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**Deukmejian's Nominees:  
Worse Than James Watt**

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**In Defense of Infidelity,  
By Michael Fessler Jr.**

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**Underwater Adventures:  
A Splashy Vacation Idea**

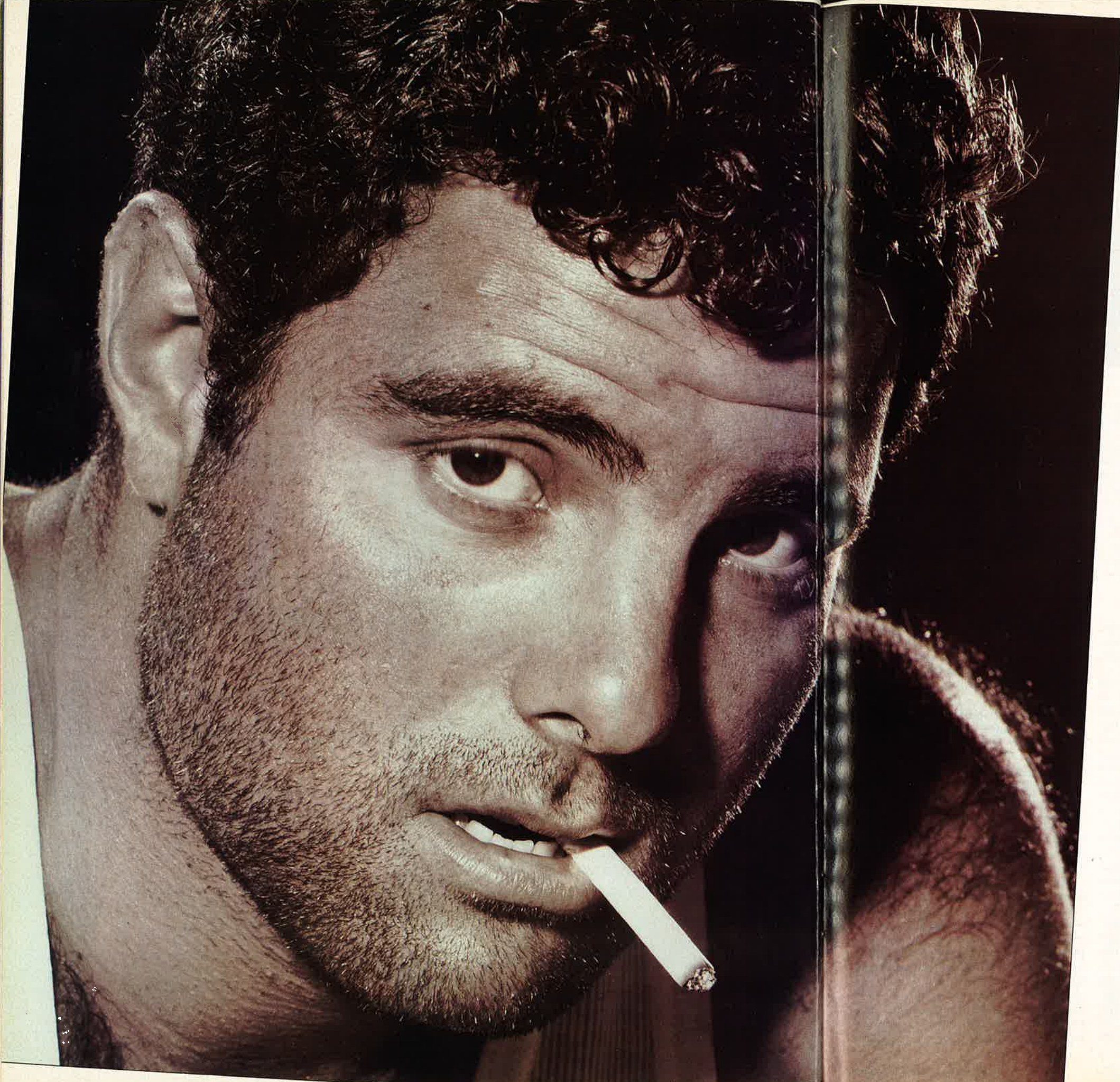
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## The Endless Summer

**From surfing legend to  
international fugitive—  
the wild ride of Mickey Dora,  
by David Rensin.**



INCORPORATING  
NEW WEST



# THE LEGEND LIVES



**Finding Mickey Dora was one thing. Making sense of the rebel California surfer was another.**

**BY DAVID RENSIN**

*"At the perfect surfing spot on the perfect day, Mickey Dora is probably the best surfer in the world."*  
—SURF GUIDE MAGAZINE, NOVEMBER 1964

**T**EN YEARS LATER, MICKEY DORA HAD DISAPPEARED. THE ONETIME Malibu heavyweight—whose cool self-possession had, to many, epitomized the California surfing lifestyle—was missing from his favorite waves. Yet, unlike other aging surf stars, Dora hadn't retired to run a beachfront restaurant or surfboard shop. He had simply vanished.

Dora left in his wake only rumor and speculation. Though tales of his activities through the years washed him far beyond the ocean's pale, the surf magazines continued to muse about his fate. And Dora's name was always mentioned whenever conversations among old beach buddies turned to surfing nostalgia. Everyone, it seemed, had heard something different about "The King of Malibu," "Da Cat."

In the absence of facts, Dora's legend became embroidered with fiction. Some said that Dora had gone Hollywood—that his innate charisma and work in early beach exploitation flicks had paid off—or that he had swapped his board and baggies for the Mercedes and tailored suits of a

*Dora in the early 1960s: He was dark, exotic—not at all the typical California beach boy.*



Da Cat in action: "He made the rest of us look like idiots," says surfing great Phil Edwards.

## Imagine Malibu without the crowds... "Mickey used to talk about the winter of '49 and how perfect it was."

prestigious law career. Fantastic stories surfaced of his alleged hashish smuggling operation in the Middle East. Or was it gunrunning in Indonesia? Others claimed that Dora, who had once adorned his surfboard with swastikas, was living the *über-life* in Argentina. Or perhaps he was still searching for the perfect wave—Dora sightings were reported in Bali, New Zealand, Peru, France, Australia, Costa Rica, and New Guinea. Some even thought Dora was dead, but the faithful plastered their cars with DORA LIVES! bumper stickers.

I'd surfed in the sixties, and followed the entertaining, Dora-bylined accounts of his improbable international adventures in the genre magazines. But there were also the rare Dora interviews—all typically sardonic, aggressive, apocalyptic. First he would lambast the surf press's fascination with him. Then he'd castigate the "Valley cowboys and aircraft workers" who were overcrowding his beloved Malibu. He'd scorn the beach party

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movies he thought were responsible, insult well-known surfers by name, and predict the entire sellout subculture's imminent demise.

For these mouthfuls, Dora was tagged the "angry young man of surfing." His blasts seemed to some like theater. They often were. But Dora's outrage was more than simple self-conscious antiheroism. It revealed deep convictions about surfing's real nature, as far removed from the surf music/beach lingo/surf contest marketing of the California lifestyle as Dora's young James Garner looks were from the typically tanned and blond beach boy's. Dora never drove a woody. He didn't spend every moment at the beach. "When there's surf, I'm totally committed," he once said. "When there's none, it doesn't exist."

Dora's flip side was equally memorable. He was an avid partyer and prankster. He was unpredictable, colorful, and attractive. "Mickey was the ultimate surfing celebrity," says an old Dora cohort. "He was flamboyant, charming, and a great storyteller with a go-for-it attitude. He spent his life searching for the ultimate wave, the

best coq au vin, and an appreciative audience that he could hypnotize with his 'truth or illusion?' stories. But he was finally a loner. We all knew him as the Malibu Gypsy."

Through the anger and the antics, Dora kept the beach crowd entertained and his private life private. He regularly rebuffed questions about his image and his off-beach activities. Though Dora's growing legion of adherents could copy his graceful surfing style, the hand gestures and vocal inflections that were his trademark, and his rhetorical approach to conversation—always questioning the questioner—they could not decipher the enigma that was their idol. Nor could his many detractors. And his prolonged absence from the scene only intensified the mystique.

In late 1982 I decided to try to find the Malibu Gypsy. It wasn't Dora's style to leave many clues, so I sought out a cross section of people who had known him. Almost immediately, I realized that I had crossed the border into an intense, fraternal land peopled with characters who lived, in their hearts, on society's edge. They were territorial. Loyal. Fiercely protective. Some talked willingly, some didn't. But to all, Dora was a cherished anomaly—good or bad, he was one of their own.

Along the way I was given an old photograph of Dora, a Belmondo-esque head shot. He wore a week's stubby beard, and a cigarette dangled from parted lips. But where Belmondo's eyes would have been etched with possibility, Dora's were like one-way mirrors. I saw the unfolding challenge reflected. It was as if Dora and I were taking off on the same wave, but only one of us would finish the ride. And Dora was used to winning.

**P**ICTURE MALIBU WITHOUT today's posh hamburger joints, exercise salons, or shopping centers. Send the sightseers home.

Clean up the beach trash. Imagine a crystalline summer morning, cooled by an offshore breeze, and remember the waves—the long, sweeping south swells wrapping perpetually around the first and second points, many crashing virgin and unriden over the rocks and sand.

But not all of them. Out in the water a young surfer eyes the six-foot combers that have been rolling in since before daybreak. He is darkly tanned, and his curly hair is the color of wet mahogany. Now, breaking through a lip of mist, he drops to the bottom of a perfect wave, carving a white trail through the blue-green wall. He stalls for a moment and then, almost imperceptibly using his knees and ankles to position himself, rises into the curl.

Once at the crest, he saunters casually to the nose of his board, bends his knees, and wraps his toes over the edge. Relaxed and yet arrogant, he taunts the wave—he moves like a matador, a ballet dancer, a cat. Suddenly, with feline reflexes, Mickey Dora abandons the wave and watches it crash before him.

"Mickey used to talk about the winter of '49 and how perfect Malibu was," says Jim Kempton, associate publisher of *Surfer* magazine. "Imagine the setup at that place without a crowd. You can understand, then, how the eventual commercialization of surfing, of California, made Mickey very resentful and bitter. Lifeguards, restrictions, people in the way..."

Introduced to the sport by his stepfather, Gard Chapin, a well-known surfer of his generation, Dora first surfed at San Onofre in the late 1940s. Though it was still a small scene then, centered on a few rugged individuals riding crude redwood boards, surfing great Phil Edwards remembers the teenage Dora as "a hot guy.... At San Onofre he made the rest of us look like idiots. Mickey had seen that there was more to surfing than riding straight in." By the early 1950s, Dora had gravitated to Malibu, where a few daring young surfers were perfecting their art on new streamlined boards and uncrowded waves. His star began to rise in the watery firmament of California surfing. Some say he was also beginning to earn a reputation as a rebel.

Dora's problems had started early. He was born Miklos Sandor Dora to Ramona, 17, and Miklos, 20, on August 11, 1934, and six years later the union ended. A friend says the divorce shook young Dora: "He wanted to live with his mother, but his father insisted that Mickey be raised as he was—in military schools. He hated them." Grant Roloff, a filmmaker who shot extensive surfing footage of Dora in the 1960s, recalls seeing an old photograph of Dora in a military school uniform. "He was probably in the seventh or eighth grade," Roloff says. "I can still remember how shocked I was by the anger and unhappiness in his face."

But Dora was a quick, intelligent child, and he found ways to survive while growing up among strangers. One was to withdraw. Another was to intellectualize situations and turn them into games. "Even today, games underlie everything," says a woman who met him in Malibu in the late 1950s and has remained close. "Next to surfing, games are his greatest passion." An extension of those games in later years was scamming—inventing ways to get something for next to nothing. In military school, Dora's scam was to

smuggle candy in on weekends.

Ramona's second husband, Chapin, began taking Dora to the beach during his school vacations, and for a time Dora adopted his stepfather's surname. But if Chapin took Dora under his wing, he also took him to task for his behavior. "My stepfather had strange ideas about raising kids," Dora said in an issue of *Surf Guide*. "He devised some pretty stiff disciplinary programs for me... but he was also a unique frontiersman and a profound influence on my life." Chapin died in the mid-1950s, and Dora insisted that the circumstances were mysterious. "His untimely [death] in Mexico can only be linked with his individualistic personality," he told *Surfer* magazine in one typically cryptic interview.

Chapin's independence was characteristic of his surfing generation and an era when surfers were true bohemians. "The American dream then was a sedate, unhip little house in the Valley, two cars, a nice steady job, and a couple of bratty kids," says John Milius, director of the surf epic *Big Wednesday*. "But this tight-knit brotherhood developed a lifestyle so they didn't have to get stuck in that rut. It was a matter of doing what you had to to get by, so you could go to the beach."

It is unlikely that Dora perceived his stepfather's legacy so philosophically back then. In a moment of rare can-

dor, he told *Surf Guide* why he found surfing rewarding: "When I went to school, damn near everything was concocted around the buddy system. They never left you alone. But with surfing I could go to the beach and not have to depend on anybody. I could take a wave and forget about it."

**I**N 1959 EVERYTHING BEGAN TO change. "Surfing U.S.A." was invented. Gremmies, kooks, hodads, and surfer girls swarmed the beaches. Peroxide futures skyrocketed. Woodies were resurrected. Surfing magazines were started and surf movies made. A whole California dream-oriented subculture exploded into the American consciousness, and Mickey Dora no longer had the waves at Malibu or anywhere else to himself. But he did have a front-row seat for the changing times as the youth revolution, with all its possibilities in tow, slammed headlong into the Malibu crowd.

Dora and his beach buddies were not quite prepared for the disorientation of meeting their idealized media images face-to-face, or for the aftershocks of celebrity. As the top dogs of surfing, they were hounded for interviews, photographed constantly, and used as stunt doubles, extras, and technical advisers in beach party movies. They were asked to compete in televised surf contests and hired to endorse rival manufacturers' products, and

## "Mickey carries a couple of pictures in his wallet. One is of his dad. The other is of a beautiful, giant wave."

Starring Annette 'n' Frankie: Dora (far left) hated the beach party movies, but they paid well.



they were ultimately cast as role models for a new generation of surfers. All of a sudden Dora had a surfing "career"—a situation he constantly renounced. "I'm not a commodity to use in your cheap, quick-buck articles," he raged in *Surfer* magazine.

But Dora didn't so much reject the media as become adept at manipulating it. "Mickey understood how to get attention," says Jim Kempton. "He knew that saying less was far more interesting than saying too much. And he had a sure sense of self—he didn't need anyone to prick his finger and see if the blood ran blue. Mickey knew that much of his mystique would have been impossible without the media responding as they did. He just understood what people liked. And then he played with it."

Dora was always up to something, and he soon gained a reputation as a prankster. Classic, perhaps apocryphal tales include his shooting Army rocket flares off the Malibu pier, unleashing a jar of moths at a surf movie screening to watch them converge on the projector, and dropping his trunks for the crowd and TV cameras at a 1965 Malibu surfing contest. Another Dora pastime was party crashing. "We always had a party kit in the car so that we could dress to suit the occasion," says Dora's self-proclaimed Hollywood party connection. "We had everything from a Hawaiian shirt to a tuxedo. Even a glass with ice cubes." Mongoose, another Malibu regular, places Dora at a Bel-Air party given by the Beatles—"and not because he especially dug the Beatles."

"Mickey loved fraud," John Milius explains. "He was fascinated with the concept of deceit. He would come to the beach with a couple of young guys and the word would pass around that 'Mickey Dora is gay.' Three days later he'd show up with the most extraordinary girl on his arm. It was quite funny."

What wasn't funny, however, was the way Dora treated his beachside groupies. He relegated them to stooge status, using them as errand boys, chauffeurs, and the objects of his contempt. Other Dora victims were those surfers naive enough to try to share a wave with him—Dora adamantly defended his practice of sending the offending surfer and his surfboard in opposite directions. "These guys are thieves and they're stealing my waves," he railed in *Surfer* magazine. "If I get it first it belongs to me. . . . I deserve it!"

Dora also deserved his reputation for rejecting the rewards of a steady job. When he did work, it was only temporary—he just did what he had to get by. He bartended at La Scala restaurant in Beverly Hills for a few

months in the mid-1960s, and there were his parts in the beach party films. (He once listed among his credits *Gidget*, *Gidget Goes to Rome*, *Ride the Wild Surf*, *Gidget Goes Hawaiian*, *Surfing Wild*, *Beach Party*, *Bikini Beach*, and *For Those Who Think Young*.) At one point he contracted with Greg Noll Surfboards to develop a signature model, da Cat, but it was only marginally successful, perhaps due to Dora's volatile ad copy: "I don't want some acne adolescent in Pratt Falls, Iowa, using da Cat as a car ornament or some show-biz creep in the Malibu Colony using da Cat as a coffee table, da Cat is too pure and sensitive for the clumsy touch of the occasional pseudosurfer." Other sources of Dora's income are largely unknown, though one friend remembers Dora as a credible silver speculator.

John Milius regards Dora's penchant for not working in a more romantic light: "The heroic aspects of Mickey Dora are that he did resist the work ethic, that he did live his own life, that he was his own man. Even if he was scamming to get by. Mickey understood that, especially in Los Angeles, appearance means everything. One just needs the proper trappings to play perfectly into whatever illusion one wants to create. If Mickey were being chased by the police, he'd probably pull over, figuring he could talk his way out of it. He scammed for the sheer joy of it. Like he surfed."

**M**ICKEY DORA TURNED 35 IN 1969. Surfing hadn't lost its spiritual charm, but Dora found it increasingly difficult to exist in a California beach scene that fulfilled his every bitter prophecy. He became a frequent world traveler, riding the waves on a circuit followed by the international surfing clique, and his appearances in the surf press began to reflect the change—the angry interviews he once gave via written answers to written questions mellowed into capricious travel pieces laced with humor and cynicism.

In early 1970, Dora and three friends, including Mongoose, went to Rio de Janeiro for Carnival as guests of the Brazilian attaché in Los Angeles. The "four horsemen of the Apocalypse"—as Dora called the troupe in a Mongoose-ghosted *Surfer* article entitled "To Whom It May Underestimate"—had a fast time. They partied at Rio's best nightclubs, crashed the \$10,000-per-ticket Governor's Ball, and claimed they were treated to a private performance by Brazil '66. The group's final destination was the Gran Hotel Dora in Buenos Aires. Ostensibly, the trip's initial purpose had been for Dora to meet his ailing "Uncle

Kornel" and, as his only living heir, to discuss Dora's eventual interest in the hotel. A picture of Dora in front of the hotel accompanied the text. It was a classic of humor and bravado, and mostly fiction.

But underlying Dora's restless escapades was his quest for an ocean Eden. "Mickey was obsessed with the idea of apocalypse, of a world in ashes," says Mongoose. "The search was his favorite thing. He once wrote me a letter from New Zealand claiming he'd found an island with an economy and lifestyle based on coconuts. To me, this quest for the Holy Grail, a place where he could seek inner salvation, was simply metaphoric. I think he was just looking for some justification for his life. He had this cynical vision—he wanted to get away from the demons he thought were going to descend."

If so, he should have been more careful, because on April 3, 1973, the sky rained demons. Dora was arrested for buying skis and equipment in Mono County with a bad check, and was charged with felony fraud. The proceedings—motions, appeals, continuations—lasted nearly eighteen months. During that time Dora failed to appear and to post bail as ordered. He also changed his plea four times, finally pleading guilty on September 27, 1974. Dora was sentenced to three years' probation, the terms of which included a \$1,500 fine, no credit cards, a job, an approved residence, and regular check-ins with his probation officer. All anathema to the now psychologically caged cat.

On April 11, 1975, the court issued an arrest warrant in Dora's name for probation violation. Bail was set at \$10,000. What had happened? A friend insists that Dora had intended to stay in touch with his probation officer. But he didn't. Another suggests that he simply couldn't deal with the "restriction and the scrutiny [of probation]. He needed to be completely free." Yet Dora's craving for ultimate mobility actually locked him into the very narrow existence he sought to avoid. He was on the run.

**B**IARRITZ IS A BEAUTIFUL OLD town surrounded by the Basque country of France and Spain. Built for royalty in the 1800s, it was a seaside resort for the upper crust, and even today, despite its faded facades, it retains much of its former opulence. It is the La Jolla of the French Atlantic coastline, with a major franchise on natural beauty, and to some it is the European surfing mecca. "It's the September stopping spot," says Jim Kempton, who met Dora in Biarritz in 1971 and continued to see him there every year for nearly a decade.



Signature model: Dora's board was only marginally successful, perhaps due to the morbid ads.

## A friend insists Dora had only to stay in touch with his probation officer. But he didn't. Soon he was on the run.

"The mountains begin to get cold, creating offshore winds, but the days are still sunny and warm. Indian summer. You get the big swells."

Though Dora would eventually make his way to Biarritz, drawn in part by the Indian summer surf and the variety of exotic paddle games played there (jai alai being the most familiar to Americans), his path was circuitous. He first set up house-keeping in New Zealand, on the Mahia Peninsula. A friend describes the stay as a brief spell of peace for the outlaw surfer—"the waves were great, and no one was around." But when the local authorities learned of Dora's fugitive status, he left for Australia. There, while horseback riding at a friend's ranch, he fell and shattered his arm. Dora traveled to Switzerland for a

restorative operation, and finally settled in France.

In 1976, Dora and a girlfriend spent eight months in a Mercedes camper parked outside an ancient Biarritz farmhouse that Jim Kempton had rented. During the winter, a severe Atlantic storm kept Dora, Kempton, and his other guests locked inside for ten days. "I got to see different sides of Mickey," Kempton says. "There were times when he broke down and we became like normal people—an extremely rare circumstance with Mickey. He was in a fragile position. The French wouldn't extradite, but I think he was afraid of being kidnapped if word spread about him. We talked about how painful it was for him to be away, to not be free. It was a special thing, his opening up to me. Kind of a feather

in the cap to have this living legend confide in me. But in other ways it was a pathetic picture—pathetic that a guy with so much charisma and intellect would degrade himself by doing stupid things that in the long term were minor in his gain and major in his downfall.

"Mickey could have been anything he wanted to be," Kempton continues. "An actor. A businessman. If only he'd played by the rules. But he was out to beat the system. The unfortunate part is that there was a moment, sociologically, when there was support for that attitude—all the sixties heroes were outlaws. What turned him bitter, I think, was that suddenly the whole thing went out of fashion, and Mickey was left holding the bag. He was on the outside, where he started."

As the seventies faded, Dora remained in France. Jim Kempton took a job in California. The Mongoose practiced landscape architecture. John Milius made his feature surf film, *Big Wednesday*, but the Dora character was only a minor role.

In 1981, Mickey Dora was arrested by French authorities. Friends say by coincidence. He'd been making transatlantic phone calls from a booth used by Basque revolutionaries—and under police surveillance. Once in custody, Dora's name probably made the computers sing, and his past deeds crashed before him like a closeout section at Waimea Bay. Though France didn't extradite him, three months in a French jail apparently convinced Dora to repatriate. He flew back to California in September 1981, first class. He told a friend that he laughed and joked with the passengers on the flight, sharing wine and stories, and that one traveler even offered him a lift home from the airport. But Dora already had a ride. FBI agents met him at Los Angeles International Airport and whisked him away to the L.A. County Jail.

**DISCOVERED THE FIRST PUBLIC** mention of Mickey Dora's whereabouts nearly a year later. Under the headlines **EX-SURFER 'KING' SURFACES IN CHEYENNE JAIL** and **SURFER TO SERVE SIX MONTHS**, two July 1982 stories in the *Rocky Mountain News* told of Dora's indictment by a Denver Federal Grand Jury. According to the indictment, Dora had forged a Diners Club credit card issued in his name in 1969 by altering the expiration date and one digit in the card number, and had used it on "a two-year-long spending spree through Europe and Asia." It was quite a scam. Dora faced ten years in prison if convicted, but he managed to plea bargain a misdemeanor charge of tampering with his own mail—that is, he threw

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