



Shooting **the waves**

Surfing fanatic LeRoy Grannis was there with his camera when the sport took California by storm in the Sixties and Seventies. James O'Mahoney pays tribute to the photographer whose iconic images captured the thrills and spills of those heady days

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THE TITLE OF WORLD'S COOLEST OCTOGENARIAN surely has to go to LeRoy Grannis, 90 next year and hotter than ever as the iconic surf photographer of our times. "Granny" (nicknamed in the second grade) documented surfing's golden decade of the Sixties after growing up a block away from the sea at Hermosa Beach, California.

He suffered a bad wipeout while surfing at the age of 83 which almost broke a hip – so turned to boogieboarding instead. Finally the doctors said "No more" so, begrudgingly, he recently came ashore.

Granny didn't start surfing until the age of 14, though he was a fish at an early age. His father was a carpenter who helped him with his first bellyboard. At 14, his friend Norm Brown let him try his "hollow" and he was hooked – in the early days there were two types of surfboard: the paddleboard or "hollow", and the plank, which was solid wood.

Granny raced home to build his own. "My dad bought me a slab of pine 2ft wide, 2in thick and 8ft long. I shaped what I thought was a surfboard, put

varnish on it and tried to catch waves. But it was as heavy as a rock. I used it for a couple of years, but when I could I would borrow Norm's board. I didn't have my own until 1935, after I graduated from high school, and from that time on I was a competitive surfer."

During the Thirties and Forties time stood still. They were California's halcyon days; South Bay beach life was in its full laid-back glory. On December 7, 1941, "We had surfed all day at Hermosa pier. We were just lying around with the radio, talking, and all of a sudden we heard that the Japanese were bombing Pearl Harbor. We looked at each other and realised that nothing was ever going to be the same again."

When the Fifties rolled around Granny was working seven days a week for a phone company, and married with children. But "in 1959 I got an ulcer at work, so the doctor told me, 'You'd better get a hobby.'" Photography was his choice.

A close friend at the time was Doc Ball, a pioneer of surf photography, who taught him the basics. Granny built a darkroom in his garage and, at 42, began shooting surfers. At the time, surf photojournalism



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Left, a surfer takes a dramatic tumble at Makaha, Hawaii. This page, close to the action at Pupukea, Hawaii, in 1970

didn't pay much. Granny's first published photos (*Reef* magazine, 1960) earned him \$5 each – a lot better than the buck apiece he would charge individual surfers for a print. Granny always knew what kind of photo to shoot, and when and where the best surfers and best swells were. It was easy and fun. Surf magazines began to burgeon and "Photo: Grannis" quickly became a hallmark of the California surf scene.

"I built a rubber-lined, waterproof wooden box that could take a 200mm lens – about 15 by 8in square – with suction cups in each corner. I'd take a big board out and put the box on the front of it and paddle out. I could shoot with the camera bare, in the water. If a wave did come, I could close the box and it was waterproof. I could even change the film out there on the water."

He lost a few cameras that were "smacked" by big waves, but captured some of the most evocative action pictures, now compiled in a Taschen collector's edition book, *LeRoy Grannis, Surf Photography*, focusing on the Sixties and Seventies.

His best day's shooting? "December 15, 1966 – the best year everywhere. I got three rolls of black and

white and one of colour at Waimea Bay in Hawaii. I've never had another day's shooting that even comes close to that. There has never been anything that consistently good, with that many good riders out."

His photographs of the scenes that so define the lore of surfing just keep getting better, suffused as they now are with a golden glow of nostalgia. Quiffed hair, long shorts and even longer boards were the name of the game then. Today's brash culture of neon Lycra and commercialism has changed the face of the sport forever, making Grannis's pictures even more precious.

It's been said of Grannis that he is neither the first great surf photographer, nor the most innovative; but he's very probably the best. He was inducted into the Surfing Hall of Fame in 1966.

His bottom line? "Surfing is the ultimate pleasure. I did it and I photographed it. I was lucky to be born at the right place and time." ■

Professional skateboarder James O'Mahoney, 60, is a contributing editor and photographer for many US surf magazines