



in the beginning

"Down through the ages, references to surf riding have survived; first via the chant, later in writing, and now most eloquently by the medium of the camera."
—Tom Blake, pioneer surfer and surf photographer

The revolution was shot in black and white on a Sunday afternoon at 250th of a second, October 2, 1966. World Surfing Championships, Ocean Beach, San Diego. Forty thousand spectators jammed the beach at the newly opened Ocean Beach pier. At the exact moment that 18-year-old Robert "Nat" Young hoisted an awkward California-shaped trophy over his head, there were more than 340,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam, Brian Wilson was on the verge of releasing his masterpiece, "Good Vibrations," and LSD would remain legal for three more months. Surfboards averaged 10-and-a-half feet in length and weighed 30 pounds. Nat Young was now world champion. And the surfing world had quietly tilted 90 degrees off its axis.

A tall, brash Australian, Young was flanked on the victory dais by the soft-spoken Hawaiian Jock Sutherland and California small-wave whiz kid Corky Carroll. A small group of local and national media, among them *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*, jostled to get close to the winners. LeRoy Grannis, *International Surfing* magazine's sole staff photographer, roamed the fringes of the crowd, methodically snapping off trophy shots with his salt-corroded Pentax S camera. At a key instant in the ceremony he focused and framed the jubilant Young cheering, "I feel jazzed!" — From "Capturing the Perfect Wave: The Surf Photography of LeRoy Grannis," by Steve Barlotti.

If you drive around the Southern California freeways for any length of time chances are good you will suddenly encounter the gaily wrapped Pacifico bear truck trundling along in the slow lane. There, life-size in fizzy aquamarine hues, is LeRoy Grannis' famous 1966 shot of a hapless surfer being launched by the notorious Makaha shorebreak. It won't be the first "Photo By Grannis" you've run into outside a surf magazine. Over the last four decades "Granny's" photos have been featured in several books, on billboards, in documentaries, gallery showings and countless retrospectives about surfing's Golden Age. More than any other surf photographer, Grannis' work has transcended time and the narrowing cultural chasm between surfers and the mainstream "legions of the unjazzed."

These days Grannis, 88, is happy for the extra income but uninterested in any sort of "legend" status.

"I was just there," he says with an unembellished, sometimes brusque, modesty. "I shot the best surfers on the good days and sometimes I got lucky."

Born in 1917, Grannis had the good fortune to live through four distinct epochs of modern surfing. A California surf pioneer from surfing's Redwood Age, Grannis was part of the last generation of modern surfers to claim a direct connection to Duke Kahanamoku. Grannis was a highly accomplished surfer in the 1930s and '40s, expertly sliding finless 70-pound solid planks at Palos Verdes Cove with such pre-WWII surfing luminaries as Tom Blake, Doc Ball and Hop Swarts.

Grannis began shooting surfing in 1960 at age 42 as a hobby to relieve the stress working nights as a Pacific switchboard installer. At that time there were perhaps on dozen dedicated surf photogs in the world. Only c SURFER's Ron Stoner, was actually paid a salary.

By using high-quality lenses and painstakingly developing fine-grained films for optimum contrast and detail, Grannis struck a comfortable middle note between shutter bug and serious photojournalist. He later experimented with the latest underwater cameras and built his own boom-mounted housings to grab riveting eye-level shots from thundering lineups of Waimea, Sunset and Pipeline.

By the early '60s Grannis was contributing shots to several fledgling surf publications, including John Severson's SURFER magazine. In 1963 Grannis shot and wrote five major articles for SURFER and was added to the masthead as staff photographer. Grannis' tenure with SURFER lasted a year before he went on to co-found *Surfing Illustrated* with Dick Graham.

The bulk of Grannis' portfolio was shot in California along the North Shore between 1960 and 1970, during a short but critical transition in surf history. In that brief window, Grannis thoroughly documented the young, sometimes gawky '60s surf culture through its boom years up to the psychedelic fallout of the shortboard revolution.

"I realized LeRoy had captured those early post-Golden Age years perfectly with cars, stomps, storefronts, contests, and cetera," says Jim Heimann, Taschen Books' executive editor

who had grown up in Los Angeles' South Bay in the 1960s devouring SURFER and hot-rod magazines. "This was stuff I knew a lot more people—not just surfers—could relate to."

By the mid-'70s, however, Grannis had moved on from full-time surf photography to pursue other passions such as windsurfing and hang-gliding. His photos languished in their plain black binders at Grannis' Carlsbad home for more than 20 years until *The Surfer's Journal* published a handsome retrospective of Grannis photos in 1998 (edited by former SURFER Photo Editor Brad Barrett).

In 2004, after using several of Grannis' images in a book of vintage surfing graphics for Taschen's "Icons" series, Jim Heimann decided to approach publisher Benedikt Taschen about creating an opus of Grannis' photos: a masterpiece made up of well-known and never-seen shots from Grannis' archives. After one visit to Grannis' home, the flamboyant German publisher known primarily for lushly rendered art books, pop culture, and high-end erotica, was hooked.

"I told him [Benedikt] all of the books out there were for a niche market of surfers, but because the sport/industry had exploded into a global entity, a much larger market had bought into the lifestyle and the imagery associated with early surfing," says Heimann.

The resulting work, printed hardbound at nearly 300 pages, weighs in as the largest surfing book ever published. A special limited edition of 1,000 signed copies (projected to be an instant sell-out) was released in late April. The general release is scheduled for mid-summer 2006. — Steve Barlotti