surfin' Bird": "Pa-pa-do-mow-mow... Pa-pa-do-mow-mow."

Just past Refugio, a black BMW with gold rims carrying three shiny quad-finned surfboards pulls alongside. I can see our mud-splattered Subaru superimposed in the BMW's lacquer paint—the well-used boards strapped on top, Wade with his wire-rimmed beggar's shades, me behind the wheel sporting a slack jaw and pillow-combed hair. Behind the car's smoked glass sit three moon-faced shorthairs wearing matching painter's caps with the bills flipped up.

Freelance writer Dana Brown claims to know all the lyrics to "Louie, Louie."

The son of surf legend Bruce Brown takes up the eternal quest for cowabunga.

BY DANA BROWN



For a moment, the cars' images mingle, then the BMW accelerates past.

"Fern-bar surfers," Wade mutters, the perfect tag for those who once discoed or aerobicized and now, since surfing is in vogue, flock to the beaches. They wear the latest swimwear, ride the latest equipment, talk about the bottom line and never hoot at a good ride. They produce an atmosphere usually associated with racket sports and can suck the soul out of James Brown.

"What's the big deal?" my wife asks when I complain about today's trendy surfers. "They're not hurting anything." "It's like invasion of the surfer snatchers or something," I reply. "It's so phony, so damn typical of everything."

Lately every time I talk about where surfing is headed, it gets mixed up with the state of the American dream and the meaning of life; that type of conversation can shoot a day of surfing right in the head. It seems like my surfing days are numbered. This year more than ever, it's the details of daily life that offer the challenge surfing once did. Paying the bills, feeding the family, writing a decent expository lead are like riding that perfect spot between the wave breaking and the wave about to break—the curl, the hook, the tube. Miss that spot and you get knocked ass over teakettle—wipeout. I am a borderline paranoid about joining the ranks. I don't want to find myself shopping for the newest surf wear or waxing nostalgic every time ads for California Cooler come on television, depicting the surfing version of a drugstore cowboy.

Like thousands raised near the edge of the continent, surfing is, for good or ill, my heritage and my legacy. My earliest memories are of groveling on the beach with a mouthful of sand and standing on a plastic-foam belly board at the water's edge pretending I'm surfing the Pipeline. Nostalgia for me is salt dried on the back, teeth chattering from an ocean chill and a sweaty wet suit.

I am the son of Endless Summer. Twenty-one years ago, my father, Bruce Brown, made *The Endless Summer*, a 90-minute documentary about two surfers traveling the world in search of the perfect wave. It showed surfing without the Hollywood hype and has been called the most important statement on surfing.

Day before yesterday, Dad was working on his 1953 Hudson Hornet when a cowboy from a neighboring ranch stopped by for an autograph. "I read that article about you in *People* magazine," the cowboy said. "I didn't know you were *the* Bruce Brown."

"Call me *The*," Dad replied, signing across the cover photo of Vanna White.

The cowboy beamed. "I guess surfing is making a comeback."

"I didn't know it went anywhere," Dad said.

"I used to be a surfer when I was a kid," the cowboy chuckled.

"Small world," Dad said. "When I was a kid I used to be a cowboy."

SURFING IS ONE of the last unforked peas on the plate of the American consciousness, rolling around somewhere between polo and the Hula Hoop, myth and fact, the quintessential western lifestyle and the number one cause of brain damage among young surfers. It is a lifestyle populated with followers whose heroes are individualists. My friend Tom once asked if I'd seen the Steve McQueen movie *Tom Horn*. "Horn is like an old surfer," he said. "Appreciates the fun, the beauty of the West, has this indomitable spirit." "In the end doesn't Tom Horn get hung?" I asked. Tom grinned. "Exactly."

Back in nineteen fifty something, my father lived on Oahu and was one of the first to surf the treacherous waves on the island's north side. When there was no surf, he'd slip into his shades, grab a cane and go out to Kammie's Market for some wine.

"Help the blind. Help the less fortunate," he'd wail as a lovely girl approached.

She'd help pick out the wine, and at the register Dad would ask her to remove a ten-dollar bill from his wallet. When she couldn't find any cash, he'd react like Joan Crawford facing a closet full of wire coat hangers, and the girl would insist on buying.

Under a puny palm in the parking lot they'd sip Ripple from paper cups. One day another surfer, Mickey Muñoz, strolled up wrapped in his standard out-of-the-water apparel, a white sheet.

Mickey waved a can of lighter fluid and a Zippo: "Bruce, you've got to see this one. The maximo Godzilla."

"Who's there?" Dad asked, staring in the opposite direction.

"Stand back." Mickey poured a mouthful of lighter fluid, flipped the Zippo and spit a long fine stream onto the flame.

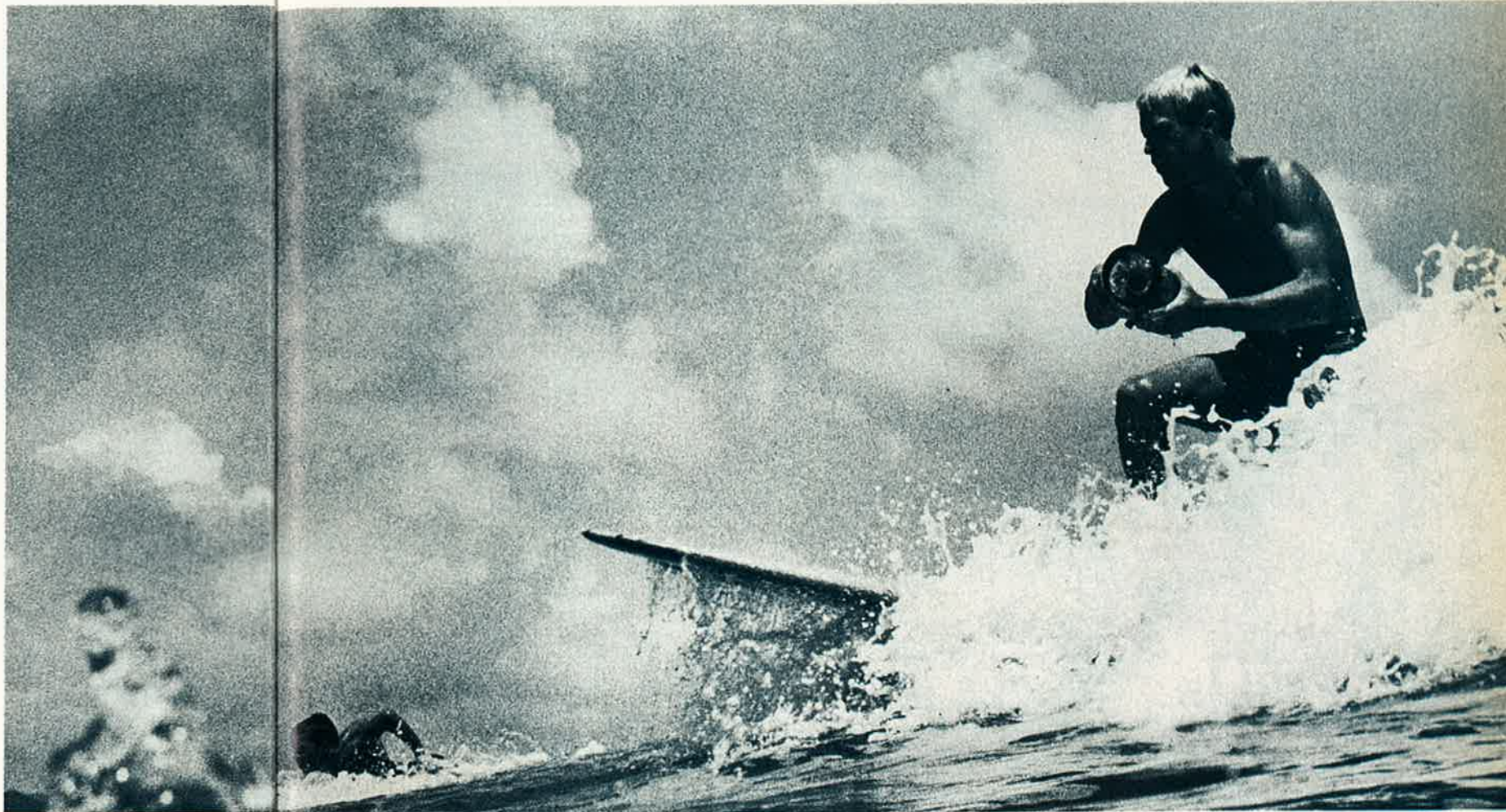
Dad watched sadly as the young lady bolted, making small, tight sounds like a leaky balloon while the stench of singed nose hair filled the air.

This, I've always thought, was how the new West was won.

Muñoz went on to do the surfing for Sandra Dee in *Gidget*, while Dad became the one-in-a-million shot: a success and a surfer. "Bruce Brown has the life," Tom Wolfe conceded in his 1968 book *The Pump House Gang*. "How many Bruce Browns can there be? [Surfers] will soon be pushing 30 and littering California like beached white whales."

But today the surfing industry generates millions of dollars, money made not by corporations but by companies owned by these same surfers. Jim Jenks,

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Bruce Brown, circa 1965

for instance, started Ocean Pacific Sunwear, which sells the surf look from Topeka to Paris. Hobie Alter created an empire with surfboards and catamarans. John Creed, president of Chart House restaurants, was such a surf rat other surfers worried about his coping with responsibility. Joey Cabel, the surfer who began Chart House, begged Creed to take a dishwashing job because he felt sorry for him.

They're the same roughneck goofballs as always, living in an exciting wilderness hacked out of civilization, even though Horatio Alger would be right at home with these guys. What's interesting is that the public is not so accepting.

Whether it's Hobie or Bruce or Del Cannon, who runs the most successful marlin charter out of Kona, they present an alarming image to the public—the surfer as solid, fun-loving citizen. For most people, Hollywood's familiar image of a goofy, eternally adolescent Frankie Avalon with a cheapo projection of a wave breaking behind him almost seems more comforting, more real. People who meet me or my dad for the first time still think of us as clichés, solely concerned with finding the perfect wave.

A few weeks earlier I sat in a crowded, restaurant with Matt Warshaw, associate

editor of *Surfer* magazine. "There is definitely something amiss," Matt said.

I agreed. "The waiter isn't retrieving the empties as fast." "No, with surfing," said Matt. "Maybe it's the new surfing craze." He shook his head. "No, that's nostalgia. People wanting to be tan and healthy and grab a piece of the beach mystique. Surfing is being hurt from the inside."

"No one knows the lyrics to 'Louie, Louie' anymore," I said, motioning for another round. "Or take old Woody station wagons. They were popular because you could sleep in them, and the wood was usually infested with ter-

mites, so they were inexpensive. Now they're status symbols."

"Right," Matt said. "The kids surfing don't know anything other than commercialism, faddishness and competition. Just the sport. No adventure, no beauty, no fun." He started to trace a tripod on the table. The first leg, he said, was the start of the IPS (International Professional Surfing) tour in 1976, which led to the big-money tours of today.

"Which is good," I said. "Because great athletes deserve the money."

The next leg, he went on, was the NSSA (National Scholastic Surfing

Association) which made surfing an acceptable interscholastic sport in 1980.

"Which is good," I continued, "because high school surfers deserve the same respect as high school football players."

The third leg, Matt said, was last year's crowning of California's Tom Curren as world champion, the first American man to claim the title since Rolf Arnese in 1970.

"Which is great because Curren is a nice, gentle guy, and California is the center of the surfing world."

Matt nodded and jabbed his beer bottle with a cocktail sword. "True, but the point is there is a great tripod, and the thing it was built to support seems to be

gone." He snapped the cocktail sword. "No spirit... no heart—"

"No cowabunga," I said.

"Cowabunga," said Matt, "has become frivolous."

It is nearly dusk at the beach by Dad's house. A sliver of moon shows high in the day's sky as we sit beyond the break, waiting. We've been surfing all afternoon. Dad hunches over slightly, looking like an old western scout who's just reached the edge of the continent. I'm to his right, my brother to his left. On the beach sits my wife, Cindy, Wes and my daughter, who is laughing despite a mouthful of sand.

On the horizon, slowly building, comes a wave. "All yours," Wade offers. "Ride it, cowboy," Dad says.

Dropping down the wave's face, I shift weight to the rear foot. The board swings around like a feather. Crouching slightly, gaining speed, I trail my fingertips in the water; the wave begins to pitch out over me. A few seconds or hours later I pull out over the collapsing wave and glide into the flat water. My brother and Dad in silhouette wave their arms, and in the shore break my son is leaping and shouting. I can't remember one concrete detail about the ride. Not one, but I feel fantastic. This, I decide, either means nothing or proves everything.

Nothing or proves everything.