

the **wave** watcher

Nothing says California like surfers on a crashing swell, and no one has captured the sport, and its culture, quite like photographer **LEROY GRANNIS**. Here, C presents an ode to his unique vision by Russ Spencer







There's the monster," LeRoy Grannis says, picking up one corner of the gorgeous and extravagant new collection of his classic surf photos, just released by Taschen, and titled *LeRoy Grannis, Surf Photography of the 1960s and 1970s*. A limited edition of 1,000, it comes in a special protective box, so heavy that Grannis, now 88 years old, can barely lift it. And that's fitting, because contained within its oversized pages is not only the work of Grannis' own lifetime, but also the embodiment of a profoundly influential American subculture.

Born in 1917, just a few blocks from the Hermosa Beach pier, Grannis began shooting surfers in 1959

and kept at it into the mid-'70s. In those days, Grannis was one of only four or five other photographers in the water, getting a buck apiece for prints he sold to surfers, and five dollars when he sold one to a magazine. Beyond a passion for surfing, the motivation to take pictures wasn't fame or fortune. And it certainly wasn't anything lofty like an urge to document a fleeting but potent moment in California history. It was, in fact, his health.

Grannis had been drawn to the ocean virtually since the day he was born. By the age of 14, when there were at most 200 surfers in the entire state, Grannis was pad-



PALOS VERDES COVE, 1964

Grannis' first published surfing picture appeared in 1960. The lifelong Californian still rides waves frequently near his Carlsbad home.

ding out to catch waves on a 100-pound piece of redwood. Even after he married a beach girl named Katie, served his country in World War II, and became a father of four, Grannis maintained his status as one of surfing's original stalwarts. In 1957, though, after years of working outside as an equipment installer for the phone company, he was transferred to a desk job. Within two years, at the age of 40, he developed an ulcer.

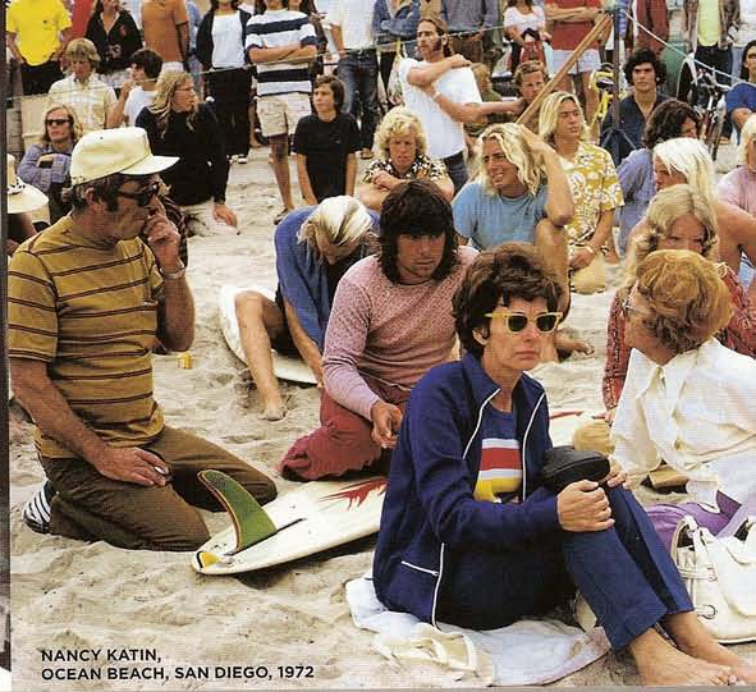
Now living in Carlsbad with Katie, Grannis still laughs when he talks of the momentous bellyache. "The doctor told me to take up a hobby to get my mind off my work," Grannis says. He immediately thought

of taking pictures of surfers: He had been close friends with Doc Ball, the preeminent surf photographer of the 1930s and '40s. "I never took up photography then because Doc was around, taking pictures of me! When I got this ulcer, I figured I would take it up," he says. Since Doc had just moved to Northern California, Grannis' new endeavor was perfectly timed.

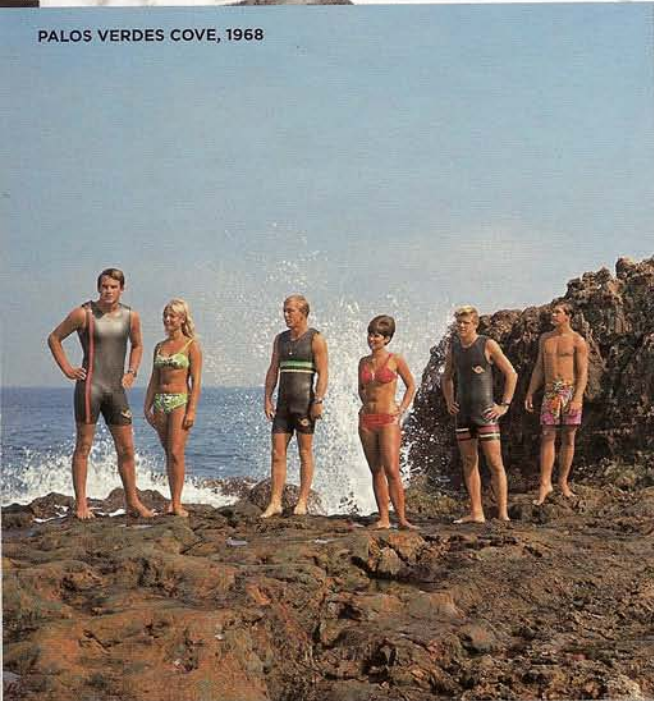
The budding shutterbug built a second garage for a dark room, which became a popular hangout for surfers. Some would rummage through his garbage for cast-offs, searching for proof of their conquests. In a few years, he was contributing to magazines with names



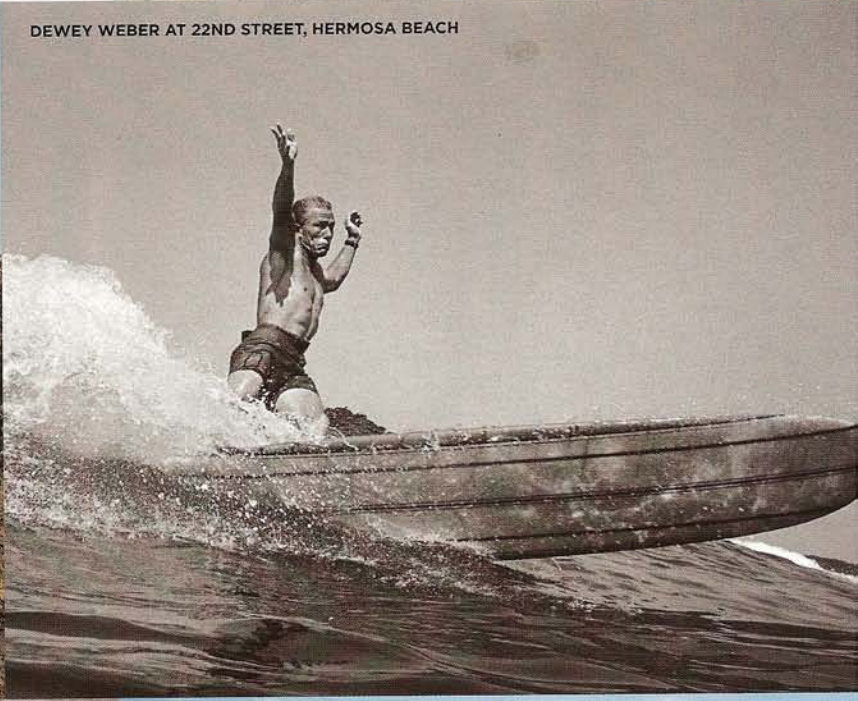
HAP JACOBS,
HERMOSA BEACH, 1960



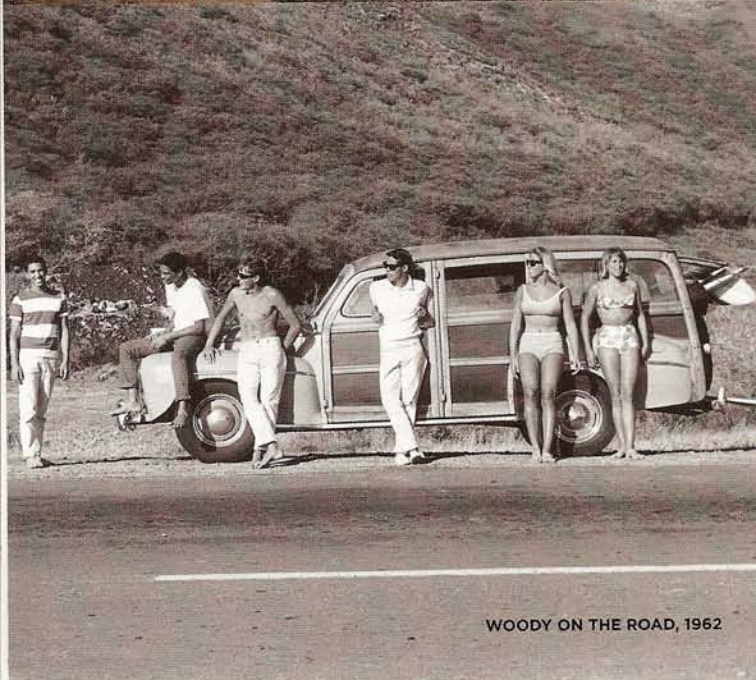
NANCY KATIN,
OCEAN BEACH, SAN DIEGO, 1972



PALOS VERDES COVE, 1968



DEWEY WEBER AT 22ND STREET, HERMOSA BEACH



WOODY ON THE ROAD, 1962



AT MALIBU'S "PIT" DURING THE SUMMER OF LOVE



PALOS VERDES SURFING CLUB,
HOLLYWOOD BY THE SEA, 1968

Before Grannis began his photography career, he was a member of the Palos Verdes Surfing Club, the first of its kind in the country.

like *Reef*, *Surfer*, *Surfing Illustrated*, and *Surfing*, and his hobby became a profession.

With a 650mm lens screwed on to a Pentax S, Grannis stalked legendary surfers like Ricky Grigg, Philip Edwards and Peter Cole as they pioneered new locations, new boards and new techniques. And Grannis also constantly fine-tuned his own methods. For the first few years of his shooting career, long before the advent of underwater casings, he entered the surf with just his board and a bare camera. If a wave would wipe him out, he did his best to continue to hold the camera above water—but not always successfully. He eventually designed a rubber-lined wooden box, suction-cupped to the front of his board, to shelter his equipment until the perfect shot presented itself.

The magic of Grannis' imagery lies not only in the action he captured in the water, but also in the surrounding scenes he glimpsed: the lines of boards leaning against a rusty cyclone fence at Malibu Point; guys hanging out in the old surf shack at San Onofre Beach. Taken together, his surf-and-turf perspective paints a complete picture of a way of life which has since been

heavily co-opted and commercialized, much to Grannis' discontent. In his photos, though, we see the original bronzed and beautiful optimism of a moment in time that simply can't be reproduced—a world before Vietnam, LSD, Watergate, or flashy professional surf sponsorships. Impossibly handsome surfers and their Doris Day girlfriends, stacks of longboards sticking out the back of pick-up trucks, and smiling guys in ties and sweaters at campy awards ceremonies. It was all real.

Despite the invaluable cache of more than 3,000 iconic images that he produced, don't try convincing Grannis that he's a legend. He doesn't buy it. Even though his photos have helped define and mythologize an entire culture, he wants no part of personal aggrandizement and takes little credit for what now appears to be incredibly prescient foresight. "I was just lucky," he says. "None of it was pre-planned. I was in my 40s then, so I had a more mature outlook on the sport and the people around me, which gave me an advantage. But that is all."

Grannis' casual humility shows through in the way he stores his work. His images are not sheltered in a vault or stored in a sealed, climate-

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HERMOSA BEACH, 1963

IN HIS PHOTOS, WE SEE THE ORIGINAL BRONZED

Growing up in Hermosa Beach, living mere steps from the ocean, Grannis' father took him swimming and bodysurfing from the age of five. THIS PAGE Malibu, 1967.



AND BEAUTIFUL OPTIMISM OF A MOMENT IN TIME