

ForbesLife Features



● ● ● LeRoy Grannis came to surf photography in late 1959, not as a professional or an artist, but as a middle-aged family man looking for a hobby to reduce the stress of his job. It appeared a logical choice, as he lived a few blocks from the ocean and his teenage son Frank had recently begun surfing. Luckily he happened to pick up his camera at a pivotal point in surfing history.

The following summer, with an East German 35mm camera, he began shooting 22nd Street in Hermosa Beach, California, a stretch of undistinguished South Bay beach break that attracted a crew of young surfers eager to show off for his lens. Grannis's darkroom was the closest thing to a one-hour photo lab in the South Bay, and at a time when surf magazines came out bimonthly, surfers were ravenous for current shots of themselves. "Sometimes I'd go right from shooting at 22nd Street to the darkroom, and before I knew it there'd be half a dozen guys waiting to see what I'd shot," Grannis recalls.

He found out early on, however, that surf photography could be dangerous for even the most experienced waterman. While shooting Hawaii's Sunset Beach with his Nikonos from the water one day, a massive "West Peak Bowl"



From left: Surfer girl Gail Yarborough, Hermosa Beach, California, 1964; The Big One at Waimea Beach, Hawaii, 1967.



● ● ● swung unexpectedly toward the channel, breaking far outside and trapping Grannis directly in its path. He looked up to see a 20-foot wall of white water and three thickset 11-foot surfboards hurtling toward his unprotected head. He dove beneath the maelstrom but managed to keep his precious camera safe. Later, with help from his old friend Doc Ball, Grannis designed and built his first rubber-lined, suction-cupped waterproof box, which allowed him to change film and shoot from the water with longer lenses and sit in the relative safety of Sunset Beach or the Waimea Bay channel for hours without returning to shore.

On land, Grannis loved the clean, cool remove provided by the Century 1000 telephoto lens. Viewed from a half-mile away, artfully framed surfers appeared as heroic figures within a vast arena such as Sunset Beach. But it was his dedication to the rest of the beach scene that fills a large gap in surfing's collective memory today. Grannis's photography, especially from 1960 to 1965, caught surfing at a critical juncture between cult and culture. Upon first glance, his photos may evoke nostalgia for a simpler, more naïve era, but closer inspection reveals that he was documenting surfing's rapid evolution into an iconic lifestyle. His photos captured

the real thing, providing a bridge between the world of Beach Boy lyrics and the reality of the Southern California beach scene. Surf language, surf music, surf art, surf media, surf fashion—all the basic elements of what are now considered essential to modern surf culture were either conceived or codified within this brief window of time. Grannis was one of the few surf photographers to swing his camera off the wave action and record it all. ●

TASCHEN will print just 1,000 copies of LeRoy Grannis, Surf Photography of the 1960s and 1970s, each one signed and numbered by the artist. \$400. www.taschen.com.



Clockwise from top left: Spectators at a surfing championship, Ocean Beach, California, 1972; the parking lot at San Onofre beach, California, 1967; a gnarly wipeout in Makaha, Hawaii, 1966.