



Among the Swells

DOCUMENTARIAN STACY PERALTA CAPTURES THE SURF ELITE WHO RIDE THE BIGGEST WAVES OF ALL **BY ROBERT ITO**

LAIRD HAMILTON IS THE GREATEST big-wave surfer in the world. When asked how Hamilton mustered the courage to ride waves 60 feet tall, walls of water that, had he wiped out, would have likely shattered bones or left his drowned body bobbing in the surf, his father had a simple answer. The family, he explained, had had a third testicle attached to

their son at birth. One baby, three balls—is there no limit to a father's love? Hamilton's peers laugh about the explanation, but not one will go on record saying that the story is untrue. How else to explain the courage of one who has conquered Maui's Jaws and Tahiti's Teahupo'o, two of the globe's scariest surfing spots? How else to explain one who looks over the precipice of a wave ten

stories high, then calmly drops down its face?

There are millions of surfers on Earth, but only a small number—fewer than 1 percent—are true big-wave riders. Fear is the primary reason the club is so small. Statistically speaking, other sporting activities are more

likely to kill you—climbing Everest, say, or bull riding—but few can match big-wave riding for sheer terror. There are the wipe-outs, of course, but the most frightening aspect is being held underwater as wave after wave crashes down on top of you. Your

PRINTS OF TIDES: Stacy Peralta is the rare filmmaker who gets surfing right



INDUSTRY

chest constricts as your last seconds of oxygen tick away. Surfers compare it to being trapped in a gigantic washing machine; even if you don't die, your body and brain and heart think you have.

Stacy Peralta, the director of the 2001 skateboarding documentary *Dogtown and Z-Boys*, has been thinking about fear a lot lately. Peralta spent much of last year interviewing the world's best big-wave riders for his surfing film *Riding Giants*, and while the subject of fear was rarely brought up explicitly, it was often lurking around the edges of conversations. Like most directors of surfing films, Peralta wanted to find out Why Surfers Surf, a question that is asked even more of big-wave riders than of their comparatively cautious peers. It is a query qualitatively different from asking why others paint or write or practice law, because people are rarely afraid to paint or write or practice law. How can some surf a place like Jaws or Teahupo'o, we wonder, when the very idea fills the rest of us with horror?

Peralta sits at a picnic table in front of Forever Films, a postproduction facility in Santa Monica that has been his center of operations for the past several months. Sporting a goatee, a baseball cap, and a Black Label Skateboards T-shirt that reads NEVER BE BOUGHT NEVER BE SOLD, he looks like Michael Moore's thinner, fitter brother. A big wad of cotton is jammed in his left ear. A lifelong surfer, Peralta recently underwent surgery for "surfer's ear." Ride

the waves in cold weather for three decades, as Peralta has done, and the bony lining of your ear canal grows in on itself. Peralta had delayed treatment for so long that the canal was 99 percent closed; doctors inserted a tube in his ear to allow drainage. "I can hear fine," he says. "But they had to go into the tunnel and grind away the bone with, like, a little dentist's grinder."

Fear, pain, near drownings, drills boring out your ear canal—they're all elements of a sport that longtime surfers describe as both an addiction and a love affair. Peralta hoped to capture all of that passion and trauma in *Riding Giants*, which, last January, became the first documentary to open Sundance in the festival's 20-year history. It recently opened, and expectations are high, largely because of Peralta's success with *Dogtown*, a small film that became the defining text on the evolution of Southern California's skateboard culture. Peralta's goals for this film were equally high. By focusing on three pioneers of the sport—Greg Noll, one of the fathers of big-wave surfing; Jeff Clark, the Northern California surfer who "discovered" Mavericks, a then-unknown surf spot; and Laird Hamilton, the reigning king—the director intends to tell the entire history of big-wave riding.

The surf cinema canon is loaded with no-plot, all-action shorts and documentaries—often created by the surfers themselves—and *Gidget-y* efforts produced by Hollywood execs to cash in on the surfing craze. So many directors have tried and failed to capture the



BREAK DANCERS: Greg Noll and Laird Hamilton



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spirit of the sport that it is far easier to name five truly awful films than to name five truly great ones. *Endless Summer* was great; *Big Wednesday* had moments of greatness. With dozens of the giants of big-wave surfing involved with *Riding Giants*, from Peter Mel and Darrick Doerner to Dave Kalama and Kelly Slater, the pressure was high for this film not to stink. "When we started the production, one of the guys told me, 'Listen, homes, I'll give you all my support. But if you screw up, I'm gonna kick your ass,'" says Peralta. "That's the kind of thing I was dealing with."

PERALTA'S INSPIRATION FOR *Riding Giants* was Greg Noll, one of the most popular and flamboyant big-wave surfers of the 1950s and '60s. Nicknamed "Da Bull" for his enormous size and aggressive riding style, Noll was a master of self-promotion, appearing in scores of surf movies and creating Greg Noll Surfboards in the early '50s (the Hermosa Beach company would later become the largest maker of boards in the world). His "jailhouse shorts," baggy swim trunks emblazoned with broad black and white stripes, made him instantly recognizable in the most crowded of lineups and the blurriest of photos. "Nobody was gonna take credit for my waves," Noll says. "And I didn't want to take credit for anyone else's."

Peralta first met Noll when the director was conducting interviews for *Dogtown*. Noll's surf shop in Hermosa Beach had sold some of the area's first skateboards, and Peralta wanted to speak with him about those early days. Noll had never heard of Peralta and didn't care much for skateboarding, but he went along with the interview as a favor to his friend, fellow surfer Craig Stecyk. "I didn't know what was going on, so I just made up this story about how Stecyk rode my son down the streets of San Francisco on a skateboard," he says. "It was all bullshit."

The fabricated anecdote didn't make the film, but Peralta knew that he had found a figure who could anchor *Riding Giants*. Noll was funny and foulmouthed, and his life story had a climax to rival that of the most overblown Hollywood surf film. On December 4, 1969, Noll was on Oahu when a record swell pounded the island's North Shore. The storm knocked houses off their

foundations; residents were ordered to evacuate the area. When Noll first heard the surf, he thought he was hearing tanks from nearby Schofield Barracks. He and a half-dozen friends grabbed their surfboards, drove out to Makaha, and paddled into the surf. One by one, Noll's friends gave up and paddled back to shore.

With no cameras rolling and only a few friends as witnesses, Noll dropped into a 30-foot wave, rode it to the bottom, then stepped off his board into the raging surf. It was the largest wave ever ridden, a feat that would go unmatched for more than two decades. The experience was transformative. According to popular lore, the wave

massive ever ridden, breaking onto a shallow, razor-sharp reef. "No one had ever ridden a wave like that before," says Sam George, editor of *Surfer* magazine. "If you had to pick one ride, that one was the most significant." It was also the most dangerous. "If he had wiped out, it would have fuckin' killed him," says Noll. "There's no doubt in my mind. He would have been a red stain on the reef."

The ride solidified Hamilton's standing as the sport's alpha male, but Peralta's interviews revealed another side altogether. In the film he's a fatherless four-year-old looking for a dad, a blond haole kid who grew up wishing he was Hawaiian, a man

who goes into deep depressions when there are no waves to surf. "If you don't understand all that other stuff, then he's just Tarzan," says Peralta. "There's Laird and there's the rest of us. But he still has fears in him where he feels smaller than he is, and it's because of those experiences growing up."

After securing Noll and Hamilton, Peralta went after Jeff Clark. If Hamilton is the Michael Jordan of big-wave riding, Clark is its Bill Laimbeer: little flash or name recognition but big and tough and fearless. While others in the sport were surfing with their friends in the warm, blue-green waters of Maui and Oahu, Clark was riding waves alone in the treacherous surf off Half Moon Bay, a small town in Northern California. Clark surfed the dangerous reef break for 15 years before he was able to convince anyone else that, yes, there were waves in Half Moon Bay, waves that rivaled the giants of the North Shore. Nicknamed Maverick's, the site became infamous for its sharks, cold waters, and unforgiving "boneyard," where broken boards and dislocated shoulders were commonplace.

Sandwiched between Noll's story and Hamilton's, Clark's part of the film is all wipe-outs and near drownings. The reputation of Maverick's as one of the scariest surf spots in the world was secured when Mark Foo, considered one of the greatest Hawaiian surfers, died there in 1994. Clark has suffered con-

"When we started the production, one of the guys told me, 'Listen, homes, I'll give you all my support. But if you screw up, I'm gonna kick your ass,' " says Peralta. "That's the kind of thing I was dealing with."

was so awesome, so life changing, that Noll walked away from surfing, never to surf again. Despite the story's appeal, it wasn't altogether correct; Noll continued to surf big waves for three more years. "I wrote a book and it came out wrong, like I stopped and that was it," says Noll. His fierce competitiveness and need to be the first rider on every big wave, however, was gone. "That bogeyman sitting on my shoulder went and sat on somebody else's shoulder," he says. "I think Laird's."

After convincing Noll to participate in the film, Peralta went after Hamilton, who had been planning to make his own film about big-wave riding. Considered by many to be the greatest big-wave rider of all time, Hamilton had revolutionized the sport in 1992 with the introduction of tow-in surfing, a way of catching waves unreachable by conventional means. Using a jet ski and a water ski rope, Hamilton was towed directly into the path of waves too fast moving and far out from shore to paddle into. In August 2000, he caught a monstrous wave at Teahupo'o. The wave was the most



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cussions and dislocated ribs in its boneyard. In one section of the film, his leash gets caught on the reef and he's held underwater as onlookers watch from shore. "I've seen guys that have had wipeouts so bad here that they've never come back," says Clark. "They'll be like, 'I've got kids to raise. I really don't need to do this anymore.'"

DRIVE ALONG THE NORTH Shore stretch of Oahu's Kamehameha Highway and you'll pass many of the surf spots mentioned in *Riding Giants*, from Sunset Beach and Pipeline to Waimea Bay. Stop in the small town of Haleiwa and you'll find the H. Miura Store and Tailor Shop, established in 1918, whose proprietors stitched Noll's original jailhouse shorts. Ask nicely and Katherine

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Kawaguchi, who was born in the back of the store in 1926, will show you some of Noll's old swatches (his latest pair of shorts measures 54½ inches in the waist). Amid the old sewing machines and surf contest posters are photos of Noll with Katherine and her sister, and one large poster that Noll autographed for the proprietors. "Greg didn't know how to spell *grandma*, so he asked his friend," says Kawaguchi. The inscription on the poster reads TO JANE, KATHY AND GRANDMAW, FROM YOUR FRIEND, GREG NOLL.

Walk past Matsumoto's Shave Ice Store and you'll hit Surf N Sea, a board and gear shop where the owner will try to talk you into taking a dip in a shark cage. Go to the back of the store and you'll hit the mother of surf film libraries, a huge case holding more than 300 titles. There's *Nibi*, a biopic about Kauaian surfer Titus Kinimaka, and

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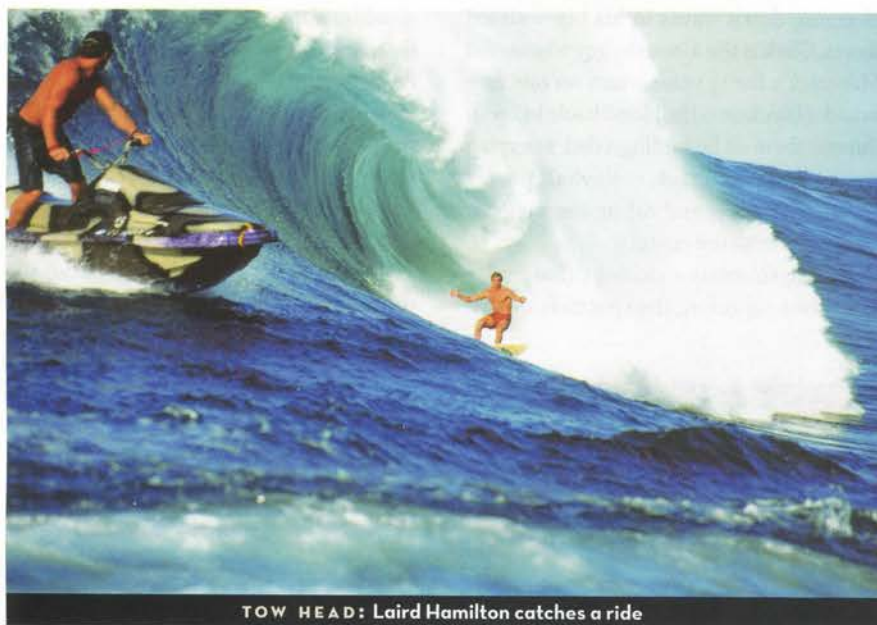
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TOW HEAD: Laird Hamilton catches a ride

Gidget Goes Hawaiian. There's *Big Wednesday* and *Step into Liquid*. There are two versions—the feature film and the documentary—of *Blue Crush*. In a year or so, *Riding Giants* will likely be here, too, alphabetically filed between *Push*, a 30-minute all-action video, and *Riding Waves*.

Peralta is aware of his cinematic predecessors and uses *Riding Giants* to skewer films like *Gidget* and *Ride the Wild Surf*. If they ever looked good, they look terrible now. It's not just the cornball dialogue or the preppy dorks in suits and ties, or even the terrible cinematography (viewing the films today, one wonders if the shots of actors like Frankie Avalon and Robert Stack "surfing" ever fooled anybody). No, it's because these films so often misunderstood the entire subculture. In Peralta's film, it's clear that these guys are outsiders yet deadly earnest about their sport. In dreck like 1964's *Muscle Beach Party*, they're actors trying to look like outsiders and failing miserably, pretty boys more interested in beer and bikinis than anything else. "It just makes me puke," Noll says in *Riding Giants*.

Ask the big-wave riders about their favorite films and they'll mention some of the classics. Clark liked *Sea Dreams* and *Five Summer Stories*. Hamilton liked *Pacific Vibrations*. They all loved Bruce Brown's classic 1966 documentary *The Endless Summer*, considered by many to be one of the finest films about surfing ever made. Its premise is simple: Two surfers travel the

globe in search of the perfect wave, crisscrossing time zones and latitude lines so that they're always, as the title implies, in summer. While portions will make contemporary viewers cringe—the Africa trip, for example, features several jokes about cannibalism and one really offensive blackface moment—the surf scenes still stand up.

Nobody mentions *Blue Crush*, an otherwise enjoyable movie that fails to convince anyone, even with the most masterful of CGI effects, that lead actress Kate Bosworth ever competed at North Shore. That's the problem with a lot of Hollywood's attempts: If big-wave riding is all about fear, and we know these actors aren't actually out there experiencing that fear, where's the fun? Even with the advances in special effects, any willing suspension of disbelief is dashed on the cinematic reef by the frequent presence of real surfers in these films. Placed there supposedly as homages, the contrived scenes throwing surfers and actors together are embarrassing to both and pull one out of the film. *Blue Crush* is believable until pro surfer Keala Kennelly paddles over to give Bosworth a pep talk; similarly, John Milius's *Big Wednesday* founders when Gerry Lopez—Mr. Pipeline, for God's sake!—gazes admiringly at the big-wave heroics of, gulp, Jan-Michael Vincent.

Endless Summer and *Big Wednesday* aside, *Riding Giants* will probably be most often compared to Peralta's *Dogtown*, and that's not such a bad thing. *Dogtown* broke more



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ground than *Giants* in documenting an unexplored facet of Southern California (and it has that great moment when narrator Sean Penn flubs his line, then clears his throat and continues reading), but *Riding Giants*—with its trio of central characters—does what *Dogtown* and its 12 Z-Boys could not: It tells long, engaging stories about the individuals themselves. Noll is Da Bull, all “shits” and “goddamns” and sentimental memories,

charging down waves in his big-waisted shorts. Clark is the loner, the guy who surfed Maverick’s for 15 years when no one else would. Hamilton is the blond haole kid who showed them all by finding a dad, marrying model and pro beach volleyball player Gabrielle Reece, and riding the biggest, scariest wave of the century.

Riding Giants is a glorious film, at its best when capturing the spectacle of ant-

sized humans getting pounded by waves that stretch end to end across the screen. Audiences grimace and ooh, then cheer, then grimace again. Listening to the surfers themselves—nice guys all—it’s nearly impossible to see them as conceited jerks, the kind we would be if only we could do what they do.

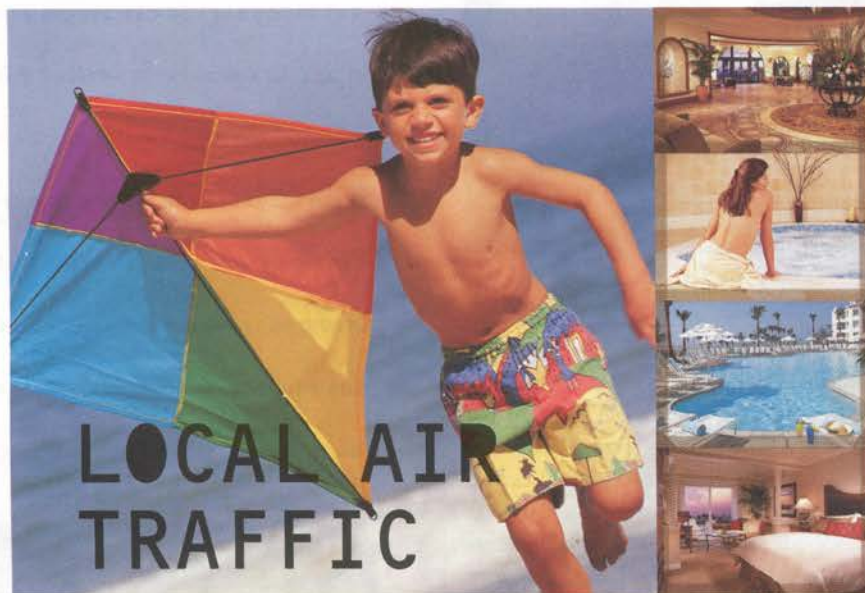
Peralta and the others bemoan all the stuff that had to be rushed over and edited out to make the film comprehensible and under two hours. Several heroes of the sport had to be overlooked, most notably Eddie Aikau, a man considered a saint in his native Hawaii, a lifeguard and big-wave surfer who died in 1978 in an ill-fated ocean rescue attempt. The film also bypasses the prickly arguments over tow-in surfing, which purists consider to be a bastardization of the sport,

“If he had wiped out, it would have killed him,” says Noll. “There’s no doubt in my mind. He would have been a red stain on the reef.”

not real surfing, and ecologically suspect besides. “There was a whole debate in our office—are we going to get into the tow-in-versus-non-tow-in controversy,” says Peralta. “We had the material, but it just didn’t fit into the spirit of the film.”

Riding Giants sold out four shows at Sundance, where Noll viewed the film for the first time. “I didn’t know what to expect, and the next thing I see is this big fat guy with dribble coming out of his mouth, called Greg Noll, talking about surfing,” he says. “I look over my shoulder and Robert Redford’s sitting there. It wasn’t real.”

While Noll, Peralta, and the others were receiving standing ovations in Park City, Hamilton was in Maui, drawn by predictions of some of the biggest swells to hit Hawaii since Noll’s ride of 1969. The waves never materialized, but that didn’t matter to Hamilton. “I wasn’t going to jeopardize missing the swell of the century,” he says. “I figured I could always see the film.” **LA**



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