

THE RADAR SOCIETY

BY GARY BAUM



RIDING HIGH: Spreckels on the North Shore of Oahu in November 1976.

THE SILVER SPOON SURFER *70s-era L.A. playboy/heir Bunker Spreckels lived life to its train-wreckiest. A new coffee table title tells all.*

Tragically, 30-years-dead Bunker Spreckels—sugar fortune heir, iconic L.A. beach boy, Tinseltown inner-circle—missed his ideal cultural moment, which happens to be this one. Long before Matthew McConaughey knowingly foreswore upper-body wear to giddy blogosphere acclaim, the six-packed Adonis was proudly rippling in the Malibu sun. Long before Stavros Niarchos found his way into the graces of both Paris Hilton and Mary-Kate Olsen, the dude's dude was on record in 1976 as having once "nailed 64 chicks in a week." Long before Brad Pitt found his calling in social activism, the legendary surfer, whilst in the midst of an *Endless Summer*-style journey through South Africa, found himself in the Soweto ghetto, trading tough-guy stares with displeased Afrikaners over the injustice of apartheid. And long before Brandon Davis entered rehab, the poor little rich boy evaded his own family's final request to check into Cedars, preferring instead to check out via an overdose of his favored pharmacopia of drugs.

Spreckels, born in 1949 as the trust-funded great-grandson of pioneering Hawaii sugar-industry maestro Claus, grew up on the Encino ranch of stepfather Clark Gable before wiling away his 20s along the coastlines of L.A. and Oahu's North Shore, where he eventually made waves in the then-nascent field of short-board riding. Those deep pockets kept him continually liquid in the fast lane, with enough ladies and psychotropics to inscribe a naughty name for himself on both sides of the Pacific. Whether it be renowned Venice aggro-skater Tony Alva, who found inspiration in Spreckels' antics, or the staff at the *Herald Examiner*, who found quality copy, nobody could get enough of his trademark brand of rascally Richie Rich behavior.

And, it seems, the public's enduring appetite for such sin has now brought Spreckels back from the dead. Two pedigreed hagiographers-in-chief, famed surf photographer Art Brewer and *Dogtown and Z-Boys* cowriter C.R. Stecyk, have teamed up on what may arguably be the most pitch-perfectly amoral memorial possible for this sun king of the dissolute scene: a glossy coffee table book, out this month from Taschen, with the anything-but-understated title *Bunker Spreckels: Surfing's Divine Prince of Decadence*. After all, nobody was as fascinated by the prospect of his ultimate wipeout as Spreckels himself, who in 1974 originally hired Brewer, along with noted videographer Spyder Wills, for the specific purpose of documenting his self-stylized exploits.

"Everything was always thought out with him," Brewer says. "Bunker knew exactly what he was doing—creating this image. Once he inherited his money, he had all sorts of people clinging on to him, out for a scam or a deal, just wanting to hustle, and his defense was to turn into a chameleon." Stecyk is far more blunt: "He was clearly acting out, but he was acting out a character."

Ergo, Spreckels didn't actually see himself as being a charter member of the doucheoisie; he just played one in reality. In fact, he had a name for this fur-wearing, pistol-toting, generally pimped-out character—"The Player"—whom Spreckels regularly referred to, Sybil-like, in the third person, and whom, apparently, he was even in the tentative process of turning into a faux-biopic film role. The exact provenance of this particular affinity for masculine performance artistry is unknown, but it may have arisen as a natural outgrowth of Spreckels' CONTINUED...

TRUE HOLLYWOOD STORY *Clockwise from left: Bunker ready to surf the Banzai Pipeline in Oahu, October 1969. Hanging out at the Sunset Tower in West Hollywood, spring 1976. In recline at the Hotel George V in Paris, September 1975. With girlfriend Ellie at the Jardin Lecoq in Paris, that same year.*



...CONTINUED intimate, lifelong relationship with macho Hollywood (family friend Jimmy Stewart delivered his eulogy).

Now, had Spreckels been spiraling downward today, all of this self-consciously glamorized, action-packed myth making—The blondes! The guns! The waves! The cocaine... and peyote?!—would have undoubtedly endeared him to TMZ readers and semiotics majors alike. Alas, the tabloid media machine was neither quite so robust nor so resilient at the time, so Spreckels, like fellow charisma conduit Edie Sedgwick, ended up resting in peace. At least, that is, for a few decades, until his outsized persona calcified into appropriately fashionable folklore.

Indeed, in the age of Cisco Adler and Joel Madden, L.A.'s roués are all the rage again. "Bunker was prophetic in a lot of ways," says Stecyk. "He was so ahead of his game." It's true: Say you saw Harry Morton ambling through the Sunset Tower a little while back? Spreckels lived large there for years. You've heard of that MTV reality star who supposedly convinced his telegenic girlfriend to purchase a new pair of bazongas? Spreckels pioneered the practice with his main babe, Ellie—while Nixon was still in office.

"He used people to his best benefit," says Brewer. "People thought they were getting the best of him, but, in reality, he was getting the best of them." Which is why Spreckels is surely smiling down from the heavens as he watches us rubbernecking voyeurs complicitly gawk, with both pleasure and disgust, at his studiously staged misadventures. ■