

SEX, DRUGS AND ROLLING SURF

Bunker Spreckels lived fast – and died young. Born into a \$50m fortune, he left his family to surf in Hawaii. There, the playboy prince revolutionised the sport before, 30 years ago, his excesses caught up with him, at the age of just 27. In his previously unpublished last interview, he talks to **CR Stecyk III** about groupies, surfing on acid and meeting Satan

Born in 1949, Adolph B Spreckels III – great grandson of a Germany-born sugar baron, railway tycoon and publisher, Claus Spreckels – grew up in the lap of luxury. When he was five, the world's most famous man became his stepfather. Clark Gable schooled him in the art of hunting and revealed the illusory insanity of the image factory to his young charge. Following Gable's death in 1960, he would use the star's Oscar as a doorstop.

From an early age, the beach boys at Waikiki's Royal Hawaiian Hotel taught the lad the intricacies of fishing, canoeing and surf riding. Little ABS III's family was revered by the native populace in the land of Aloha because they had supported King David Kalakaua, the last absolute Hawaiian monarch, in his battles against the interlopers. He was taught things few would ever learn because of his lineage. Old *kahunas*, the keepers of island lore, proclaimed that he was a reincarnated Hawaiian prince. Back on the mainland, the boy evolved into a highly skilled surfer, practising in the manicured perfection of the private-access beaches of Point Dume in Malibu. He was universally called by the family-bestowed nickname of Bunker, and society columnists charted his every move.

Bunker dated Miss Teen California, became a nationally ranked archer, was on track to become a stockbroker, and seemed doomed to the sweet ride of those groomed for success. But, at 18, Bunker would turn his back on the family fortune and return to Hawaii, to the North Shore of Oahu, where he became a penniless, itinerant surfer. Surviving by building surfboards and living by his wits, he pioneered a revolutionary approach to board design and wave riding that has never been

equalled. Bunker crafted radically short, hard-edged boards that he rode lying down, on his knees, and standing up, changing to the most effective body position several times during a single ride.

As international magazines began to mention him regularly, the surfer retreated to the obscure outer islands of Hawaii. When he finally allowed his inheritance (believed to be in the region of \$50m) to fall upon him, Bunker immediately established 'branch offices' around the globe. Hotel George V in Paris. Hotel Edward in South Africa. Yacht Harbor Towers in Honolulu. Kuilima Estates in Kahuku. Sunset Tower in Hollywood. Divergence became Bunker's avocation. Surfing remained a passion, but the earlier simplicity of his monk-like existence was replaced with vengeful, spectacular excess.

I first met Bunker in 1962 at Malibu. We became good friends over the ensuing years, travelling, building boards, doing things like that. These interviews were done over October and November of 1976 on the North Shore and in Honolulu. Bunker was working on a film of his own then and also on the *Lucifer Rising* project with director Kenneth Anger. He died just after our interview sessions, in January 1977, aged 27, and neither of the movies was completed.

The thing that strikes me now is how prophetic Bunker was. He was considerably ahead of things in term of style, concept and attitude. Now the big irony is that Takuji Masuda and Anger are both working on finishing off Bunker's film. So 30 years later we're back to the beginning of Bunker's project. Now people will finally get a chance to see what Bunker was about.

CR Stecyk III is a surfer and artist and co-wrote the classic skateboarding documentary Dogtown and Z-Boys (2001)



I FAMILY

How do you react to being called the most decadent person in surfing?

I suppose it's reasonably satisfying to have that sort of reputation, because it's a reputation that I alone have built for myself, without the help of advertisers or manufacturers.

What was the most outstanding moment in your surfing career?

One time a porpoise pushed a wave over on me at Jeffreys Bay [near Port Elizabeth in South Africa]. That was pretty interesting.

He made it break?

Yeah, he made a tube. He swam in going the opposite way as I was coming down the line.

The board I had made was 7ft 4in long and I was halfway around a corner when I saw this form swim into the lip going the other way. When I got right up to where I was going to hit the lip, I noticed it was a porpoise. He pushed the whole wave over right on me. It just ledged me. I stood up and fell off the tail because I was so excited.

Let's get into your background. Has your family always been a powerful family?

Yes.

Do you know much about your ancestors?

Quite a bit actually, about some of them, just maybe the key people in the family. I've read books on them. We come from a Viking line of Teutons. My great-grandfather Claus Spreckels – only then it was Von Spreckels, but in America we dropped it to Spreckels – sailed over from Germany in 1846.

What was it like growing up around Clark Gable? He couldn't go out on the streets without causing a riot. I don't think there's anybody that's come around today as far as just out-and-out being a superstar that's more famous than Clark Gable was, and still is. I'm not talking about rich, I'm just talking about fame.

I got to know him on a level that people wouldn't ever normally get to know him. I'll say one thing – he was the same way at home that he was on the screen. He didn't change very much. He was from that no-crap school of acting and that's the way he lived, too. He was never one to talk about himself. He'd always talk about other people or other things rather than himself. If you listen to people most of the time nowadays they're usually talking about themselves.

'CLARK GABLE TAUGHT ME TO SHOOT. HE WAS GOOD WITH A WHIP AND IN COWBOY ARTS'

Main picture: Spreckels in Hawaii in 1973. Above, from top: Spreckels (right) with his mother, sister and stepfather Clark Gable in 1957; in Hawaii in 1969; interviewer CR Stecyk III with LSD guru Timothy Leary (left) in California in 1978.

What did you learn from him?

I learned a lot about grooming. I heard from him what a fuck-tit the acting business is. I learned a lot about words, how to use words. He taught me how to use the dictionary.

You mentioned women once before...

Oh, yes, he taught me quite a bit about women, and that I better watch out for them, too. Also, some women don't keep themselves so clean so you got to watch out for that, too.

Did you learn anything else from him?

He taught me how to shoot. He taught me how to use different weapons - knives and bullwhips, that type of thing. He was good with a whip. He was good with a lasso, good in the cowboy arts. Good with horses. He was good with animals. He was into hunting and fishing.

When you were a kid you went to military school?

That's right. Saint John's Military Academy.

What was that like?

It was a nightmare, but I liked it. I learned a lot. I learned to hack it out with all those guys every day. Their egos running rampant to the playground.

What future did your family envision for you?

They wanted me to be a banker, I believe. International banker. Or an ambassador. Some sort of diplomatic job. That type of thing. I wanted to go through military school and then get into the air force academy or just go right into the air force. I wanted to go to Vietnam to fly missions. Those were my plans, but I got sidetracked.

How so?

By the lifestyle that I started to lead in Hollywood. The fringe American youth lifestyle activities, and surfing, and fucking off. I got caught up in that whole Sixties culture-shock thing and sort of dropped out from society by spending all my time surfing and making car models. My plans to go into the air force fell through. All of a sudden I didn't want to go to Vietnam and kill anybody or even go over there at all. I wanted to go surfing instead, so that's what I went and did.

What was your life like then?

I was living on the Gable ranch. It was pretty exciting because I had a job and made a few dollars here and there doing this and that. I had a girlfriend who was Miss Teen California at the time. They gave her a fur coat and \$5,000 and a

free car. Between her bankroll and mine, we both made out pretty good. We went on expensive dates and took little trips and that sort of thing.

Did you make enough money from your job to support your emerging lifestyle?

No, I found other avenues in Hollywood and the beach to make money.

Such as?

I set up a little business of my own, selling a little bag of this or a little bag of that to the kids.

How long did you do that?

From the time I was about 15 until I was about 20.

How much money did you make?

Sometimes \$5,000 a week.

How much did you spend?

All of it.

II SURFING AND SURFBOARDS

How many surfboards do you figure you've owned in your life?

I tried to count one time but couldn't. A lot. I've probably ridden more boards than anybody, and more different types of boards.

You have 39 surfboards right now?

Yeah.

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Nine of them that you are using all the time?

Yeah. Some of them are either retired or in storage or I don't ride them any more. I've ridden a lot of surfboards. I went out and bought all my surfboards. I never surfed for a company or manufacturer or anything like that.

Why not?

Because I always had the money to go buy my own surfboards. That's why I went surfing in the first place, because I didn't want to be part of some team. Like at military school, I used to play sports and be involved with a team. You had to do what the coach said. The team had to show up here at a certain time and do this and do that and do the other thing. Same thing I feel about professional surfing for myself. Had I made it professionally this year, all of a sudden I would have been playing the surfing game by their rules. That to me is defeating the whole purpose of surfing, which to me is getting off the land and going out and being free in the water. I just felt the whole thing was self-defeating.

How would you rank yourself in terms of the surfing pantheon these days?

If you put everybody who's anybody in the water at Sunset [a beach on Oahu] and you've got some good waves going on out there, I feel that if it was my day, I could surf as good, if not better, than anybody else. I still feel capable of doing that. But the thing about my surfing is, I've never been real consistent because I've always had other problems that have kept me from being consistent in the water. I had things happen to me on land that had me connecting with drugs, women, or physical violence that have kept me from turning in a first-class performance every time I go out.

But you figure you're as good as anybody on the pro circuit on a given day?

Oh, yeah, sure. I can ride big waves. I can ride small waves. I can ride rights. I can ride lefts. Plus I have a style that I've developed that I've learned watching the masters of surfing over the years and studying the magazines and films and watching a lot of surfing. If it comes down to it, I can imitate a lot of surfers, too. And I do.

What do you strive for when you surf on your own?

To catch as many waves as I possibly can in the time that I'm going to be out there. And, hopefully, that the waves will be hollow. My speciality is riding real short boards. My other speciality is tube-riding, whether it's a real small tube or it's a real big tube. That's when I can really turn it on, so to speak, and really come unglued.

Why do you surf? What are you trying to get out of it?

Good health and pleasure. Something beautiful to look at, something beautiful to think about in a society that's pretty rat-fucked. Something that you can still do that's just beautiful, aesthetic.

Talk about the roots of surfing.

Surfing after all these years is still considered by many of the Hawaiian surfers and California transplants and what-not here in Hawaii as the sport of kings and the king of sports. In the old days it was only the kings that were allowed to surf. That is all the more interesting when one



With 'life partner' Ellie in Hawaii in 1973.

'WOMEN WANTED TO GET THEIR TOES BETWEEN MY HOOK ONCE I HAD MONEY'

learns that surfing has a background in pagan and primitive life. Surfing almost disappeared during the 19th century, when almost everything was called 'wicked' by the missionaries. Surfing was revived about 50 years ago by white men who found that redwood trees in California made the best surfboards. In the old days in Hawaii there were a lot of ceremonies attached to surfing. The *kahunas* would come down and bless the events. There were certain rituals and details that were performed by the surfer himself.

Are you conscious of Hawaiian heritage when you go surfing in Hawaii?

Yes. For all I know it could be a million years ago I'm out there. It could be two million. Time all of a sudden really has no meaning. It could be any century of any age. The waves were breaking before I was here on this earth and they'll be breaking after I'm gone.

You once mentioned something about Hawaiian reincarnation...

There's a group over here that believes I'm a reincarnation of a Hawaiian prince. I was told that by two Hawaiian women who claim to be *kahunas*.

Considering your heritage, how do you feel you fit into modern-day Hawaii?

I'm not really quite sure how I fit into here yet, into the plan of things. I'm just practising my art of surfing. That's what I'm doing here.

So you've dedicated yourself to surfing for how long?

Eighteen years so far. I'm now thinking of retiring from surfing shortly. There are other things in life that I'd like to pursue, and if I'm going to pursue these other things I'm going to have to dedicate myself to that.

Do you feel like you've had all the experiences there are in surfing?

I think I've done as much as I'm going to do. I'm 27 now. I've surfed almost every major spot that I know of in the world worth surfing. Like Bruce's Beauties in Africa - I've surfed that at eight-to-10-foot-plus. I surfed Jeffreys Bay at 10 feet. [In Hawaii] I've surfed perfect Sunset, perfect Pipeline, perfect Velzyland, perfect waves on the outer islands at various spots. All I could do is just maintain the level of surfing I have. Maybe get a little bit better than I am now. But I don't think I would get that much better than I am now.

So there's nothing more for you to accomplish in surfing?

In a sense I feel that way, but I don't feel that I'm better than surfing. I know that there are going to be things that will be happening in surfing, maybe the next 25 years that kids may start doing manoeuvres that I never even thought of doing.

But for this time period?

For this time period I'm pretty well through.

III BIG MONEY

How did you realise you were going to inherit the money?

I wasn't in line to inherit any money in the first place. The only reason I inherited money was because of a sequence of events, the way people died in my family. Had my father lived, he very easily and very probably would've spent the money that I inherited.

How's that?

He expected my grandmother - his mother - to die. The money that she was holding would've gone to him and his sisters. He would've gotten that money, so he was spending his money. He was just waiting for her money. But he died first so the money she would've given to him she gave to me.

Did you get any money when your dad died?

I didn't get any money. He had spent almost his entire fortune.

How much did he spend?

In the neighbourhood of \$50 million.

What did he spend it on?

Cars, yachts, women, wives, travelling, having a good time, partying, houses, gambling. The usual material things.

When did you actually get the money?

When I turned 21, I went to the bank and I picked up my money.

In cash?

That's right.

What'd you do with it?

Spent it.

Spent it?

Spent it and made investments.

How did you get the money out of the bank?

Armoured car.

Where'd you take it?

To my secret cave.

What do you use that for?

It's just a place I have that nobody knows where it is, where I keep certain objects, art treasures, things I don't want people to see. Plus, it's where I can go do things that I don't want people to know that I'm doing. It's just a secret place that I have here on the earth where I can go and be alone. I've got all my things of value hidden there, and everything is arranged very neatly. It's like, you know, the Batcave or something.

Did your life change when you got the money?

Yes.

How so?

I had a lot of new friends all of a sudden. That's a joke, son. Anyway... Yeah, things changed. They called me Mr Spreckels at the bank. When I went to the bank to get some money, I didn't get any shit any more.

Have your personal habits changed?

Not to any great extent. I just started eating better. I started eating steak every night, eating out at restaurants every night, that kind of thing. That's what changed. I was able to go out and go to the bar and drink as much as I wanted and not worry about who was going to pay for it. I could drink myself comatose and I could go out and buy whatever I wanted.

How much would you say you spend on an average day on the North Shore?

About \$500.

Is that counting your bar bill?

That's counting everything. Some days it's more, some days it's less. But basic minimum, \$500.

The average guy here I'm sure doesn't spend that in a month.

Yeah, well.

How did the women react to you after you came into your money?

I had a lot of women approaching me. They'd come over and get it on with me and go places. I had a lot of women just flocking around me, trying to get in there and get their toes beneath my hook, so to speak.

What was your record for women during that period?

I used to fuck a lot. Still do. My record? Let's see. I nailed 64 chicks in one week. That was pretty interesting.

How do you happen to remember that?

I was keeping track. It was an ego trip.

Interesting. Are you proud of your heritage?

I am proud of it, yes. I think it also has its drawbacks. I think in the long run I'll be able to win the game that I'm playing. That will be a result of the kind of family and the kind of thing that I come from. It's kind of a hard thing for people to understand, the type of egos, the type of relationships that I've dealt with and put up with through my life. But it's not up to them to understand it anyway, because they wouldn't. Even if I sat down and spelled it out to them, they still wouldn't understand it because they haven't lived that way and they don't know what it's like.



At the Sunset Tower Hotel, Hollywood, 1976.

'SURFING JUST SEEMED TO BE THE ONLY THING TO DO AFTER A DOSE OF ACID'

IV EXCESS

Have drugs played a part in your surfing career?

Yeah, certainly.

What kind?

Drugs and surfing sort of go hand in hand, in the sense that it's the kind of lifestyle with which drugs are more or less an occupational hazard, like in the world of rock music.

Were there any drugs that were good to do while surfing?

Yeah, LSD, when it first became popular. I believe it was a factor in rearranging the boards. The boards got smaller. The surfing got more radical. People were having hallucinations and visions and vibrations, spiritual revelations. Or else they were having complete bammers. Surfing just seemed to be the only thing to do when you take a dose of acid. It was a hell of a lot better than sitting around in somebody's room staring at them, thinking you were reading their mind or having some kind of hallucinogenic tangent. I think that the only drugs that really brought surfing through to another level were the psychedelic type – mushrooms, mescaline, psilocybin. Other drugs are like anaesthesia. They make you so numb that they shut your senses down so you can't feel the currents that are going on around you. They make you numb.

What drugs in particular?

I think marijuana makes you numb for surfing – cocaine or heroin take the edge off surfing.

How many psychedelic trips have you taken?

I couldn't count the times that I've taken psychedelics. I can't remember things like that.

What kind of frequency did you take it with at your height?

Every day.

Every day, all day?

No, I'd take maybe a little sniff. I'd mix psilocybin with mescaline and LSD and smash it up, and then chop it up into a powder and keep it in a bottle. When I'd wake up in the morning I'd take a little snort. Just one snort in the morning and that would be it for the rest of the day.

Have you ever had a big drug habit?

A big one? I've had what most people would call expensive drug habits for sure.

You've been strung out. How could you walk away?

I've always been able to control it. I've always been able to get up and walk away from drugs whenever I wanted to.

Why is that?

Because I have a lot of will power. I only take drugs when I want to or feel like it.

V THIS IS THE END

What kinds of things are you into now?

Things that haven't been done, or that other people wouldn't think of to do.

What kind of things do you experiment with?

My looks, mainly. My thinking, my approach to life, people, women, the media, TV, movies, records. I follow any fads, like skateboarding, which has had a re-emergence. If some new toy comes out I try to see if this fad is going to take hold and what the market for it is going to be and if somebody's able to pull it off. I follow the rock-and-roll music scene quite closely. I am interested in the music business.

How so?

I write lyrics and I'm a vocalist. More than that, I suppose. I was in one band. I can dance, too. I'm capable of doing probably just about every American dance step that has ever been done. With a band my role is vocalist and lyricist, and I'm the one that's the front man, the performer, because I can dance. That's what the crowd likes to see. They like to see somebody who is not only going to entertain them with just singing, but with their visual image as well.

What about acting?

I'm interested in that as well.

What kind of people would you work with?

I'd like to work with Andy Warhol, Nicolas Roeg, Stanley Kubrick, Kenneth Anger. I feel that the way I'm directing my image that I would be most comfortable and work best with people of their stature. I feel they could take a personality like me and direct me in a positive way.

Their directions are similar to yours, then?

Yeah, the stuff that I see them do is what I would do if I was a film-maker.

You have said you could play the role of Lucifer...

Because I think I can deal with the role in the right type of fashion, from some of the things ▶

BUNKER SPRECKELS

that I've studied. I could get my looks up for the part. I always look like such a devil. Plus, I wouldn't be afraid to play the role. I wouldn't be afraid of the so-called repercussions of playing such a role.

Why not?

Because I just don't have that fear of Satan. He doesn't scare me.

Have you ever seen him?

Yes, in 1970.

What was that all about?

It was a personal confrontation between the two of us as to what I might want to do with myself.

What was the background? What kind of stuff were you doing at the time?

Surfing, learning how to shape, studying magic.

Were you doing any drugs at the time?

Peyote, marijuana, hash.

So you could play Lucifer because you know what he looks like?

In the film I wouldn't necessarily look like that because he can assume any form he wants.

And having dealt with him?

Yeah, that's why I think I would be one of the people qualified to play that role.

What are the most important things to you now?

Being healthy. Cleaning my appearance up. Getting my trip together. Getting a business rolling. Making lots of money. Hopefully there's some work with some of the directors I mentioned.



Two new Mercedes with surfboards for the Gunston 500 competition were waiting for us at the airport in Durban. The next 10 weeks were pure 24/7 crazy shit. Bunker pulled a knife across the throat of an adversary at a banquet. He shot out traffic lights while driving at night between bar fights. Ellie split. He fired me and, for good measure, shot at me with his pistol. Then it was kiss and make up and I was rehired. We moved on to Paris and prostitutes chased us, \$35,000 worth of film equipment was purchased, and Bunker spent his last night in town with a redhead.

ART BREWER, PHOTOGRAPHER, ABOVE

You mentioned changing your appearance.

After 19 years old I became aware of the fact that I could manipulate my looks. In some photos I look like a different person from photo to photo.

Is the way you dress important to you?

Yes. To dress tonight all I would have to do is put a certain type of a shirt on with the coat that I

was wearing earlier and I could get into almost any party anywhere in the world. Except for maybe a real heavy black tie. But even then, I've crashed black ties in really radical clothes.

Are you politically aware?

Of course.

What plans do you have after your retirement from surfing?

Plans to get associated with people, just some musicians that I find around that are capable of doing the songs that I write. Once I find a group that is capable, I'll be able to feed my lyrics to them and hopefully come up with a good, new, hot band. I've got some good lyrics that I've been playing lately and I'm dying to form a band.

Anything else?

You did know that I'm the father of two?

Yeah?

I've got a boy that's in Guethary [a French surf resort] that I've never seen. I don't really want to go down there and see his mother. **OSM**

These interviews were conducted at Spreckels's home in Wailua Beach, Oahu, in winter 1976. Bunker died on 7 January 1977. 'Bunker Spreckels: Surfing's Divine Prince of Decadence' by Art Brewer and CR Stecyk is published tomorrow by Taschen, www.taschen.com

