

LEROY GRANNIS: It's the real thing... the notorious Makaha shore break in Hawaii pounds another victim in this now very famous image from 1966.

For colour, LeRoy used 35mm Kodachrome II (25 ASA) until Kodachrome 64 came out in 1974. All 2 1/4 transparencies were shot on Ektachrome (64 ASA).



LIFE'S A BEACH

In 1966, the top documentary photographer of California surfing was a middle aged Pacific Bell executive with an ulcer - 40 years later LEROY GRANNIS is a legend...

BY THE EARLY 1960s, most of Western Europe had domestic television. In England, the rush had been to secure a set in time for the Royal marriage of Princess Margaret in 1960, but normal daily programming was dominated by the romance and sheer glamour of imported American shows. The American lifestyle, as depicted via television sitcoms or dramas, only went to

reinforce the drabness of a Europe locked into to a Cold War psychosis. As most imported television emanated from the Southern California media centre of Los Angeles, sunshine and golden beaches featured large in much of the output - two elements in short supply across the Atlantic, unless you were lucky enough to live on the Côte d'Azur.

For the young, just finding their feet and independence through

pop music and the evolving 'Swinging Sixties', the California beach scene represented heaven on earth - all day sunshine, deep tans, bikini-clad girls, music, sport, glowing health... and surfing. This dream of the LA lifestyle was so embedded in the psyche of a generation of teenagers, that subsequent TV soap operas about anything related became smash hits - from *77 Sunset Strip* (1958-64) right up

to *Baywatch* in 1989 (first episode: 'Panic at Malibu Pier'). Even the dismal *The Monkees* TV series hypnotised a generation and when The Beach Boys released the first of their many catchy hits in 1962 (*Surfin'*) the scene even had its own, if somewhat naive, sound track.

But the California dream of beach, blondes and surf was *real* and no invention of television or movie makers. Malibu is located in western Los Angeles County, a 27-mile (43.5 km) strip of Pacific coastline; an ocean front community famous for its beaches and for being home to countless movie stars and others associated with



Diane Bolton, Malibu 1967. The way it should always be...

the entertainment industries. Most Malibu residents live within a few hundred yards of the Pacific Coast Highway, its adjacent strips include Surfrider Beach, Zuma Beach, Malibu State Beach and Topanga State Beach. Additionally, Carbon Beach, Paradise Cove, Escondido Beach, Broad Beach, Pirate's Cove, Westward Beach and Trancas are places along the coast in Malibu. Point Dume forms the northern end of the Santa Monica Bay, and Point Dume Headlands Park affords a stunning vista stretching to the Palos Verdes Peninsula and Santa Catalina Island.

As far back as the 1920s, residents alongside this Pacific coast strip had made sport in the great rollers hitting the range of beaches on the outer environs of LA. LeRoy Frank Grannis was one - born on

August 12, 1917, in Hermosa Beach, less than a block from the ocean. Then Hermosa was a small town with a population of some 3,500 residents. What used to be called El Camino Real (now the

famous Pacific Coast Highway) was nothing but a dirt road. Grannis remembers that: 'when I was 14, I became acquainted with the surfers in Hermosa through Norman Hale, my next door neighbour [he was also a good friend of 'Doc' Ball] and whose mother had a restaurant on the beachfront called Ma Brown's,

which was where the surfers hung out...'. Grannis and Ball subsequently formed a friendship that lasted more than 60 years.

The Palos Verdes Surfing Club was second only to the Corona del

'...surfers had a wonderful camaraderie that I didn't have in my own life. They were healthy and joyful...'

Mar Surf Board Club. Because it organised the first annual Pacific Coast Surfing Championship in 1928, it is generally considered to be the first surf club on the Mainland, 'the largest club of this kind in America', according to *The Santa Ana Daily Register* of July 31, 1928. The PVSC was one of the first structured clubs, after that

came Hermosa, then Manhattan and then Santa Monica. From there on 'it went up the coast and kept going after that'. The PVSC was the dominant surf club of the 1930s but, during World War II, surfing activity was suspended by circumstances, however it slowly rebuilt its impetus after the victory. As late as 1948, most all Southern California surfers still knew, or knew of, each other and surfboards were still pretty much of the redwood and balsa variety. Mike Doyle's autobiography, *Morning Glass* notes that: 'I saw that the surfers had a wonderful camaraderie that I didn't have in my own life. They were healthy and joyful, and they enjoyed being with each other. I could see a community spirit there that I wanted to be a part of...'

In 1960, at the age of 42, LeRoy Grannis took up surf photography as a hobby, at the suggestion of his doctor. He'd developed an ulcer due to stress at his day job. 'I built a third garage and made half of it into a darkroom and started shooting the kids at 22nd Street and Hermosa; sold 'em 8 x 10's for a buck a piece to get a little money back for stock', he remembers of those early days with an East German 35mm camera and a 400mm Meyer lens. Later he would add a Pentax S with stock 50mm and 28mm lenses, also a 650mm Century telephoto lens. He duly got some pictures published in the September 1960 issue of *Reef Magazine*, and in that first year alone, shot some 2,500 frames of black-and-white surf images. There were other surf photographers around (Don James, John Severson, Ron Church, Ron Stoner, Bud and Bruce Brown) and they formed a 'sort of a fraternity' according to Grannis, whose own work was now being seen in *The Surfer*, *Reef*, *Surfing Illustrated*, *Surf Guide* and other early-to-middle Sixties specialist magazines.

In 1961, through his wife's family connections, Grannis travelled to Hawaii. Here, he first shot from a surfboard, hand-holding a Pentax with a 200mm Takumar lens wrapped in a plastic bag, an idea fraught with danger for the equipment. In 1964, he built a 9"x9"x12" wooden box with suction cups on the corners and a waterproof cover. Mounting this on his surfboard, Grannis shot the action and was able to change rolls of film without having to leave the water. He was also quick to take advantage of the Calypso, a Jacques Cousteau-invented 35mm underwater camera equipped with a wide angle 35mm lens.

By 1965, LeRoy Grannis was holding down three jobs: Pacific Bell executive, magazine editor and surf photographer. Most of his photos from this period were taken at surfing contests and LeRoy would follow this pattern of shooting primarily contest

images for the remainder of the decade. At the First Annual International Surfing Hall of Fame in 1966, Grannis was voted number one surf photographer, with Don James coming in second and Ron Stoner third.

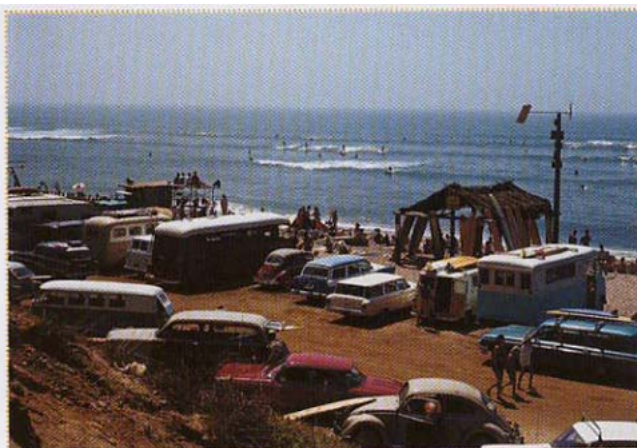
Just as in the music scene, where The Beach Boys poppy sing-a-longs were being submerged by psychedelic, LSD influenced rock music, 1969 saw a schism in the surfing world. The end of the Sixties marked a transition from 'the whole long-board thing to the shortboard... we were playing a whole different ball game after December '69, a total change in eras, a changing of the guard, and it was marked by maybe the biggest swell [wave surge] in recorded history...' recollected one veteran. LeRoy Grannis continued throughout the 1970s covering competitions, finally retiring in 1984 to become - today - a legend in his own lifetime. It's a legend that Taschen have now presented in a readily available large format economy edition with their usual design flair and pzazz (the limited, signed 'collectors edition' sold out instantaneously). Extensively illustrated with full page colour and mono images, twenty years of heroes and villains, beaches and boards are faithfully recorded presenting a fascinating look into a subculture that has now become something else altogether.

With a modern perspective, LeRoy Grannis' pictures work on many levels. For sports surfers, his close-up depictions of the great athletes of his day in action are priceless recordings, but on a sociological level, his documents of a double decade, where life really was 'a beach' have an hypnotic quality for those that dreamed of being there - and for those that really were. ☺

SURF PHOTOGRAPHY OF THE 1960S AND 1970S

LeRoy Grannis

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Top:

The real wet dream of countless teenagers: California sunshine, a beach and surf. c.1964

Middle:

The long walk down to Palos Verdes Cove. 1964

Bottom:

A fully restored '33 Ford Deluxe with proud owners at Huntington Beach, 1964. No doubt listening to The Beach Boys' Fun, Fun, Fun on the radio.