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PORTFOLIO SURFING

Revolutionary Etude *The Surfers Journal* Spring 2019

The coastline of the Republic of Cuba is 3,570 miles, more than four times longer than that of California and more than ten times that of Puerto Rico. Let's imagine there's at least one decent break for every five miles of Cuban coastline – that's 714 breaks, give or take. Sets one to dreaming, doesn't it?

On January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro and the 26th of July Movement declared victory upon the flight of dictator Fulgencio Batista from the island, and Latin America's first communist regime inaugurated what has become almost 60 years of uncontested rule. That same year, the first West Coast Surfing Championships were held at Huntington Beach Pier, and *Gidget* flickered on drive-in screens across the USA. A very different revolution was in full swing.

Cuba was closed to Americans until 2016, when Barack Obama became the first American president since Calvin Coolidge to visit the island. Another visit, one accorded far less fanfare and much longer, about ten weeks, was made by Makewild, a Southern California collective of artists, filmmakers, photographers and writers. Adventurers and explorers each and all, the Makewild team has spent about five months traveling and surfing in Cuba since 2016.

The result of Makewild's extended surfing safaris is *The Cuba Unknown*, a combination coffee table photography monograph, Surf Report, travel journal and Baedeker. It's *Endless Summer* on a single island, and you'll find everything from a detailed hand-drawn map and guide to Makewild's favorite bars, cafes, restaurants and tattoo parlor in Havana to page after page of luminous aquamarine waves that set one to dreaming. Marco Bava, Seth Brown, Tyler Dunham and Corey McLean share credit for the exquisite photographs, California artist Allison Kunath provides delightful single-line illustrations, and McLean wrote the text and drew the maps. *The Cuba Unknown* is the first segment of an even larger Makewild project, *Havana Libre*, a feature documentary and part of the group's efforts to help make surfing legal and legitimate in the Republic of Cuba.

The Cuban government doesn't officially recognize surfing, which makes it just this side of illegal, and the country's surfers have to battle just to get a board or even wax. "When surfing began in

Cuba,” McLean writes, “surfers made boards from all sorts of material, but the most popular method was to find broken refrigerators and strip out the foam...the boards were shaped with cheese graters. Today, of the hundred or so surfers in Cuba, less than half actually own a modern board.”

A few pages later McLean explains the impetus for the voyage: “...the sport was considered illegal and those who chose to pursue it did so with great risk. We set out on a journey to learn why the sport was off limits and how, in spite of this restriction, surfers chased the swell anyway. Fortunately, on an island of 11.5 million people, fewer than 100 of them surf and all of them know one another by name.” The book is a work of “amor verdadero,” equal parts affection, awe and reverence: “At another spot we learned it was common to crush beer cans into makeshift sandals to walk across the reef to an entry point where you’d kick the can back to your friend.” Dios mio.

We are introduced to a number of effervescent and impossibly hospitable Cuban surfers who make the Makewild sojourners family over the course of the team’s first ten weeks on the island, including shaper and surfer Frank Gonzalez and the island’s lone female surfer, Yaya Guerrero. As you progress through *The Cuba Unknown* it’s obvious they are the first deities of a pantheon: Frank is its Zeus, forging tri-fin thunderbolts in his apartment cum workshop; Yaya is its Athena, giving the island’s youngsters the gift of her wisdom, courage and enthusiasm.

“For Cubans, the sea is the window into the outside world,” McLean writes. “It is the only clear path that promises freedom, clarity and space. In Cuba the sea acts as a border wall and the very end of communist control.” This is very much how Cuban novelist Reinaldo Arenas describes it in his autobiography, *Before Night Falls*: “The sea was like a feast and forced us to be happy, even when we did not particularly want to be. Perhaps subconsciously we loved the sea as a way to escape from the land where we were repressed; perhaps in floating on the waves we escaped our cursed insularity.”

In perhaps the most memorable photograph in a compilation of same, Yenia Exposito-Linares, Frank’s wife, eight months pregnant and wearing bikini, floats face-up six feet or so below the surface of the sea, a constellation of bubbles as round as her belly rising from her mouth and nose. It is the book’s purest, most visceral image of hope.

The revolution is long-finished: surfing is a core branding concept for global corporations like Citibank, Samsung and Subaru, a marketing tool to reach multiple demographics, and you can buy Billabong and Quiksilver clothing at Target. We are outlaws no more. What we see, in *The Cuba Unknown*, is one of the world’s last surf frontiers, a nascent culture of outliers, rebels and zealots. They have been forced to feel their way forward in darkness, and they have done so with delight, vigor and unimaginable ingenuity and resilience. They have built a community. It is a surfing revolution on the cusp, and *The Cuba Unknown* is one of its core documents.

Long-dominated by the USA and Australia, surfing, as both art form and professional sport, is a chorus soon to include the voices of some of the world’s tropical and largely impoverished

nations. It's only a matter of time, isn't it? Here at home we have brand new boards, rash guards, enough cakes of wax to open a bakery, dependable rides to the water...traveling through *The Cuba Unknown* will fill you with admiration for our brave, hearty and joyous Cuban brethren while making you stratospherically grateful for what we have.

Cuba's surfers want official recognition of their sport so they can surf for Cuba at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and, obviously, in other international competitions. May their love and devotion continue to inspire us. Hasta la victoria siempre.

For more information, please visit www.makewild.co.

Roadside Death Marker
The Surfers Journal
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I wanted to be your favorite pop song. Jangling guitars and tambourines, Beatle boots and girl group harmonies. Set me on repeat, play me over and over, the chorus you can't shake out of your head.

Jeff, John and I buy Mexican car insurance for the RV in San Ysidro. By ten Tijuana is gritty and gray, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, growling Volkswagens, a bullring by the sea, valleys clotted with the rusted hulls of dead cars. South of Ensenada 1 becomes two lanes, a thousand pot-holed miles to Cabo San Lucas.

I was the earnest boy, standing on the lawn of the house of the girl he loved. It was snowing. I waited for you to answer the door, the star of a movie about an earnest boy. I wanted to serenade you.

The way you spoke to me when I was yours, breath and spit and heat. You unbuttoned an old red flannel shirt, dropped it to the floor, stepped toward me. The carpet slanted, tumbled you toward me.

Dawn. A breeze slipped through the window, shivered the curtains. You laughed, pulled a sheet to your chin. Tide of air, your morning skin.

We have a twenty-six foot RV, seven surfboards, four wetsuits, three rash guards, one boogie board, five leashes, fifteen bars of surf wax, a television, a VCR, a camcorder, a CD player, ten movies, forty CDs, one copy of *The Magnificent Peninsula*, one copy of

Baja California, *A Lonely Planet Travel Survival Kit*, the "Traveler's Reference Map of Mexico, Baja California" and the Surf Reports for Baja Norte and Baja Sur.

Costco before we left California. We have five pounds of pasta, three jars of marinara sauce, two pounds of butter, four pounds of sausage, two gallons of milk, two boxes of Captain Crunch, a box of Total, a pound of sugar, four frozen pizzas, two loaves of wheat bread, five pounds of peanut butter, two pounds of strawberry preserves. We have three pounds of Peet's coffee, two cartons of Marlboro Regulars, a box of matches, two cases of Tecate on ice in a cooler beside the refrigerator.

We have a toaster, a coffee maker, a microwave, a toilet, a shower, a kitchen table and a couch. We have aspirin, Pepto Bismol – liquid and tablet – toothpaste, shampoo, soap, deodorant. I sit on the toilet and watch 1 recede, a black line through the desert.

Above San Agustin Jeff presses the wrong tank control button, evacuates the black water. We leave our shit baking in the road, continue south.

The float of rancharo guitar, Peñafiel bottle caps, flecks of warm water surf wax. Twelve inch crosses painted white, pushed into the dirt alongside 1. Time is heat, sunlight, miles.

I become millenary.

I left you homeless, bereft of the city I was building, where we were driving. The way you thought I twisted beneath the lights in the produce section, flickered, turned into the person who would leave you. A payphone off Route 80 in Nevada, midnight. 'I miss you so much,' you said. 'I hate being away from you.'

Old records, piles of paper, traffic on the bridge, the same song on the radio, three times every day since summer started. A glaze of light along the ridges, some reference to a saint.

Why have I been given anything? I can't keep it.

Below Mulege. On the beach at Punta Arena I write I LOVE YOU in zinc oxide between your shoulder blades. Unshuttered and adored, drench you with my mouth and hands.

We could have changed everything down here. Parked in pebbles and dust, bottled water and straw sombreros. We could have taken the sun full on, been extraordinary in the heat and cholla and sand. Realized this was something.

Driving south from Loreto, Ciudad Insurgentes by nightfall. We come over a hill, drop, a stray dog standing in the middle of our lane. Jeff leans on the horn. The dog turns toward us, its face calm, expectant. Jeff slows and presses the horn again, but the dog doesn't move. Jeff stops five feet from the dog and leans on the horn. The dog walks across the dividing line and stops in the middle of the northbound lane. Jeff accelerates. The road descends, veers left. If we looked back we would only see the road curve up and around, the dog invisible.

"That dog's going to get fucking whacked," John says. The road uncoils into straightaway. A truck whips past us in the northbound lane.

I practiced waiting. Stood myself in long lines at the bank, outside movie theaters. I found empty chairs at the dentist's office, sat and stared at my feet – no appointment. I wanted to feel time crippled, watch its pace become moribund, seep into all of my minutes. Feel it decelerate the moment you touched me.

The RV is always low on gas and full of black water. South of Ciudad Constitucion I buy refried beans, salsa, tortillas. I stop playing cassettes, search the radio for rancharo music, Selena. I stop speaking English in the mercados and Pemex stations and RV parks. Jeff and John sit up front

smoking Marlboros, drinking Tecates. I watch the Llano de Magdalena through the windows, Galloping Cactus and Century Plants. We drive toward Todos Santos, an RV park south of El Pescadero.

Our roads full of cars, our sky full of planes, my mouth and hands full of you. The world shrinks around me, makes me itch. I want to skip back, rewind, drop the needle at the crackling beginning. I want to slow it down, reverse it, a boy in a straw sombrero beneath a palapa on the beach at San Pedrito. Backwards into the future, a perpetual homesickness.

We could pretend it's dawn, always at the beginning, forever slipping into a morning, the world quiet and waiting.

We think we have the future, but we're lined up against the sun. We're going to lose.

We find clean, shoulder-high waves at Playa Los Cerritos. Little kids run up and down the beach kicking soccer balls, riding belly boards, laughing. We surf all afternoon and return to Playa San Pedrito for showers and dinner in the RV park restaurant. I carry my board, razor and dry clothes to the bathroom. The campground is deserted in the day's last heat.

He's over six feet, blond and burly, carrying a longboard and a bucket. "Eric," he says. We shake hands. He lives in the big trailer below the hills at the north end of the beach. He's been down here three years.

"I'm building a place down by Los Cerritos, no other houses around. I'm waiting for these guys I hired to dig a well for me." He owned supply stores for marijuana growers in Tempe and Long Beach. Grow lights, humidifiers, fertilizer. Mail order. "The FBI kept trying to get my customer lists, close me down. I sold it all to my partner and bailed down here. My kids still live in LA."

"Do you ever miss home?" He shakes his head.

"I hope I'm dead before they wreck this, too."

We give up an afternoon in the water to drive the two hours from San Pedrito to Cabo San Lucas. We drink Coronas and weave our way through No Fear t-shirts, silver rings, painted pottery. Outside the market it's Baskin Robbins, Pizza Hut, Carlos and Charlies, Cabo Wabo. I walk past an American kid crossing Boulevard Marina, silkscreen of a blonde in a bikini with enormous breasts. 'Let's see the Japanese build a better one of these.'

The postcard you bought me at that place in North Beach, a photograph from the Sixties. A couple walks toward the ocean after sunset, the sky inflamed – inside of a pink grapefruit, skin of a tangerine. He carries a longboard, the lights on a municipal pier glittering behind them. The caption at the bottom reads 'one more time.'

Her hair is long, her arms and legs thin and muscular. The string tying the bottom of her bikini, her flat stomach, the poise of her breasts, she walks into the surf.

I dreamt of California. Wet sand, the darkening sky red and sweet, the cool wet clean of her skin. Stand in the outgoing tide, press yourself against me. Give it to me once, now, while I'm still young. While I'm standing in the surf, waiting.

We stop at a roadside shrine, a small wooden altar painted white, embraced by bougainvillea. Statue of the Madonna, unlit candles, bouquets of red and pink paper roses, the sky the color of your lips when it was cold. St. Patrick's Cathedral, Rockefeller Center, the windows at Lord & Taylor.

I don't know what other people say to themselves. We live in our own languages now. Our country is finished.

The evening empties itself into the sky, the RV idles. Looking back over these years you'll see a boy driving toward you.

I saw you. I really saw you.

Watch you fade.