

## Beach myths

# Bunker Spreckels and me

A look behind  
the glitz



Bunker Spreckels on the beach at Pipeline with one of his boards, which according to Mike Purpus, photographed better than it rode. Photo by Art Brewer ([www.artbrewer.com](http://www.artbrewer.com))

by Mike Purpus

In 1970, Bunker Spreckels arrived at Malibu with a new short board design and the hopes of gaining recognition for being the archetypal surf hedonist that he was. It was perfect timing for Bunker. Mickey "Da Cat" Dora — Malibu's Black Knight of Surfing — was on the run from the FBI, hiding out in Europe, Valley kooks and the hardcore, Dogtown locals from Santa Monica looking for a new messiah. Bunker was about 6-foot, 165 pounds, with semi-long, sun bleached hair complementing his perfectly tanned, surf physique. He looked like a postcard perfect surfer. *Surfer* magazine photographer Art Brewer came out with postcards of Bunker posing on the beach with his red surfboard that had "California Surfer" printed across the top. Bunker wasn't such a bad guy. He was always nice to me. I despised him mostly because I was jealous of him for getting so much attention without going in the water. Bunker's problem was that he was gorgeous but only an average surfer and a bad shaper.

He got notoriety for being the stepson of movie star Clark Gable, and the son of the heir to the Spreckels sugar fortune. He entertained all the skateboard and surf stars who needed free meals or a place to stay. He took over imitating Dora, condemning surfing contests and preaching surf design theories. His personal surfboards looked like your mother's ironing board with square 4-inch thick turned down rails, flat decks and bottoms with no rocker. The boards looked like they were cut out by a six-foot cookie cutter. Bunker took a shotgun and blew a dozen big holes through one of his surfboards and told everyone that his Swiss cheese design was the wave riding vehicle of the future. He never rode the board but got several photos of himself holding the board in the surf magazines.

The waves would be perfect while Bunker strolled up and down beach holding one of his strange surfboards talking to anyone that would listen. I always thought that he didn't want anyone to see how badly the strange surfboard worked. But I was still jealous because he was cutting into the attention I was getting for my infamous Raquel Welch surfboard. The bot-

tom of the board was air brushed with a picture of Welch from "One Million BC." The board had no rocker so it was too stiff to surf, but drew plenty of attention and several photos in all the surf magazines.

In November of 1973, Bunker arrived on the North Shore with his "Dogtown" posse, Jay Adams and Tony Alva. It was a perfect 6-foot day at Rocky Point. Alva strolled up to me half drunk and said, "When are the waves going to drop so we can start having some fun." I told him that the surf was as small as it gets in winter and he should go back to "Dogtown," where he'd be safe. Bunker's posse left two days later, but Bunker was all of a sudden invited to compete in the Smirnoff Pro, which was ludicrous because Michael Ho had to win The Smirnoff Pro Trials held the week

before to get an invite to the main event. Also, Bunker condemned surf contest and never competed. He had paid \$10,000 to Fred Hemmings, International Professional Surfing Association director to be allowed to join the top 24 rated surfers in the world for the contest. I was furious and tried to rally the other pros into getting Bunker thrown out. Gerry Lopez told me to settle down and asked if I would rather surf against Bunker or one of the top 24. All of a sudden everyone, including me, was asking Fred to put Bunker in our heat.

Luckily for Bunker, Sunset Beach was blown out, so the 1973 Smirnoff Invitational Professional Surfing Championships was held in fun, 6- to 8-foot good waves at Laniakea. Bunker got two long rides but still finished last in his first heat. At the awards dinner Bunker came up to me dressed like "Superfly" in a burgundy velvet suit and hat, pink shirt with a bright blue tie and floor length mink coat. He had a cute brunette under one arm and a nasty looking blond under the other and showed me a plastic bag in his pocket with a couple ounces of cocaine inside and invited me to a party in his room upstairs. I told Bunker that I appreciated the invite but would have to decline as David Nuuhiwa, Angie Reno and several other surf stars followed Bunker into the elevator.

Over the next couple of years, Bunker kept appearing in *Surfer* magazine, surfing in far off surf spots around the world. He would pay "Surfer" photographer Art Brewer to go with him. Eventually, *Surfer* publisher Steve Pezman got tired of Brewer's photos of Bunker so Bunker had to start paying for other surf stars to go along or Brewer couldn't go.

In 1977 I went with the Kanoa Surf Team to compete in the pro surfing contests in Brazil and South Africa. After the two pro contests in Durban, the Kanoa Team and pro surfing circuit director Randy Rarick drove for two days down to Jeffrey's Bay and Cape St. Francis. Randy told me that he was with Bunker, Art Brewer, Reno Abellira, and Bunker's model girlfriend the year before surfing Jeffrey's Bay. At that time Jeffrey's Bay was a very small community. It was hours from the nearest town and its highest phone number was 50.

One day, while everyone was surfing, Bunker's girlfriend took off with a local resident and didn't come back for dinner. Bunker was drunk and furious. He grabbed his shotgun and strolled down the main street shooting out several store front windows in search of his girlfriend. The following day his girlfriend came home and convinced Bunker to apologize. Bunker gave everyone in the town several hundred dollars to stop them from calling the police in the neighboring town. From then on everyone in Jeffrey's Bay loved Bunker who brought presents every time he came back. ▣



Author Mike Purpus in 1975 with his Raquel Welch board that competed for attention with Bunker Spreckels shot gunned board. Neither board surfed well but photographers loved them. The photo originally appeared in the Sept. 18, 1975 *Easy Reader*. Photo by Kevin Cody

# Bunker Spreckels: Surfing's Divine Prince of Decadence

by C.R. Stecyk III  
with photographs  
by Art Brewer

216 pages. Published by  
Taschen. Hardcover 8.6 x 11.4  
in., 216 pages. ISBN 978-3-  
8228-5338-2.  
\$39.99



Bunker Spreckels riding his Bunker board at Pipeline. Photo courtesy of Art Brewer (www.ArtBrewer.com)

## by Kevin Cody

*Bunker Spreckels: Surfing's Divine Prince of Decadence* is a cautionary tale for rich surfer kids and their parents. It brings to mind Orson Wells' observation that "the enemy of art is the absence of limits." Spreckels was a promising surfer and surfboard designer until he came into money.

Spreckels was an heir to the Spreckels sugar fortune, whose patriarch Baron Claus was a supporter of King David Kalakaua, the last Hawaiian monarch. As a result young Bunker was treated like royalty and taught to surf by the beach boys at Waikiki's Royal Hawaiian Hotel. He further developed his surfing back home at Little Dume, one of Southern California's best surf breaks. The fact that Little Dume is a fiercely guarded private beach undoubtedly contributed to his understanding of surfing as a quasi spiritual experience intended for royalty.

Asked by author C.R. Stecyk III why he surfed, he answered, "Good health and pleasure. Something beautiful to look at, something beautiful to think about in a society that's pretty rat-fucked."

Spreckels was dealt a California royal flush. Blond surfer looks got him Miss Teen California for a girlfriend. Natural athleticism made him a nationally ranked archer, and a world class surfer. His parents kept him on a short financial leash, but he survived quite nicely on \$5,000 a week in dope sales to neighboring princes and princesses.

And he was smart. Art Brewer's photographs show him in 1969 at age 20 surfing Back Door Pipeline on a 5-foot-6 Bunker-designed board, which he describes in the book as "fairly thin in the nose, a little bit thicker in the tail and...complete down rails that were sharp..."

The design was intended, he said, for "a quick release. A rail sucks water

around it. These types of boards, instead of having water suck around your rail and plugging you in that way, the water would be squirting and releasing... We were trying to get more speed out of the boards by making the bottoms perfectly flat..."

And there was one other reason Spreckels favored the hard to ride design, which would evolve into the popular, more rider friendly fish.

"The reason I was riding their [Southern California shapers Vinny Bryan's and Bob Smith's] boards was because everybody was riding spears and guns, and I didn't want to do, or look like everybody else on a wedge. So I kept trying to do something different."

Spreckels rebelled against his parents' expectations that he go to college and become a stock broker by fleeing to the North Shore after finishing military school in 1969 at age 18. He lived in his truck and stashed boards in the bushes at various surf spots. After a year, he fled his rising surf star status by going into seclusion on an outer island.

Then tragedy derailed his personal quest. His father had squandered an estimated \$50 million inheritance and Spreckels fully expected his father to squander the remainder of the family fortune when Grandma Spreckels died. But dad died first, which meant, at age 22 the young Spreckels inherited money he never expected to see. That was the tragedy.

Overnight the soul surfer became, in superstar skateboarder Tony Alva's words, "Like the king of the scene....He used to say, 'Yeah, I'm a player.'"

Drugs, sex, bodyguards, cars and then death by overdose at 27. It took just five years from the time money unleashed him from the limitations that had given shape to his life.

The story is told through interviews by C.R. Stecyk III and photographs by Art Brewer, and presented in an 11-inch by 12-inch coffee table book. Both the writing and photography are as undisciplined as Bunker's life. The interviews are wandering and overlapping and few of the photos have the pin-sharp, photoshopped quality one expects of a coffee table book on surfing.

Nevertheless, the storyline is compelling and the gritty photos more revealing than some readers might care for. Spreckels comes across as an interesting guy, though not someone you want as a friend or partner.

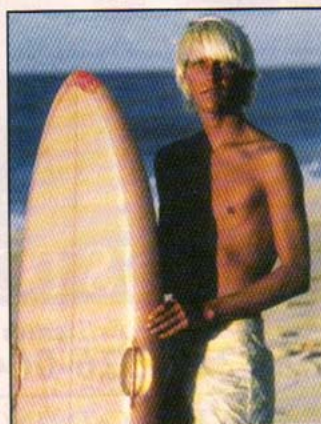
Stecyk, a childhood friend of Spreckels, and co-writer of *Dogtown and Z-Boys*, uses the interview format to allow Spreckels to tell his story in his own, seductive voice.

Brewer, a former *Surfer* magazine photo editor was given access to Spreckels' personnel life because, Brewer writes, "I was one of the only people he had met who hadn't asked him for anything more than a photo release."

In a brief interview, the photographer compared working with Spreckels to "playing with snakes. I viewed him as a teacher on what not to do."

Brewer's detachment results in documentary style photos that trace Spreckels' predictable arc from buffed surfer and martial arts fighter to paste, fur-draped druggie.

But despite his detachment, he was not immune to Spreckels' charms. "He could have done anything. Another week or two and he might have made it. He was in transition," Brewer said. ▣



In his prime — Bunker Spreckels in at Pipeline in 1969, at age 20, with the 5-foot-6 fish precursor that he designed. Photo courtesy of Art Brewer (www.ArtBrewer.com)



In his decline — Bunker Spreckels at age 26, shortly before his death from an overdose. Photo courtesy of Art Brewer (www.ArtBrewer.com)