

The Chantays playing
at The Lighthouse Cafe
- what an event to
have attended!



The Beach Boys

At the midpoint of the 90s, the stars of surf music past and present gathered at a beach venue in California for one of the wildest shows of all time...

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN



If you were a fan of surf music and were in the Hermosa Beach area on 1 April 1995 you'd have witnessed something very special: a unique coming together of the genre's original greats with many of its most hailed revivalists. Yet the venue that evening wasn't exactly the Hollywood Bowl or the Michigan Stadium, but instead a small, cosily intimate nightclub, mostly known for hosting jazz players such as Miles Davis and Chet Baker. But on that spring day over 30 years ago, the Lighthouse Cafe became home to such surf legends as The Chantays, The Surfaris and Davie Allan & The Arrows, alongside acclaimed second wavers like The Surf Raiders, Jon & The Nightriders and Paul Johnson & The Packards.

Organised by Johnson, nobody behind the scenes had arranged for that evening to be documented for posterity, and for years those that were there thought their performances were lost to time. Except what they didn't know was that a recording *did* exist, and now that singular night of surf mastery can be enjoyed by everyone, with the arrival

➤ of *The Legends Of Surf Guitar*, which is out now via Oglio Records.

The person we have to thank is producer Mark Linett. Best known for his work over the past 30 years remastering The Beach Boys, in the 1980s and 90s he was used to turning up to gigs with portable recording equipment, just in case...

"My friend Elliot Easton from The Cars heard about it and me, being who I am, if I'm going to go to a show, I would rather be recording it than just watching it!" Linett tells us over Zoom from his house in Los Angeles. "At the time, I'd just gotten my first digital eight-track. I used to go out and do these things with a portable two-inch 16-track but portable then meant something a little smaller than a washing machine! But by 1995 I had this eight-track and a little box of preamps for whatever wasn't being mic'd on stage that I could grab"

However cutting-edge that device was at the time, though, technology has

leaped forward since and the recording we're now able to feast on in 2025 sounds much cleaner and more dynamic than would have been available in the mid-1990s.

"I played with those tapes off and on for years," Linett says. "That was the beginning of digital recording, but a few years before we had digital audio workstations and computer recording and editing. That's something that made this project better, because when I got to really working on it, I had those things and could drill down into making the performances sound better."

Linett has come together on this release with surf guitarist and historian John Blair. Blair was also there that evening, not in the crowd but on stage, and not just as part of his revivalist outfit Jon & The Nightriders, but helping out many of those first wave groups who were, on the night, missing a crucial member or two.

"I grew up in the 60s listening to these people," Blair enthuses to *Vintage Rock* from his home near Monterey. "So these guys, plus George Tomsco of The Fireballs and Nokie Edwards of The Ventures and Dick Dale, these people were essentially my guitar teachers. But the problem that night, some of these bands' original members had passed away, some of them had moved out of the area, and others were still around, but they weren't playing their instruments anymore. | So that was the big challenge, and the idea was that Paul invited the lead guitar or rhythm guitar players from the 60s bands to appear on stage with a backline of seasoned musicians who could play the tunes that their bands were known for. So he brought up these guys, one guy from The Lively Ones, one guy from The Surfaris and so on, and then we had a backline of four or

COURTESY OF JOHN BLAIR

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A LES PERRY PRODUCTION

One of the flyers for the gig, promising an all-star line-up

John Blair joined many of the older bands, replacing members who couldn't be at the event



New album *The Legends Of Surf Guitar* brings to life a 90s night of live surf music long thought lost to time

five musicians that would swap out from time to time.”

This meant that Blair would be playing alongside many of his heroes, including The Astronauts, best known for their 1963 hit *Baja*. “Bob Demmon was asked to come along, and he was the rhythm player in The Astronauts,” he recalls. “So at some point during the day, I was asked to play lead guitar for

releasing it commercially. That album came out in 2020, and, in Linett’s words, “this was the next logical step”.

“I’ve loved surf music ever since hearing *Wipe Out* and *Pipeline* as a teenager in New York,” he says, adding that the advances in technology since ’95 have allowed him not only to punch up those original recordings, but also to go in and correct a few blunders made on the night.

“Paul invited the lead guitar or rhythm guitar players from the 60s bands to appear with a backline of seasoned musicians” - JOHN BLAIR

three or four Astronauts tunes, and Bob was on stage playing rhythm. So I was channelling, essentially, that band’s lead guitar player, Rich Fifield. That was an absolute, supreme honour to have been asked to do that.”

Blair, then, was far too busy – and indeed starstruck – that night to notice Linett and Easton amongst the throng. In fact, Blair and Linett’s paths didn’t cross properly until decades later, during the 2017 Surf Guitar 101 weekend, another live event that the producer had recorded, in the hope of

“It’s made this record better,” he suggests. “Because of digital editing, I was able to go in and fix the inevitable duff note, which kind of sticks out, especially in this kind of music. It would be like if a vocalist was horribly out of tune on a note, or sang the wrong lyric. Fixing those mistakes made, I think, the whole performance better and more authentic.”

That there’s such excitement about this release, 30 years on from that gathering, and 60 years on from surf’s heyday, only proves how enduring



Producer Mark Linett turned up to the gig with a digital eight-track recorder, capturing the night

SURFIN’ BIRD

Aside from his production credit on this recording, Mark Linett’s history with surf goes back to even before 1 April 1995.

“Prior to recording this, I’d made maybe three records with Los Straitjackets, who are one of the more successful surf revival bands,” he tells us. “And I also did a record with a very interesting, fun band from the South Bay called The Ziggens that Elliot Easton produced. They do a lot of stuff, but they do a few surf-style tunes with a lot of humour. You know, even in the titles, the name of the album we did was called *Pomona Lisa* and they had a song on the record called *Surfin’ You Say!* I mean, I really like that. So I had had a direct experience with recording surf music before this event came along, so that probably had something to do with it. After that, I did two live Los Straitjackets records and a live DVD. Then Danny Amis left the band, moved to Mexico, and for a while, was bringing me lots of Mexican surf bands, largely patterned after Los Straitjackets, and I really enjoyed that stuff!”



➡ this quintessentially American genre is. And it's not just the first and second wavers that are finding fresh fans. Newer artists such as Susan SurfTone, Messer Chups, The Coffin Daggers and The Surfrajettes are now reinterpreting those crashing sounds through a 21st century lens.

"In terms of surf bands and audiences, it's much, much more popular today than it ever was," claims Blair about the genre's health in 2025. "They use the term first wave, second wave, third wave, if you really want to follow along with that scheme, this is probably the third or

because it doesn't really reflect the tradition that I'm very much aware of. There are a lot of three-piece surf instrumental bands today – guitar, bass, drums – leaving a big, big hole in there for a rhythm guitar player or a keyboard player."

It's possible, though, that this recording will remind those modern-day surf trios the benefits of a fuller-bodied sound. At 25 tracks, *The Legends Of Surf Guitar* is virtually a Greatest Hits compilation – apart from the then-ubiquitous *Misirlou*, it's hard to name a surf classic that isn't covered on the album. There's *Peter Gunn*, given a pounding makeover

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fourth wave, the first wave being the 60s and the second wave was when my band came along in 1979 and revived that style of music. We jumped into the New Wave scene at that time, and because we were playing this surf music loud and fast, it appealed to the punk crowd, and so we were accepted with open arms. Then *Pulp Fiction* in '94 pretty much ignited what came to be known as the third wave. So whether or not we're in a fourth wave now, it depends on who you talk to, but it's all kinds of silly – everybody wants to put labels on everything. The music has grown over the years, and in my opinion, it's been co-opted in certain ways. Today, what I see happening kind of hurts a bit

by Davie Allan, and a vigorous *Mr Moto*, courtesy of Paul Johnson & The Packards. Then there's Jim Pash's muscular rendition of *Wipe Out* and Paul Johnson's version of *Apache*, as good as anything The Shadows committed to vinyl. There are other surf collections out there, but it's always been a sound best heard live. There's an urgency and a grit to the music that comes across more clearly in live recordings, which is what makes this record so vital.

"Yeah, it's a different thing," Linett says. "But those 60s records, by the way they were made, they were, by and large, live. When I started making records in the 70s, we're already into 16-track and instead of going for an organic sound in

the room, you wind up making what I would call layer cake records."

Making this LP has proven quite nostalgic for the pair. As part of its promotion, Linett and Blair made a return visit to the Lighthouse Cafe, for the first time since that night in 1995, though the producer's memories of the performance itself are sketchy, to say the least.

"We did a press event a couple of weeks ago, and I had no real recollection of where we set up, or how we did it," he says, laughing. "But looking at it, there's really only one place we could have, which was just off stage, in the corner. And we had so little equipment that, in a way, I'm not surprised that we weren't noticed. I mean, it wasn't a whole lot bigger than a couple of plates of cheeseburgers!"

But now this project is done and dusted, what next? Despite both being in their seventies, neither Linett or Blair have any plans to retire – their love of music, and surf in particular, is too great.

"What I'm mostly doing now is reworking projects that I did 25 or 30 years ago," Linett tells us. "I've got one in the pipeline now, and another couple being talked about. Again, recordings that were made quite some time ago, but somehow never saw the light of day."

As for Blair, though nudging 80, his passion for music is undimmed and, aside from his "domestic baloney" duties, there's always something related to surf bubbling away.

"I'm waiting for the next project to come along, and it probably will," he smiles. "I just finished last month a movie that I'd been working on for 18 years called *Sound Of The Surf*, which is streaming in the UK on Vimeo. It's a documentary and the first one to really tell the story about how this music happened in the 60s and beyond."

If you discovered the surf guitar via that best-selling *Pulp Fiction* soundtrack back in the 90s, but have found your interest waning in recent years, then this red-hot collection of reverb-soaked classics should remind you quite how ageless it is. The Lighthouse Cafe wasn't big enough to hold every surf fan that night, but through this priceless recording, we're all able to travel back in time, to 1 April 1995, to experience the energy and, yes, fun of one of American music's most enduring genres. ★