2018

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Joseph, The Green Cathedral: A Little Memoir of Working Class Suburban Hippie Surf Culture on the South Coast of New South Wales, Australia, *Counterculture Studies*, 1(1), 2018, 80-97. doi:[10.14453/ccs.v1.i1.8](https://doi.org/10.14453/ccs.v1.i1.8)

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Abstract

Most people today, if they think about it at all, probably identify Australia's counterculture as something primarily to do with Nimbin's 1973 Aquarius Festival. That was certainly totally cool. However, there are other north coast New South Wales towns like Mullumbimby that also embraced a counterculture back in the 1970s - but were usually a bit more low-key about it all. And believe it or not - once upon a time - long before Billabong and Quicksilver and Mambo cashed-in on surf-culture big time - a vaguely creative down-at-heel anti-capitalist counterculture grew up in suburban Wollongong. Your mum made your board shorts and, even before modern sunscreen (apart from then totally uncool 'Pink Zinc') was invented, whipped up a 'Grannie Hat' (which you rarely wore and regularly came home with sunburn all over your already badly sunburned face and shoulders) on her very old Singer sewing machine.

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Most people today, if they think about it at all, probably identify Australia's counterculture as something primarily to do with Nimbin's 1973 Aquarius Festival. That was certainly totally cool. However, there are other north coast New South Wales towns like Mullumbimby that also embraced a counterculture back in the 1970s - but were usually a bit more low-key about it all. And believe it or not - once upon a time - long before Billabong and Quicksilver and Mambo cashed-in on surf-culture big time - a vaguely creative down-at-heel anti-capitalist counterculture grew up in suburban Wollongong. Your mum made your board shorts and, even before modern sunscreen (apart from then totally uncool 'Pink Zinc') was invented, whipped up a 'Grannie Hat' (which you rarely wore and regularly came home with sunburn all over your already badly sunburned face and shoulders) on her very old Singer sewing machine.

The fetching number above is a slightly repaired and modified (yet still vintage) late 1960s 'Grannie Hat' very similar to the one my mum whipped up to protect her darling only child who had pleaded with her for months to scrimp and save so she could buy me the cheapest backyard surfboard then available. My first was a "glue-up" pocket-rocket short-board made at Point Street, Sandon Point in 1969 from the off-cuts of the foam blanks of two larger surfboards and hence sold much more cheaply.

South Coast Backyard Bliss 1960s style (photographer unknown).

These backyard board shapers and glassers were amazing. It was all do-it-yourself stuff before real backyard DIY had been commercialised and destroyed by mass production and giant ugly multinational hardware stores.¹ Either naturally gifted, or having imbibed some of their father's handyman skills (something then much more common in working class households), this backyard board-manufacturing culture grew up not only in Illawarra and the northern beaches of Sydney but also further down the coast as this cute design from a town some kilometres from the coast demonstrates.

Nowra, however, was too far away for a kid in Thirroul from a family without a car to even know about, but this example of a logo by Geoff Woodham (who started Woody Surfboards in Nowra about 1970) looks pretty much like it has already swallowed - perhaps almost by osmosis - a complete San

¹ One of the earliest Wollongong fibreglass surfboard builders was Colin "Biggsy" Ashford. He reputedly began his shaping career in "a converted chook pen in the backyard at Stanwell Park" in the early 1960s by stripping and reshaping balsa boards discarded after the introduction of foam blanks. In 1966, with schoolmate Bill Trestrail, he started the short-lived 'Bill-Collins Surfboards' in a disused ex-service station on the hill at Stanwell Park. This was followed by a brief stint in a shed at Kennedys Hill on the border between Thirroul and Austinmer before he relocated to a workshop at 30 Flinders Street Wollongong from 1967 to 1974.

Franciscan design philosophy. Woody, of course, was the complete DIY man and shaped, decorated and glassed the boards himself in the 'factory' located in the shed behind his house on the highway at South Nowra. Yet, as can be seen below, even Mick Carbine's logo (often seen around Illawarra beaches) also had some slightly trippy typography.

Soul Surfing Poverty

Apart from the cost of some wax and maybe a pair of thongs, now and then there was really nothing left to spend if you just wanted to surf all day. Wetsuits were still uncommon and so we simply froze our balls off all winter. I'd been a "sand-scab" (officially a "Sandcrab") at Thirroul Surf Club from the age of five and had been taught how to run fast on both wet and dry sand and, ludicrously, march up and down a beach in a ridiculous ceremony known as 'The March Past'. This was something that could only have been thought-up by some deluded First World War veteran who must have suffered so much Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that he had somehow begun to think marching up and down a beach might be a fun idea. Just as Italians believe in "bella figura" and misuse the beach by privatising it with deck chairs, these old fogeys in surf clubs seemed to me like some perverted alien imposition on Australian beaches and the delights and full-on freedom of riding a surfboard and getting you hair wet inside some perfect "green cathedral".

My life entirely changed the first time I stood up on a surfboard and rode its green face for as long as was physically possible. That memory rush of adrenalin and perfect peace – and oneness with nature - has never left me. As a pastime, surfing back then was basically as non-commercial as you could imagine. I was personally particularly receptive to this – and so was my wharf labourer (ex merchant seaman) father who, although he never went near a surfboard, had a philosophy that capitalism was totally fucked and tried to subvert it by constantly going on strike and trying to only buy stuff second hand if you couldn't actually make it yourself. We even had his homemade solar hot water panels on the roof of our house, which he constructed in the backyard after simply reading about the idea in a library magazine in 1967. They still function to this day – but not as efficiently as more modern ones.

Vintage DIY hot water solar roof panels in Thirroul. Constructed 1967 and still operative in 2018.

Nonetheless, whenever we received electricity bills they were for laughably small amounts as we also had a fuel stove and electricity only powered our electric lights, a washing machine, a radio/record player and my dad's second-hand power tools as we didn't even own a TV, let alone a car. My mum, however, was not a political person like my father, but she was a sort of suburban housewife proto-

hippy who hung out in the garden all day growing vegies as she was a life-long vegetarian, having, as a child, had her pet calf on a dairy farm at Cambewarra killed for food. She had very little in common with most suburban housewives and was not at all much like the mothers of my school friends. She also did not have a lot of interest in putting up with her pesky only child either and, at age 5, took me for free community swimming lessons at the Thirroul Olympic Pool. I proved pretty hopeless and could still not really swim very well after the two-week course. She then had a word to the instructor and offered him 5 quid to pick me up at 6.00 o'clock each morning for two more weeks and give me private swimming lessons. She came with us on the last day and I was still pretty hopeless so she pushed me off the diving board in the middle of the pool in the deep end. My survival instinct must have kicked in because I somehow swam to the edge of the pool. And that was enough evidence I could swim for her - and so from age five I was allowed to walk the kilometre and a half or so to the pool or the surf on my own anytime I wanted. She also enrolled me in the Thirroul Junior Surf Club so that I wouldn't annoy her so much on weekends. I was thus down the beach most afternoons and nearly all day every summer weekend from 1961 until about 1969. In that year I saw my local surf club persist with a bronze medallion examination on a morning when the surf was about 13 foot high (around 4 metres) and pounding and the first bloke forced to swim out with a belt on (something surf clubs have now abandoned because they are sort of dangerous) had to be rescued, nearly unconscious. I knew then I was going to avoid surf clubs and keep to my new mum-bought surfboard and try to have little to do with formal organisations ever again. Today the thought of even "a surf board riders club" or a 'surfing contest' and other beachy commercial surf stuff simply makes me feel ill. That some people actually pay money today to learn how to ride a surfboard is way beyond my comprehension.

1969 was a time when most self-respecting freaked-out flower children surfed their then under-populated local surf breaks from dawn to dusk, affected to despise ‘tourists’ and just hung out on the beach while resting between surfing sessions all day while learning all the lingo e.g. “See that cutback! So smooth. Oh, check out Steve’s really radical re-entry!” - and delighting in the kind of arcane surf argot I hear kids use today: “Hey, that grommet can really shred, and the kook doesn’t even wear a leggie.”

One’s only luxury ‘lifestyle’ expense while still at school was a much-shared copies of some the very early editions of *Tracks* magazine. Eventually, after listening to Taman Shud’s *Evolution* soundtrack from the movie of the same name I also started running down to the local newsagent each Wednesday to try and get a copy of *Go Set* if my mum happened to have any spare change. I thus whiled away most of my teenage years honing the finer points of the noble art of checking out the surf. And Illawarra’s finest photographer of the late 1960s /early 1970s - Ray Mills - seems to have virtually caught me in the act.

North Wollongong Beach c. 1970. Photograph: Ray Mills.

The Bible of the Green Cathedral

Tracks magazine, November 1971 edition.

Tracks Magazine seemed just so good to a 14-year-old surfer. I loved it even more so when I once won the 'Letter of the Week' competition and was posted a copy of the first “Hot Tuna” acoustic album not even realising the band comprised two side-project blues refugees - Jorma Kaukonen and Jack Cassidy –from those hippy-trippy San Franciscan psychedelic musos the *Jefferson Airplane*.

Hot Tuna, LP, RCA Victor, May 1970.

So it certainly was not a case of “Go ask Alice when she’s ten feet tall.”² I’d never even heard of Haight Ashbury (let alone been there), but down in Thirroul we were simply soul-surfing freaked-out flower children livin’ the dream and I still love that LP and back then played it so much on a tiny portable record player that the grooves in the vinyl wore almost completely away. As Billy Wordsworth once said “Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive / But to be young was very heaven.”³

Those of us who left school in Fourth Form could walk into a job – and almost immediately walk out of one – almost without even trying. I like school and stayed on and I’ve only been for one real job interview in my entire life – at the local (and then still Government-owned) Commonwealth Bank in 1974. I was 18 and they asked only one question at the interview. And that question was: “When do you want start? I told them I didn’t – and went for surf instead. Between 1969 and 1975 it seemed possible (at least if, like me, you were still living with your parents) to get by almost completely outside the capitalist work system. A friend of mine, however, did even better. He inherited \$8000

² Grace Slick, “White Rabbit” (line 3) who recorded and sang this song with Jefferson Airplane for their 1967 album *Surrealistic Pillow*. “White Rabbit” was written and performed by Grace Slick while she was still with the band named Great Society. When that band broke up in 1966, Slick was invited to join Jefferson Airplane to replace their departed female singer, Signe Toly Anderson, who left the band after getting pregnant.

³ William Wordsworth “French revolution, as it appeared to enthusiasts at its commencement”, lines 4-5 (1815).

when his Grandma died in 1974. He told my dad that his parents had gone mental when he told them he was going to use the money and the little bit extra he'd earned as a first year apprentice before quitting to buy an eighth-share in a commune on a clapped-out dairy farm not far from a beach on the north coast. I remember telling my own father and he was delighted at the idea - and I remember the commune-bound surfer being totally shocked when I told him my Dad said it was probably a really good idea and that my Dad has said, if he got lucky, he might never have to work for a boss his whole life long.

My father's attitudes were pretty atypical at the time though. Suburban parents in Illawarra were then usually far from radical. As local veteran surf photographer, Mick McCormack, once explained, "When I told my family I was going surfing, they all thought I was going to the surf lifesaving club. Trying to convince your parents in the '60s you wanted to hang at the beach was like saying you wanted to be in a bikie gang. Surfing was quite alien to Wollongong in the beginning. My family would watch surfers for the novelty value. Not many people knew what it was. Most of them thought it was a waste of time and said I should be mowing the lawn."⁴ That other Illawarra bloke from another school I vaguely knew did finally head off to a North Coast commune and we lost touch over the years but I ran into him just a few years ago at Circular Quay railway station in Sydney. I asked whether he was still on the farm? He said, "No." It had turned out he was the last of the original eight still standing and, fortunately, had probably sold enough dope to buy each share out as they left. He said he ended up selling the whole place and bought a house in Point Piper. Well, I guess that's sort of one way to never have to work for a boss! But very few of us back then were genuine (rather than accidental)

⁴ Quoted in Josh Bulter, "Wollongong surf pioneers look back to the beginning", 11 January 2014.

philosophical or political anarchists – and, as it turned out, I’m pretty sure I was the only one whose father had a copy of Paul Lafargue’s Marxist tract *The Right To Be Lazy* (1883) alongside *Das Kapital* on his bookshelf (even though I’d never read either of them myself). Two or three of my surfing schoolmates left Bulli High in Fourth or Fifth Form and tried apprenticeships at BHP before quitting them and heading for the far south coast – renting half-abandoned farmhouses in the backblocks of Bermagui and Cobargo. But living on the dole in the early to mid 1970s a bit too far from the beach and being unable to really afford a reliable car to get to surf meant they didn’t last too long. Very recently, and only after being asked to write something about the counterculture for this publication, I’ve thought a whole lot more about my all too brief meeting at Circular Quay with the former working class freaked-out flower child who had fled north to the commune in the heart of Australian East Coast Hippiedom. And I still can’t but help unreasonably start hankering for those days way back then when even the finest local surf break in the area – the now famous Sandon Point – was often uncrowded and yet, even then, still not especially welcoming of even people like me who lived just a few hundred metres north at Thirroul.

Sandon Point c. 1975 (with just one of the wooden pylons from the old Bulli jetty surviving).

Tale end of a long ride at Sandon Point on a very big day.

Only surfers who spent nearly every day of their lives working up the courage and practising in preparation were willing to ride between the remaining jetty pylons when the surf at The Point got really big. One of the few surviving slightly younger full time soul surfers of the period – the long-time Thirroul resident thirteen times shortlisted Archibald Prize finalist, Paul Ryan (the only artist I know who can legitimately claim his surfboards as tax deductions) - eloquently recalls how unwelcome 'tourist' surfers were when Curly Haines and The Point Boys were on the warpath at Sandon Point when the surf was really going off on a big swell.

Thirroul artist Paul Ryan – “FUCK OFF Back TO thirroul ya BLOWIN” (2013) from “The Green Cathedral” exhibition at Wollongong Art Gallery.

What was great for working class kids living on the NSW South Coast at the tail end of Capitalism's long boom – and before professionalism and rampant commercial soaked deep into soul-surfing's moribund soul – was that in the Illawarra the term "surfer" was sometimes considered almost synonymous with laziness, sloth and teenage apathy. Culturally, suburban Thirroul in the years 1969-1975 was up there with the most boring places in the universe. Without my mum scrimping and saving to buy that first cheap "glue-up" surfboard for me, I think I would have gone completely mad. Sadly, Thirroul's working class surf scene was an almost completely male culture. I didn't know a single girl who rode a surfboard. The girls simply lay (and got laid) on the beach and got bored just as they did in Kathy Lette's and Gabrielle Carey's masterpiece *Puberty Blues*. It is Don Walker, the creative song writing force of *Cold Chisel*, who pretty much summed them up in his classic lines for "Khe Sanh" released in 1979: *Their legs often open / But their minds were always closed / And their hearts were held in fast suburban chains.*

Only one very bright girl – the amazing Sally Gjedstead - in my Fourth Form class at school in 1972 not only claimed to have, but *had* actually read, *The Female Eunuch*. She was very good looking but seemed to treat most of us yobbo surfers with a sort of studied aloofness. Apart from her, Feminism seemed pretty slow to start down south among teenage girls, and even The Wollongong's Women Centre only really got off the ground after 1975. The only late 1960s /early 1970s totally out-there female radicals in town actually seemed to be the mothers of local draft resisters (the Save Our Sons group) who chained themselves to the gates of Parliament House in June 1970. And Edna Gudgeon – the wife of a middle class Wollongong pharmacist – indeed looks like a most unlikely radical in this famous photo. And yet she genuinely was!

The Canberra Times Friday 12 June 1970 p 1

But, today, it has all come to nothing. Oddly, it would take the poetry of a west coast singer-songwriter – Jackson Browne - to perhaps best encapsulate what happened to most of the male south coast soul surfers of the late 1960s and early 1970s:

I'm going to rent myself a house

In the shade of the freeway

Gonna pack my lunch in the morning

And go to work each day

And when the evening rolls around

I'll go on home and lay my body down

And when the morning light comes streaming in

I'll get up and do it again

And just like Jackson Browne, we would come to “want to know what became of the changes / We waited for love to bring / Were they only the fitful dreams / Of some greater awakening?” But the ‘greater awakening’ never happened for most working class Wollongong kids. So, in a sense, this little essay is a requiem for all those who, like me, gave up on the chance of a life devoted to soul surfing and, pathetically, caved-in to precisely what Jackson Browne (who, amazingly, seemed to have the wisdom of a very old man while still in his 20s) delineated in what I consider his greatest song, *The Pretender*.

*I'm gonna be a happy idiot
And struggle for the legal tender
Where the ads take aim and lay their claim
To the heart and the soul of the spender
And believe in whatever may lie
In those things that money can buy
Though true love could have been a contender
Are you there?
Say a prayer for the Pretender.
Who started out so young and strong
Only to surrender.⁵*

I guess it may possibly have been even a whole lot more fun for middle class hippies – but that’s a life I simply never lived. Yet I still am so happy I experienced that five year long South Coast Summer

⁵ Jackson Browne, "The Pretender" featured on his 1976 album *The Pretender*.

of Peace, Love and Understanding. And as the great Nick Lowe rhetorically asked "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace Love And Understanding?"⁶

Today Thirroul is simply the place where working class surfing culture came to die – where miner's shacks are knocked down almost daily by the doctor/lawyer/merchant banker refugees from Sydney's crushing real estate prices. They have made any derelict Thirroul or Austinmer or Sandon Point shack near the beach now worth near two million bucks. But this is probably fitting as Thirroul was also the place where the arch-capitalist of the countercultural Australian art world – Brett Whiteley - chose to end his life in a classic suburban motel in 1992.

Prior to his death I would frequently see Brett 'smacked-out' (vacant and unspeaking) wandering by the banks of Flanagan's creek near the Thirroul beach opposite the motel.

⁶ Nick Lowe, "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding" originally released in 1974 on the album *The New Favourites of... Brinsley Schwarz* by Lowe's band Brinsley Schwarz and then released as a single.

(Detail) Brett Whiteley in Thirrour (undated oil on canvas) by Frank Nowlan.

But that brief *florescence* of *Thirrour's* counter culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s was by then *well and truly over*. *But don't be fooled*. I'm certainly not trying to tell you that, back then, we'd seen the plan. Perhaps it's just best to avert your eyes from the screen and walk away if you think I am. Oddly, it was Robert Forster of *The Go-Betweens* (someone who likely never ever rode a surfboard) who captured – long after the dream had ended – a little something of what we were largely unconsciously seeking in this actually rather lame lyrics for his song 'Surfing Magazines' on the seventh track of their 2000 release *The Friends of Rachel Worth*.

We used to get out kicks reading surfing magazines

Good looking people wearing Lee Cooper jeans...
Going to throw school and follow those scenes
Gonna get a Kombi and go from beach to beach
Be the kind of people the authorities can't reach
We used to get our kicks reading surfing magazines
Wake up in the morning and the waves are clean
Standing on the headland taking in the scene
Just like they do it ... in surfing magazines

But don't think too badly of those today left holding sand. We were all just young and basically clueless yobbo surfers struggling to dream of a better life. Dreaming like Jackson Browne, but in our own unreconstructed and totally sexist way, about Everyman.

Joseph Davis, August 2018