

10 SUMMER READING

IN THE PAST DECADE OR SO, THE SPORT of surfing – once so exclusively and rebelliously youthful – has undergone a wacky cultural shift. Like its kissing cousins, rock'n'roll and motor-bikes, it's swimming in baby-boomer nostalgia. You can't walk into a surf shop these days without being confronted by surfboards reborn from days gone by, with extraordinary names like "Retro Fish" and equally ornate artwork. Classic wood-panelled longboards sell for up to \$2000, and old broken-down single-fin boards are hunted from council clean-ups to be patched up and hung on walls from Whale Beach to Byron Bay. Last year, a wooden surfboard made in the 1930s by Pacific Systems Homes pulled in \$US45,000 (\$57,000) at a Honolulu surf memorabilia auction.

Forty-five thousand dollars! It feels like nostalgia for a life you never had – or something you once had, traded in for a good job and a family, and now hope to regain by trading back a little of the old hard-earned. You don't know whatcha got till it's gone ...

Nowhere is this mood more perfectly encapsulated than in *LeRoy Grannis: Surf Photography of the 1960s and 1970s*. A spectacular colossus of a book, almost a metre wide when opened to its full landscape form, it offers (for the equally spectacular sum of \$900) a window into surfing's boomer golden age through the perceptive lens of Grannis, who might, if he chose, lay claim to "greatest ever" status in the world of surfing photography.

LeRoy himself is a step ahead of the baby boomers, in a number of ways. Now 89, he's the classiest water-gentleman imaginable. And he'd be terribly embarrassed by that "greatest ever" tag. Recently I visited him in his seaside trailer park, a half-hour's drive north of San Diego, to ask about his great invention: the surfboard-mounted camera box. Grannis, gracious and twinklingly blue-eyed, made some coffee and told a few stories about the good old days.

The box, built of marine ply, had a waterproof lid and four suction cups on its base to secure it to a board. Grannis used the device to shoot his famous images of Hawaii's Sunset Beach and Waimea Bay in the '60s, paddling out alongside the huge waves, whipping out his camera, snapping away, then hurling it back into the box, clipping down the lid, and hoping for the best.

Before the box, he had relied on plastic bags. One day, he recalled, "I put my Pentax and a 200mm Century lens in a plastic bag, paddled an 11ft gun out at Sunset and started to shoot, when a clean-up [giant wave] came through the channel. I grabbed the plastic bag, wrapped it around the camera and held it high over my head and jumped to my knees. The wave just lipped over enough to take my board, but didn't sink me under."

Fortunately, an Australian surfer – LeRoy isn't sure who it was – came paddling out with his board in tow.

Such mad situations are part of life for any surf photographer, even today, but they have an extra zing

when told by a man who helped build the foundations of the craft. Born in Hermosa Beach, Los Angeles, Grannis was an old-school surfer, already in his 40s when he decided to take on photography as a stress reliever in 1960. He took his last water shot at Hawaii's Pipeline in 1983, thinking "it was time I quit pushing my luck". In between, he amassed a body of work that might best be compared, in its own small cool field, with the Renaissance galleries of the Louvre.

Surfing arrived on the west coast of America in the early 20th century, courtesy in part of railroad baron Henry Huntington, who hired an Irish-Hawaiian named George Freeth to put on surfing displays as a PR stunt. In the ensuing decades, as Grannis surfed and raised a family with his wife Katie, the sport spread along the coast of the Golden State, contributing to the great Californian Romance. By the 1960s, it was the central image of a postcard being mailed to the rest of America. "Wish you were here," it proclaimed, among the photos of palm trees and the Hollywood sign and the Beach Boys, "the water's fine!"

You'd think such charm would have long ebbed away. Yet seen again on the vast pages of this volume, LeRoy's photos of wood-panelled cars ("woodies") and striped boards, of Californian "gremmies" hanging out at places like Huntington Beach and San Onofre are fascinating. There's no nostalgic irony here; the images aren't camp, à la Gidget or Frankie Avalon. Straight up, simply composed – even oddly formal at times – they capture a generation going about an entirely new kind of

POCKET ROCKET
Midget Farrelly, Australia's 1964 world champion, in action at Pupukea, Hawaii, in 1970, preceding page

COOL RUNNING
Gremmies perched on a restored 1933 Ford Deluxe at the US championships in 1964

“There, sporting a pompadour, is Peruvian Felipe Pomar, who once rode a tsunami off his home break near Lima”



life, unaware or unconcerned about how it would look to us four decades down the track.

The surfing photographs are something else again. LeRoy's work bears the mark of every top water photographer: it's all about action. Beach-based surf photography, like most sports shooting, is clearly detached from the subject, clearly voyeuristic, clearly uninvolved. Water shooters, on the other hand, are irresistibly drawn to the action. Like LeRoy, they're mostly competent surfers who have seen enough water angles to know what really counts.

You can see that unerring eye for action in all of LeRoy's best pictures. His style was perfectly suited to recording a sport in its first explosive period of growth, when its basic technical skills were still raw and evolving. Early in the book, Dewey Weber, California's '60s hotdogging king, is captured in an astonishing moment. Arms flung high, upper body swung open to the angle of turn, Weber's move is a flash of the surfing techniques still far off in the future. Today you will see the same swift openness and precision in photographs of multi-world champion Kelly Slater, right down to his fingertips, extended and stroking the air in soft counterpoint to the hard slashing of rail through water.

Then comes a cascade of wave-riding, small, medium and big: Malibu's Miki Dora playing games with others trying to ride the same wave; Greg Noll bull-legging his way down Waimea Bay's huge blue faces. These photos continue to amaze. Today's surfers riding the gargantuan swells of Sunset and Waimea have, with their modern surfboards and techniques, the odds on their side. Back then, LeRoy's subjects took off on 7m waves knowing they had perhaps a 20% chance of making it. Without a leg-rope holding the board within reach, every wipe-out meant a 400m swim.

You feel you want to remain sentimental about it all, but it's the lack of sentiment that gives LeRoy's work its power. The cover shot, for example, will drive nostalgia buffs insane. There on the edge of the water at Sunset Beach is Joey Cabell, the fastest man ever on a wave, long-limbed and loping into the sea ahead of his compadres. On the right walks California's Mike Doyle, behind him the reclusive 1970 world champion Rolf Aurness, and behind him, sporting a pompadour, is Peruvian Felipe Pomar, who once rode a tsunami off his home break near Lima. And in the very centre of the image, a sleek red board slung easily under his arm, walks Eddie Aikau - Eddie, the Hawaiian big-wave rider whose untimely death conferred on him mythic, even iconic status.

Yet something about the way LeRoy composed this scene seems to have freed it from any creaky machinery of nostalgia. Legends, icons, more than human these men may seem to us, to LeRoy they were also simply his friends.

Perhaps the nostalgia is not so much in the work but in the very fact of the book's existence. Why did it take a German publishing house, Taschen, to bring LeRoy back into the light, to package his work in such



monumental form? Actually, it didn't. There is an earlier volume of his photographs, published in 1998 by the Californian magazine *The Surfer's Journal*. But that book, which first triggered Taschen's interest, is out of print. *Journal* publisher Steve Pezman is thanked in the afterword to this new book.

The text was never going to match the images, but it falls shorter than it might. The introduction, by American surf journalist Steve Barilotti, is workmanlike enough; the shame is that he doesn't explain more about what Grannis actually did, or how surf photography changed the way surfers looked at their own sport. The captions are too clipped and void of further insight; in the context of such wonderful images, it would have been so much better to read more of the photographer's thoughts.

Another step back is a sobering truth about the life the reader, Nostalgic Seachange Boomer, might have lived. Many of the surfers featured in the book are dead: Weber fought alcoholism and business failures for years before succumbing in 1993; Aikau disappeared into the Ka'iwi Channel, between Molokai and Oahu, while paddling for help from an upturned canoe in March 1978 and was never seen again; Dora died of liver failure in 2004 after years on the run from the US and various relentless creditors, including the IRS and credit card companies. The surfing life was never as fast, free and glamorous as it appeared then; it sure as hell wasn't as financially rewarding as it is for today's top surfers, some of whom pull down endorsements of more than \$2m a year. Then again, the book's price tag of \$900 is only about the cost of a Retro Fish.

By the way, LeRoy Grannis is still in the water - his passion is windsurfing. If you can do that at 89, you're well beyond nostalgia. ●

Nick Carroll is a surfer and surf writer who worked in the US from 1990 to 1997 as editor of *Surfing*, the magazine LeRoy Grannis co-founded in 1964.

***Surf Photography of the 1960s and 1970s*, by LeRoy Grannis, is published by Taschen (\$900). A limited edition of 1000, signed and numbered by Grannis, is available internationally. A more modestly priced hardback will be released by Taschen in 2007.**

DAYS OF THUNDER

The fearless brigade try their luck at Sunset Beach on the north shore of Oahu, Hawaii, in 1967