

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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From Endless Summer to The Present

It was a time before Rip Curl or Billabong, a time before Gidget, before Frankie (Avalon) and Annette (Funicello) or Beach Blanket Bingo. In the early 1960s, surfing was still considered a cult sport, limited to beach bums in Southern California and Hawaii.



The film *The Present* gives a view inside the barrel.

So when filmmaker Bruce Brown completed *Endless Summer*, the celluloid story of a few friends chasing the perfect wave around the world, the allure of his now-classic surf movie eluded movie distributors. So, Mr. Brown screened it himself — in school gyms, in music venues, in town halls. Surfing became a sensation, even for audiences far from the sea. (And the movie gurus, left shaking their heads after *Endless Summer*, promptly produced a slew of psudeo-surfing beach party movies to cash in on it.)

In the past 10 years, indie surf films have made a resurgence, complete with grass-roots tours and high-profile pop music proponents such as Jack Johnson and Donovan Frankenreiter.

Filmmaker Thomas Campbell has been a big part of the next wave of surf films. Already critically acclaimed for his cinematic specials *Sprout* and *Seedling*, his new film is called *The Present*. Four years in the making, now touring, it is coming to the Vineyard courtesy of the Martha's Vineyard Film Festival and its surfer-founder-director Thomas Bena.



There's a board for anyone ready to ride.

Mr. Bena describes *The Present* as an updating of the classic surfing films that used to tour the country in the '60s and '70s, shot in beautifully rich 16mm film. He says *The Present* offers a glimpse into present-day surfing subcultures interspersed with breathtaking footage of top surfers. Sunday, April 26 at 7 p.m. is its only Massachusetts stop in the films' nationwide tour. The jazz

duo *The Mattson 2*, whose music is featured in the film, will perform live at the screening, and a hand-shaped alaiia surfboard will be raffled off at the event.

Mr. Bena agreed to interview Mr. Campbell this week for the *Gazette*, one surfer and filmmaker to another.

Gazette: This morning, when I told my dentist about your film she said, "Oh, I remember the *Endless Summer*. I've never forgotten that movie." So it's funny how surf films still have the ability to give something special to people, even if they don't ride waves, they still get the beauty, the essence, the solitude.

Campbell: Sure, that's what this is about. And I think that even people that aren't surfers are open to the experience and the beauty of how we make the films.

Gazette: How often do you surf?

Campbell: Ah, two or three times a week.

Gazette: Do you think that this film will translate well to people who don't surf?

Campbell: I would say that the film is made for surfers. The idea of the film is made for people who are in the know. So when you hear the historical references, it's not leading up to the information for a person that knows totally nothing about it. But, I would say that it also is probably one of the most accessible films for a normal surf film, for people. As far as beauty and simple connection.

Gazette: What are some of your favorite surf films?

Campbell: Let's see ... *The Sunshine Sea* by MacGillivray/Freeman, *Hot Generation* by Paul Witzig, obviously, *Endless Summer*, it's the best. Those are my big ones.

Gazette: What does surfing mean to you?

Campbell: It's just a connector base. Being in contact with nature and being

totally immersed in it, and then to challenge your body and feel a connection with your body. I don't know. It just makes you feel fantastic. I don't know really anything else like it. I guess I don't really think about it so much. It's just like something that I gravitate towards.

Gazette: Is there anything that you want to say about surfing — how it inspires your art, any connections you've made?

Campbell: I guess in general the way I think about surfing and being involved in the ocean is just that there are so many — there are such a vast amount of possibilities out there, for access [various types of waves and the many methods to ride them on a variety of equipment].

I think a lot of times the media, surf media in general, is so directly connected with big business that what you see and what you hear doesn't really reflect what is out there or what's happening or what's possible.

And it's such a wonderful life — even to just go down to the beach and be like, “You know that little bodysurfing wave is working.” That you can just obtain such a high from bodysurfing, even — sometimes even greater than any board — for me and for a lot of my friends. And then you'll be like, “Oh man, it's double overhead and there's a sick grinding wave.” There are so many other possibilities.



... but anyone can enjoy this kind of vista.

I'm just excited about documenting this [range]. I'm not really a part of the big

business, the surfing big business circle. I never saw anything per se, from any company, that was like, "Hey here's a bunch of possibilities." That's the way I see it anyway. I just see a lot of options out there. ... Yesterday I rode my 5-10 quad fish and today I don't know what I'm going to ride. But it's a good day, it's already a good day.

Gazette: That's great. And I want to thank you again for agreeing to screen with us. When I contacted you, I was hoping that you would check out our site and see what we're trying to do with our festival and be into it.

Campbell: It's one of the main things that I really love about doing this.

This is a film for surfers. If you just put out a DVD, you're not sure that it's really going to get out there, you know? I think there are people that make a DVD every year. This took four and a half, five years to make — not full-time, but that's the duration of time, and it's incredibly expensive to make — it's shot in 98 per cent film, Super 16mm. You get done with this thing and really want to share it and get it out there. So doing this creates a really nice event with the people. People are going, "Wow, that was so nice. It was a nice event and it brought the community together."



Director says it's a film for surfers . . .

Reader Feedback



Friday, April 24, 2009 6:12pm

There's no byline on this story. I'll assume it was written by a young person who's unfamiliar with 60s film culture. The Endless Summer had its original 16mm release 5 years after the movie "Gidget" debuted (1959). The novel Gidget was written in 1957. The "pseudo" surfing movies mentioned above pre-dated the theatrical release of Endless Summer. So, they certainly weren't created in reaction to Mr Brown's film. AIP was the company responsible for the whole 'beach party' film series, and had done at least 5 films in that genre before the general public knew what Endless Summer was. In fact, the last 'beach' film of the period was released just a few months after Brown's film went to 35mm. Also, by the early 60s, surfing was widespread throughout the continental US and other parts of the world, like S Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe.

- Steve M , Chilmark

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