

# In Trim: Bruce Brown's Endless Epic

The Story of the Filmmaker and the Film that Changed the Surfing World

By Paul Holmes





**G**ranted, it was a charity fundraiser riding a swell of philanthropy and nostalgia and, sure, there were woody-loads of surf legends making personal appearances for autograph hunters and celebrity hounds. But it remains an extraordinary phenomenon that Bruce Brown's film *The Endless Summer* can still pack a theater—at \$50 per ticket!—fully 40 years after the movie first secured nationwide general release distribution in 35mm format. And the film still commands national media coverage too. Reporting on the screening held mid-June this year at the La Paloma in Encinitas, Calif., *Washington Post* staffer William Booth wrote that the film “is still considered the ur-text, and the most important and influential statement on surfing.” Back in 1966 the critics were even more effusive: “A brilliant documentary,” said the reviewer for *New Yorker* magazine, while *Newsweek* rated it one of the top 10 films of the year and *Time* dubbed its maker “the Bergman of boards.”

By any standard of measurement—shelf life and staying power, box office receipts and film rentals, impact on the sport and culture—*The Endless Summer* is by far and away the most successful surf movie of all time and, with its droll humor, travelogue hook and cool soundtrack, it is still the model for most surf flicks to this day.

Made for around \$50,000 and single-handedly produced, directed, filmed, edited and narrated by Brown himself, *The Endless Summer* has been seen more widely than any other surf film. For thousands of non-surfers who caught it at cities across America it was a window on an otherwise arcane universe. Wholesome, charming, corny at times, but with what film critic Leonard Maltin describes as a “diverting, tongue-in-cheek narration,” the film’s premise—a quest for the holy grail of a perfect wave—gave surfers some noble dignity at a time when they were often stereotyped as derelicts, ne’er do wells or delinquents. They were certainly not the kind of boys that girls’ parents wanted them to be dating. But the stars of *The Endless Summer*, Robert August and Mike Hynson, came across as clean-cut, fun-loving athletes and surfing itself as a grand, healthy, respectable sport with unexpected global appeal.

On location filming *The Endless Summer II*. (Left to right): Dana Brown, Associate Producer and Co-writer/Editor; Mike Hoover, Cinematographer; Bruce Brown, Director and Co-writer/Editor; Michael Graber, Camera Operator. Says Graber: “Wherever we went in the world, people would come up to me and say, ‘Is that really Bruce Brown over there? That man changed my life.’”

Photos courtesy of Bruce Brown Films.



Bruce Brown with 16mm movie camera during production of *The Endless Summer*.

The film changed society's perceptions of surfing and surfers and it changed the way surfers saw themselves. It also changed the way surfers saw the world, introducing a new era of travel and exploration in search of waves that in turn changed surfing itself. It changed the lives of countless thousands who were inspired to take up surfing and follow the sun. For an audience in 2006, the film seems quaintly archaic—dressed in suits and ties as they take off from Los Angeles bound for Africa, our travelers hark back to a bygone era when an international flight was a glamorous undertaking worthy of dressing up. But when Hynson and August ride the pristine point surf at Cape St. Francis, South Africa, in the film's grand finale, the stoke-filled payoff is as compelling today as it ever was.

There are no reliable figures for how many people have seen *The Endless Summer* but it runs into the millions: The film has shown all over the world in theaters, high school auditoriums, rented halls and ballrooms; it has been broadcast repeatedly on network and cable television; it has been sold and rented in video stores everywhere. Even Brown doesn't know how much it may have taken in, although he says he's read that it could amount to \$50 million. Regardless, that makes it one of the highest-grossing documentaries of all time. It has spawned two sequels—*The Endless Summer II* (1994) and *The Endless Summer Revisited* (2000)—and it is the only surf movie ever to become what Hollywood refers to as a franchise. Today, *The Endless Summer* is even its own brand, internationally licensed in product categories such as

calendars and postcards, beach towels and tee shirts, glasses and mugs, and even beer! And the movie is still in distribution, which is nothing short of amazing at a time when the average shelf life of a DVD movie release is just 18 months.

Now, as he approaches his 70th birthday, Bruce Brown is low key about his role as the sport's most celebrated and successful filmmaker. "At the time we made the movie, we just wanted to give the sport some respect," he says. "That's what I'm proud of, because back then kids were being told to give up that stupid sport, that only beach bums surfed, that kind of thing. Today it's different because all kinds of people surf and are proud to say they do."

*The Endless Summer* was Brown's sixth film when he released it in 1964 and he would not make another surf movie for almost three decades. His journey to becoming the sport's most distinguished documentary filmmaker began when he started surfing as a stoked 13- or 14-year-old gremmie on a borrowed paddleboard in the early 1950s in Long Beach, Calif. His first custom-made board was shaped by Dale Velzy at his Manhattan Beach workshop. Fresh out of high school and faced with being drafted for the war in Korea, the surf-stoked teenager joined the submarine reserves with a plan to get himself over to Hawaii. "I knew from an article I'd read in the *Readers Digest* that there was a submarine base in Hawaii, and that if you went to sub school and got top

## "THE MOST IMPORTANT AND INFLUENTIAL STATEMENT ON SURFING."

— WILLIAM BOOTH,  
*THE WASHINGTON POST*, 2006

in your class, you could choose your submarine," explains Brown. "So I was thinking, 'Aha, Hawaii, surfing.' So I went to boot camp sub school and I was the top guy in my class and got to choose my submarine. The captain of the Sea Wolf came by and asked me if I wanted to be on his boat, but I said no, I wanted to get to Honolulu. "So they showed me a chart of the various subs, which ones were doing what, and I pointed to the one located in Honolulu and I said, 'What about that

one?' And they told me it was in the shipyard and I said, perfect, that's the one I want, because I really didn't want to go anywhere, I wanted to surf."

At first Brown's plan went brilliantly. He rented a room in Waikiki and bought a clunker car, went to the shipyard in the

## "MAY BE ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL DOCUMENTARY FEATURES EVER MADE."

—VINCENT CANBY,  
*THE NEW YORK TIMES*, 1967

mornings to chip paint off the hull of the submarine named Gudgeon, and by one in the afternoon he was free to go surfing. Unfortunately those halcyon days of waves at Waikiki, Makaha or the North Shore came to an abrupt end, first when he was made mess cook (14 hour shifts for 30 days straight with a one week furlough in between) and then the Gudgeon was sent off to spy on Russian subs in the Bering Sea, "under the ice pack, three months at a time, and coming back white as a sheet and totally out of shape for surfing." So much for Brown's best-laid plot.

Brown was not the only California surfer to finagle being stationed in Hawaii during those years. John Severson, whom Brown already knew from surfing up and down the SoCal coast, was in the Army over there and both had developed an interest in shooting film of the surf, particularly action on the North Shore—Severson with a 16mm camera and Brown with an 8mm home movie setup. "We'd end up shooting the same stuff because we'd be wherever the surf was good," says Brown. "Anyway, when I got out of the service I made a little 8mm movie with a soundtrack that I'd taken the music from *The Man with the Golden Arm*."

There was very little competition in the surf movie business in the late '50s. Bud Browne ruled the genre, having been making a film each year for more than a decade, showing them in auditoriums and

*The Endless Summer* was a first-time original in every way—from concept to distribution. (Opposite top) The roadshow gets underway with, (left to right) Mike Hynson, Bruce and Pat Brown, Joey Cabell, Corky Carroll, Hobie and Sharon Alter, Heidi and Phil Edwards. (Opposite below) Hynson lays down some radical tracks during filming.





Bruce Brown, Mike Hynson and Robert August pose for the photo that was transformed by artist-designer John Van Hamersveld into the iconic poster for *The Endless Summer* and that became, in effect, the movie's trademark. The photo was composed and shot by Bob Bagley.

delivering a live narration because surf film economics didn't stretch to making sound prints. Greg Noll began making his *Search for Surf* series in 1957 (mostly as a way of promoting himself and his surfboard company) and Severson came out with his film, *Surf*, the following year. "That was pretty much the same stuff that I had," says Brown. "But he started showing it in auditoriums and charging money for it and I thought, 'That's Bud Browne's deal, he shouldn't be doing that.'" Brown was unimpressed on another score too: "I thought my stuff was better," he says.

In early 1957 Brown completed his stint in the Navy and when he returned to California he took a summer job as a lifeguard in San Clemente and, newly married, doing odd jobs at the Velzy and Jacobs surfboard shop in the evenings. Brown showed his 8mm film for the core group of guys at the shop one night. Ever the entrepreneur, Velzy saw potential. "All through that summer," recalls Brown, "he

kept saying, 'Well, how about going back to Hawaii and making a real film, in 16mm?' The deal kept getting better and better to the point that come fall he was saying, 'Okay, I'll put up \$5,000 for you to go make a movie.' So I first went to Bud Browne to ask him what he thought about that, because I didn't want to step on any toes, but Bud said, 'Yeah, go ahead, do it, no problem...' I reminded him of that a couple of years ago and his response was, 'Uh-oh, little did I know I was unleashing a monster on the world. I should never had said yes.'

"So Velzy and I went up to a camera store in Long Beach where a high school buddy of mine [Bob Bagley] was working. Bolex had just come out with a reflex camera, where you could look through the lens instead of a viewfinder, which was really difficult when you're using a big telephoto lens. Typical of Velzy, he takes one look at it and says, 'You want that, kid?' And I'm just saying, 'Oh wow, yeah,

bitchen, wow, yeah.' And then Velzy checks out the zoom lens that had also just come out and he says, 'Yeah, we'd better get that too.' He ends up buying this whole outfit, reaches into his pocket and starts peeling off the hundred dollar bills he always had in a big roll, and he pays for the whole deal right there in cash."

If Brown was stoked out of his mind by his own good fortune, so was the camera salesman, Bob Bagley. "I was a commercial still photographer working there part-time," he recalls. "The store had just sent me to a seminar given by the Bolex distributors about their new product line. I'd just got back to the shop and the first customer in the door was Velzy. It was the biggest single sale the store had ever made!"

It was also a fortuitous connection. Bagley would eventually work with Brown as a cameraman, business manager and "right hand man" (Brown's words) for some seven years before going on to his

own long and illustrious career as a shooter, producer and packager of sports programming for television.

With Velzy's money in his pocket, Brown went to Hawaii for three months in late 1957, October through December, with Kemp Aaberg, Freddie Pfahler, Henry Ford, Del Cannon and Dick Thomas to film the key action sequences for *Slippery When Wet*. "I didn't know anything about making movies other than that 8mm I'd made, but we came in on budget, \$5,000 paid for everything—camera, film, living expenses, airfares, everything."

If Brown knew nothing then about making and distributing films, he soon found he'd better figure it out. "It's your deal, kid, just do it," Velzy had told him. And he did. Editing the footage on a bench equipped with a viewfinder and hand-crank rewind spools, Brown cut together the original footage.

A soundtrack was recorded on reel-to-reel tape after he'd approached jazz great Bud Shank following a gig at the famed Lighthouse Cafe. "After he was done playing I went up to him and said, 'Hey, I'm doing this surf movie and how would you like to do the soundtrack for it?' And he said, 'Well, I don't know anything about making movies.' And I said, 'Well, I don't know much about making movies either.' And he said okay, and I think he only charged me 200 bucks. So we recorded it at the offices of Pacific Jazz, which was just a little room and we did this by projecting the movie through the mail slot into this tiny room and showing it on the wall while Bud Shank's quartet played along."

Following the formula well established by Bud Browne, Bruce and his wife, Pat, took the film on the road, printed up posters and flyers, screened the movie in high school auditoriums or rented halls and he delivered the narration, live at every showing. "I hadn't ever got up in front of an audience and done anything like that. Anyway, I came up with something and did it and people in the audience were laughing and I thought, 'Wow, this isn't too bad.'"

"Dale and Hap were supposed to promote it, but that never really happened," he says. "But they got their money back out of it and the next year I went back and did it again on my own account, and that became *Surf Crazy*." Brown was in the movie business and the die was cast for a career, which was timely since he and his wife were by now

expecting the first of their three children.

Brown made one movie a year from '58 to '63. *Surf Crazy* was followed by *Barefoot Adventure*, *Surfing Hollow Days* and *Waterlogged*. Each film illustrates how Brown was honing his craft as a filmmaker and storyteller, how he was tuned into his audience, and how his delivery and timing were getting the most out of humor that ranged from dry wit to utter slapstick. "Basically when there was no surf we were always thinking of something dumb to do that might end up being funny," says Brown, "like lassoing the tree branch from the moving car so it would jerk the guy out of the car." There are plenty of other such

## **"IF THE CONTENT IS GREAT, IT REALLY DOESN'T MATTER IF THE SHOT COMES FROM SOME LITTLE HOME MOVIE CAMERA."**

antics in Brown's films—surfers trying to bring up the waves by tipping "Surf" soap powder into the Makaha shorebreak, or pouring a live batch of polyurethane foam over Del Cannon's feet and taking him down to Newport harbor to see if he could walk on water. "It was dumb then and it's still dumb now when you look back at it," says Brown with a shrug. Brown's brilliance was in finding just the right quip to make it funny instead of just plain stupid.

"When you're editing you have the narration pretty much figured out, but then when you actually do it live you find out what works and what doesn't," he says of the process. "If you get to a place where you think the audience is dragging you think, 'Wow, I'd better think of something funny to say.' But when you get a good reaction to a line, you don't forget it and it becomes part of the deal. I was always changing stuff in the live narration according to what kind of audience I had. Sometimes the audience was so noisy, cheering and yelling and hooting so loud, they couldn't hear what I was saying anyway."

But Brown was savvy about how to get an audience going. When playing to a high

school assembly, he says, "I'd ask some questions about the name of the principal or the most hated teacher and then when there was a sequence of some horrible wipeout at Pipeline or Waimea I'd say, 'And there he is, Mr. Johnson, going over the falls. Ouch, that's gotta hurt!' That kind of thing would always get a good laugh."

Of course, there was more to Brown's films than humor and hi-jinx. Serious surf history went down in *Slippery When Wet* as Velzyland was recorded on film for the first time and named in honor of the film's sponsor. In *Barefoot Adventure* (Brown's personal favorite among his early films) there was huge point surf at Makaha and also the legendary first ride by Phil Edwards captured on film at Pipeline, thusly named, Brown says, on a suggestion by Mike Diffenderfer. Brown, of course, played up the drama to the hilt, although he admits there were some moments of high anxiety about "first time" forays at the now fabled Hawaiian surf spots, Pipeline in particular. "The very same day, once the word got out, everyone was surfing it," he says adding, typically deadpan, "We thought someone was going to die, but nobody did."

During this early '60s period the audience for surf films exploded, as legions of teens took up the sport in the wake of Hollywood's success with *Gidget* and the "beach blanket" movies—a very different genre than the product coming from the core filmmakers, whose own ranks were growing to meet the new demand, causing fierce competition among them.

"At one point there was a ton of people making films," reflects Brown. "Greg Noll, although it was mostly his wife who shot all his films while Greg went out and surfed, myself, Severson, Bud Browne, Dale Davis, Grant Rohloff, Walt Phillips and more. Part of the problem at the time was that auditoriums were hard to come by sometimes and we were trying to make a quality film but some of them weren't so good and the audiences would get rowdy and start throwing stuff and carrying on and then we'd find that we weren't allowed to use the auditoriums anymore. So that was tough. It used to piss us off. We never had any of those kinds of problems, but we weren't able to use the auditoriums either."

There was also a competition for surfing talent. "Some filmmakers would try to keep an exclusive lock on the guys who were surfing. Some would make the guys



paddle in to the beach if someone else showed up with a camera. But of course we were all over in Hawaii chasing around the North Shore at the same time, so it was hard. The surfers didn't care usually. Surfers are such egomaniacs that they'd want to be in all of the movies if they could."

In the midst of all this, Brown's reputation as an accomplished surf filmmaker was beginning to get noticed. As a result, says Brown, "Kodak wanted me to do a commercial for their Instamatic camera with Phil Edwards and a girl surfing, with me surfing beside them and shooting as Phil took the camera and a roll of film out of a plastic bag, put the film in the camera and took a picture of the girl. There was supposed to be no cuts except when it cut to the picture of the girl that Phil had taken. So I got the storyboards from the ad agency and found that this was all going to happen at the Pipeline to which I said, 'Yeah, right!' But it also said I was going to be shooting 35mm film. I said, no way, I can't possibly surf alongside them with a 35mm camera, it's just too damn heavy. But I said I'd do it in 16mm and they agreed, but they insisted I had to use an Arriflex, pin-registered camera that I knew was going to be too big as well. I just used one of my little Bell & Howell cameras and shot it at Chun's Reef in like three-foot surf. That commercial went all over the world and won a Clio award for the best commercial of the year. Well, I went back to New York for the awards ceremony and those agency people were still saying how they couldn't believe the quality of the shot and how those Arriflex pin-registered cameras were really something, weren't they? So much for the technical experts. I never did tell them. It made me realize that it's the content that really matters and the quality is important and the technical stuff may be important too, but if the content is great, it really doesn't matter if the shot comes from some little home movie camera."

Bruce Brown can take credit for being a pioneer in every aspect of documentary filmmaking and distribution. (Opposite, clockwise from top) Paul Allen and Corky Carroll man the booth while Brown, right, drums up ticket sales for *Waterlogged* during the 1963 Surf-O-Rama trade show at the Santa Monica Civic; Brown's passion for motorcycles inspired him to make *On Any Sunday*, released in 1971; All dressed up with somewhere to go (like around the world!) August, Brown and Hynson prepare to depart from Los Angeles airport; Brown and Bob Bagley check the camera package for one of their "Missions Impossible."

Brown went on to become an ingenious technical innovator, grafting big telephoto lenses onto tiny home movie cameras (and learning how to pan with them and get the exposures right), making his own waterproof housings, adapting a vibration-free helicopter mount to fit onto the gunwale of a fast-moving Boston Whaler (captained by Jose Angel) to get a surfer's eye perspective of big surf at Makaha. "People were always telling me what I could and couldn't do," says Brown, adding that he learned not to take much notice.

Brown was beginning to realize that he could make a decent living from his self-taught filmmaking skills. "We did a little better each year. I borrowed money to make the second movie but after that it was pretty much self-sustaining. In addition to the auditorium shows, I'd cut a half-hour version of the films that I'd take around all the high schools in California and show them in school assemblies. I'd make \$50 or \$100 for each showing and sometimes I'd do two or three in a day so that was pretty good money for back then. Those showings went over great. The kids were stoked because they weren't having to be in class, of course, and it wasn't some boring lecture about something. Even today people come up to me and say they still remember when I came and did a surf film show at their high school assembly."

By 1962, however, 25-year-old Brown was ready to break out of the mold and do something different. The biggest problem he faced in doing so, he realized, was not so much a matter of money, but of time. He cranked out *Waterlogged*, a compilation drawn from all his previous films, for a 1963 release to keep the wheels of commerce churning, and he also began shooting surfing and doing color commentary for network television shows, including ABC's "Wide World of Sports," NBC's "Sports Spectacular" and various programs in local San Diego and Los Angeles markets. With business booming, he says, "I felt it was just time to spend more time making a movie. With the earlier films I never had any time. I'd shoot for three months, then edit them, then do the showings and then start shooting the next one."

With *The Endless Summer*, says Brown, he intended just to break away from the formula of the day—segments of hot-dogging in California and big-wave riding

in Hawaii—and expand the surf film horizon. From that humble concept, the film "just kinda evolved."

Originally, he says, he was just going to venture to South Africa because a friend, Dick Metz, had been there in 1959 and come back with tales of fabulous waves in Cape Town and a break at Cape St. Francis where perfect cylinders peeled down a long, boulder-strewn point. "Nobody had been there to do any filming at that time. It turned out it was \$50 per ticket cheaper to go to Cape Town and then around the world instead of making a return trip to the U.S. So all of a sudden we spent a lot of time with travel agents trying to figure out connections and where we were going to stay and all that kind of stuff."

Brown pored over maps, trying to figure out where else in Africa there might be undiscovered surf, but as footage in the film still shows, cracking the perfect wave was no easy task. "Mostly we only had a very short time to do what we had to do," he says. "In Senegal, for example, we were only there for one or two days. There was no information. From looking at a map you could maybe figure out where there might be waves, but we didn't have enough time anywhere to really explore the area so we had no idea if the days we were at some beach was a big day, a small day, a good swell or whatever."

Nevertheless, a three month trip to Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Tahiti book-ended with two winters shooting on the North Shore, provided enough surf stoke to pull together the footage to make his point—that there was a world of waves waiting to be ridden. Even if the movie's title was a conceit (most surfers knowing that chasing the endless winter is a better prospect for finding the best surf), Brown's storytelling magic did the rest, along with the now iconic poster designed by graphic artist John Van Hamersveld.

The 16mm film, shown with a music track by The Sandals and Brown's live narration, premiered in June 1964 at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium. The 3,000-seat space was sold out for a week to rave reviews and rapt audiences. Immediately after, in a piece of co-marketing magic if not first class travel planning, Brown teamed up with Hobie Surfboards and embarked on an East Coast tour, starting in Asbury Park, New Jersey. "Hobie had this big, old motor home, so Hobie and his wife, Pat and I, Corky Carroll, Joey Cabell, Phil Edwards and his wife, Heidi, we all

piled into this thing and went across country, complaining to Hobie the whole time, of course, and then going to all his dealers down the East Coast and making shows along the way. It was so popular that we began to think this thing could show in theaters all over the country, although of course nothing like that had been done before with a surf movie."

Brown and his growing team, that in addition to his wife (who was always his creative consultant and all-purpose helpmate), now included Bob Bagley as business manager and Paul Allen as publicist, continued to road-show the movie while they sought the deal that might bring the film into mainstream

distribution. Says Brown: "Bob Thomas, who was an Associated Press film critic, he loved it and tried to get a distributor for it and we all thought the distributors would be in L.A., but of course they weren't, they were all in New York. So Paul Allen and I went back to New York to see if we could get somebody to take it, but the reaction was mostly that this thing could never play more than 10 feet from the ocean. We started to think, well, maybe they're right, but there's only one way to find out and we decided we'd better set ourselves a pretty hard test. Anyway as we were flying back from New York, Paul looked down and saw this town and it turned out to be Wichita, Kansas, about as far from the ocean as you could get."

Determined to prove the New York distributors wrong, Brown and his team booked a theater in Wichita for a week in the dead of winter, when there's only about nine hours of daylight and the average temperatures dip to 20 degrees at night and daytime highs scarcely push 40. As it happened, the dates they booked coincided with one of the worst snowstorms in memory and the landlocked locals were more than ready for *The Endless Summer*—it was exactly what they needed to relieve their winter woes. The movie, now in 16mm soundprint format, sold out the house for its week-long booking. It was kept over for an additional week and sold that out too, breaking the theater's previous all-time

record held by *My Fair Lady*. Brown, Allen and Bagley thought they'd nailed it.

But the New York distributors were unmoved, saying that the Wichita test didn't prove a thing, that their own test screening had showed that there were too



A Zulu rickshaw ride made for a colorful way to get to the beach during filming for *The Endless Summer* in Durban, South Africa.

many elements of the film that just weren't funny. By this time, Brown was exasperated, but downright dogged.

"I learned to listen to my instincts rather than to the experts. I'd shown the film to thousands and thousands of people, so I knew what was funny from the way they reacted," says Brown. "We decided the only way we could prove it to them was to take the film to New York and show it ourselves, and then those guys would be coming to us. So we rented the Kips Bay Theater in a pretty rundown area of Manhattan, because that was the only place we could afford, and we blew up the film to 35mm so we didn't have to take our own projector this time, even though people tried to tell us you couldn't do that, but of course you could—Disney had been doing it for years. So we showed it for a week and it broke the theater record and we sat by the phone waiting for it to ring, but we only got a couple of little nibbles. So we showed it for another week and it dropped off a bit and we thought 'Uh-oh...' But then we showed it for a third week and it broke the theater record that it had made the first week, which is totally unheard of. That's when the phone started ringing off the hook."

It wasn't just good "word-of-mouth" that led to the movie's record-breaking run. Prior to the premiere, publicist Allen and business manager Bagley had been working behind the scenes to ensure a high-profile debut. "Bud Palmer was a

commentator with ABC sports and married to Daisy Palmer who was well connected in New York society," explains Bagley. "They helped us with the promotion by inviting 500 people that were among the who's who of New York society. And they were all fascinated that this film could have been made by this skinny little blond guy and a single camera."

Brown corroborates: "The critics just gave it super reviews. Vincent Canby and all the New York intellectual film critics were calling it a perfect movie and it did make lists of the 10 best movies of the year. Bud Palmer, who I'd worked with doing 'Wide World of Sports' stuff, he was like Mayor Lindsay's official greeter for New York, so he organized a special showing for Walter Cronkite and those kinds of heavyweights and I ended up being on the 'Tonight Show' with

Johnny Carson and we got a ton of press because what we were doing was so unusual."

Even with all the media attention, securing a nationwide general release for the film was no pushover. "Most of the distributors were saying to us, 'Well, the poster's shitty, so we're going to have to change that, and we need to re-edit it and get some chicks in there,' that kind of thing. And we were just saying, 'No, no, nope ... no way!' Finally, we met this guy, Don Rugoff of Cinema 5, and he just said, 'Okay, we're gonna leave it exactly as it is.' And he hired Paul Allen to do all the publicity, just as he'd been doing for us."

In 1966 *The Endless Summer* went to big screens in cities across the country and, ultimately, around the world. And in many instances, publicist Allen and cinematographer, director, producer, editor and writer Brown, went with it.

"It seems like I spent a year going to just about every major town across the country," says Brown, "showing the film, doing all the publicity, talking to the critics, doing press interviews and the next week doing it all again in some other city, staying in another hotel, being asked the same stupid questions over and over again. It was exhausting."

*The Endless Summer* inspired a new era of global surf exploration. (Opposite top) Robert August surfing at "Bruce's Beauties," Cape St. Francis, South Africa. (Opposite below) Brown with Bolex camera and Century telephoto lens, filming in Hawaii.





Photo: Paul Holmes

At 69 years old, Bruce Brown is now the patriarch to a family of filmmakers that includes his son, Dana, and his grandson, Wes.

*The Endless Summer* was a huge success, but Brown himself was suffering from terminal burnout. "I'm a surfer and if you're a surfer you don't want to work if you don't have to. So when people would tell me how rich I was from making this film, although I still hadn't seen much money from it, when they asked 'What's your next project?' I'd tell them, 'shit, I'm just going surfing.'"

And when he did embark on another project, it was not a film, but commercial fishing, buying a series of boats and harpooning broad-billed swordfish in a Dana Point-based operation, for several years with Mark Martinson as a partner. Bagley, in the meantime, kept the reels turning in the movie business. "Bruce had the foresight to keep a couple of dozen sound prints in circulation that we'd rent out to charitable organizations or schools," says Bagley. "We set up people

internationally, like John Whitmore in South Africa and the Witzig brothers in Australia, people in Europe. It kept me pretty busy sending out prints, getting back prints and repairing them."

Through his friend Bagley, Brown developed another passion during this period—riding and racing motorcycles, mostly of the off-road variety. In the then deserted hills behind Dana Point, Bagley and Brown played with their new toys and it wasn't long before dirt bike riding became a craze among other surf industry movers and shakers of the late '60s, Grubby Clark, the Hoffmans, and more. Soon Bagley and Brown were organizing busloads of them to go out to Ascot for the big races.

Almost naturally, Brown and Bagley got into filming the fast-growing sport, and even arranging races that they could shoot for television. "We dreamed up these

events we called Missions Impossible," explains Bagley. "We did a 100-mile desert race for ABC 'Wide World of Sports' with two dozen cameramen, jeeps and helicopters. It was monumental and that was the first experience I had with producing what we call a package, and it was one of the biggest things in my career, because there's nothing much harder than doing things like that. In the end we'd document the big race tours where they'd bring in top riders from Europe and we'd cover the California events. Then we did the Baja 1000, the first time that had been done, and again it was an army of cameramen, helicopters and huge logistics."

Ultimately, their common interest in the sport led Brown and his team to make the 1971 landmark film, *On Any Sunday*, another coup with distributor Cinema 5, that played in 35mm format in theaters all

over the world. For Brown there was a distinct sense of déjà vu from the days of *The Endless Summer*—a parallel between the surfing and motorcycle communities in which both needed a documentary film that would raise awareness and appreciation of their lifestyles and bring some much needed dignity to their little understood sports. The film also led to a long association between Brown and cinematographer Mike Hoover, whose list of mountain-climbing movie credits included the action sequences in *The Eiger Sanction*. Hoover would go on to be Dan Rather's cameraman reporting on the war in Afghanistan.

Remembers Bagley about how he and Brown met Hoover: "*On Any Sunday* was starting up and we'd bought a bunch of Arriflex cameras and needed long lenses for them. I was at Century Precision Optics and as I was walking out with a six or eight telephoto lenses sticking out the top of a box, this big strapping guy, 6' 5" and real trim, came up to me and says, 'What are you going to do with all those lenses?' It turned out he was also a motorcycle rider and we began talking about the film and he said, 'Well, if you're doing that you're going to need slo-mo segments, so what kind of cameras are you using?' I explained that we had these Arris that could supposedly only do 50 frames a second but we could run them at 100 frames by juicing them up. So he started talking about this instrumentation camera that he had that was really high-speed and telling me all about this and that. It was all so complicated I just said, 'Yeah, well, we're just jump-and-run shooters.' And he said, 'Yeah, that's what I do too, so if you hire me for a day I'll show you what it can do and then I'll donate it to the project.' So we did. And we've all been friends since that day in 1969."

But the success of *On Any Sunday* did not come without stress for Brown and once again, he says, he was feeling burned out to the point he dissolved his film business. Bagley went off to pursue his other interests in film and television. Brown himself "went back to doing all the things I didn't have time to do when I was making the movies—surfing, riding motorcycles, spending time with the kids and my family." Still, he says, people kept bugging him to make another surf film, in particular a sequel to *The Endless Summer*, but it would take 20 years before he could be convinced to do it.

Finally it was his eldest son, Dana, who persuaded him.

"Dana had been working with restoring and re-editing some of the old films and he wanted to do it," says Brown. "I think that if he hadn't wanted to do it, it may never have happened, but it was a great opportunity for him to be involved from day one and to make a movie in 35mm because nobody had ever done that. Then Mike Hoover got involved as director of

## "I LEARNED TO LISTEN TO MY INSTINCTS RATHER THAN TO THE EXPERTS. I'D SHOWN THE FILM TO THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE, SO I KNEW WHAT WAS FUNNY."

photography and again, if he hadn't wanted to do it I don't think I would have either, because he's the kind of guy who would get the job done no matter what. All I wanted to do was sit in the folding chair and direct."

*The Endless Summer II* was a far easier sell to mainstream theaters than the original and the concept was acquired and backed by New Line Cinema. Africa, Indonesia, France, Fiji and Costa Rica were among destinations for the movie, shot in the early '90s and released in 1994, with shortboarder Pat O'Connell and longboarder Robert "Wingnut" Weaver in starring roles. In many respects the film was ahead of the cultural curve—the longboard revival was just gaining momentum—but for Brown the distinction was immaterial. "Why not?" he says. "Surfing is surfing and I was just interested in the visual contrast in style."

Not that the movie was without its production problems, according to Brown, including the disastrous crash of the seaplane in the Costa Rica segment which made for a dramatic scene, but was also a major headache of insurance and potential litigation even though nobody was injured.

The film was somewhat disappointingly received in the surf market, although critic Leonard Maltin opined that it was "superior" to the original, and it did fairly

well at the box office. It is currently ranked #38 on the list of highest-grossing documentaries released since such records began being kept in 1982, with estimated receipts of just over \$2.1 million. For Dana Brown it marked a solid start to his own filmmaking career. Dana's next film, *Step Into Liquid*, a 35mm movie backed by Sony Entertainment, did even better, ranking #19 on the list with box office receipts of almost \$3.7 million. He has since gone on to make his own motorcycle film, *Dust to Glory*. Now there is a third generation of the Brown family getting into the movie business. Dana's son Wes's second film *Chasing Dora*, (made with T.J. Barrack), is to be aired shortly on Fuel TV.

Both son and grandson could hardly have a better mentor than Bruce Brown in helping develop their moviemaking talents. The senior Brown is something of a guru in the documentary filmmaking world, so much so that he was invited not too long ago to present a seminar at one of the world's leading film schools, giving the master pause to reflect on his long and successful career.

"Without realizing it, back in the '60s, I was learning about all aspects of making and distributing a film," says Brown. "Early on I used to tell myself, 'Wow, if only I could go to film school I could learn all about how to really make movies.' Finally, when I eventually had the money where I could have done that, I got a call from the USC film school asking if I could go talk to the cinema students. So I said sure. They were asking me things like, 'What kind of editing machine did you use?' And I'd say, 'Well I didn't, I had a little viewer but that was it. I'd take a look and then crank the film to where I thought the cut needed to be and that was how I did it.' Or they'd ask, 'How many prints did you strike?' And I'd say 'Well I didn't have any. I showed the original film and if the splices got caught in the gate, my wife would stick her finger in there to bring the loop back to where it should be.' And they'd ask 'So who was the Director of Photography?' And I'd say, 'Well, that was me.' And they'd ask, 'So who was the Production Manager?' And I'd say 'Well, that was me, too.' Editor? Me. Writer? Me. Narrator? Me. And of course they couldn't believe it—I did all those jobs from step one. What was funny was in talking to them was that I realized thank god I'd never gone to film school, because I would have learned that I couldn't do what I did." 