

NEW WAVE CINEMA

DAVID COHEN REFLECTS ON SILVER-SCREEN SURFING FROM *GIDGET* TO *BRA BOYS* AND BEYOND.

SOME YEARS AGO, I had a next-door neighbour with a cat named Gidget. I wonder if my neighbour knew that the name, a portmanteau of 'girl' and 'midget', was coined by Frederick Kohner for his 1957 novel about a surf-loving Californian teenager, *Gidget: The Little Girl with Big Ideas*. Two years later, Kohner's book was made into a film starring Sandra Dee as the eponymous teen, which spawned the TV series (and later, the cat) of the same name. But it was the *movie* that had the youth of America running out to buy longboards. *Gidget* was perhaps the first film to bring surfing, and surf culture, to the mainstream.

As surfing has evolved into a professional sport – and a multibillion-dollar industry – we have seen many changes in the way surfing and surfers are represented on the big screen.

Witness the new Australian action-drama *Drift*. Inspired by the stories of companies like Quiksilver and Rip Curl, which began locally and have since become global brands, *Drift* examines our home-grown surf culture through the story of two brothers, Andy (Myles Pollard) and Jimmy (Xavier Samuel), starting up a surfboard business in

1970s Margaret River. There's something quintessentially Australian about those images of fibro shacks and panel vans. *Drift* also features some great surfing, with real close-ups rather than *Gidget*-esque backdrops.

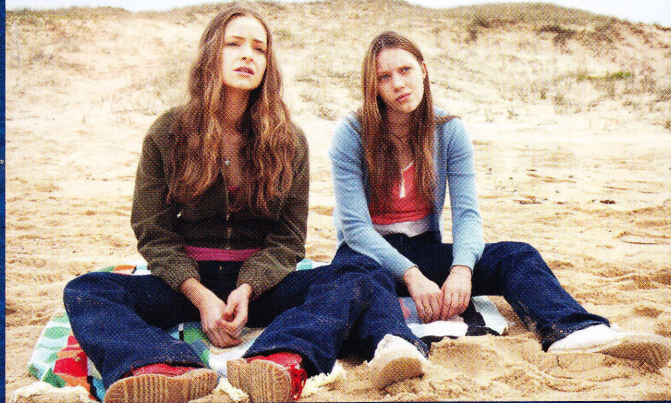
In the 50-odd years between *Gidget* and *Drift*, there have been several memorable surfing-related movies. *Gidget* was the precursor to the 'beach party' genre – *Beach Party* (1963), *Muscle Beach Party* (1964) and the like – a genre that has had a lasting influence on popular culture. These lighthearted romps featured blond hunks and bikini-clad girls aplenty, but not much actual surfing. They were instrumental in promoting the surf lifestyle, however, and by showcasing bands like The Pyramids and Dick Dale and The Del-Tones, they helped popularise surf music.

By the 1970s, surf-themed movies were tackling more serious themes. The 1978 coming-of-age drama *Big Wednesday*, directed by John Milius, depicts three young Malibu men trying to dodge the Vietnam draft (here, as in nearly all surfing films, to be a surfer is to reject conventional social values). One of the leads was a young

DRIFT, 2013

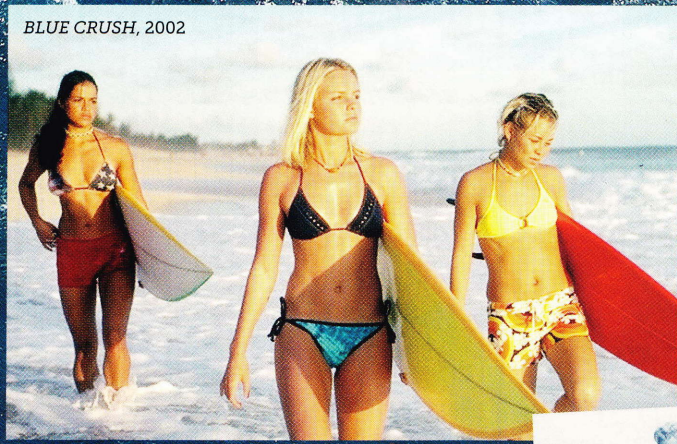


PUBERTY BLUES, 2012

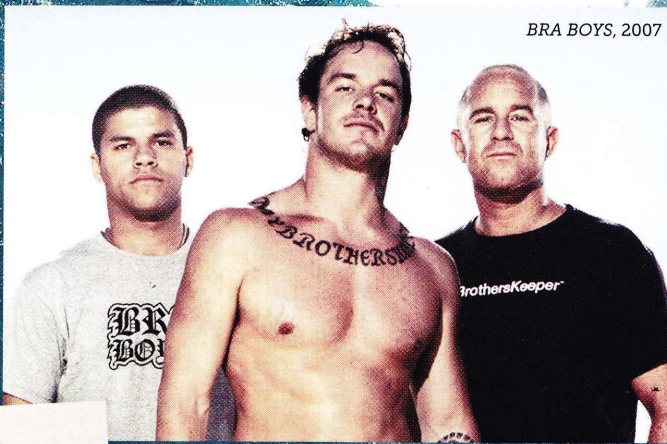


BACKGROUND PHOTOGRAPH FROM DRIFT

BLUE CRUSH, 2002



BRA BOYS, 2007

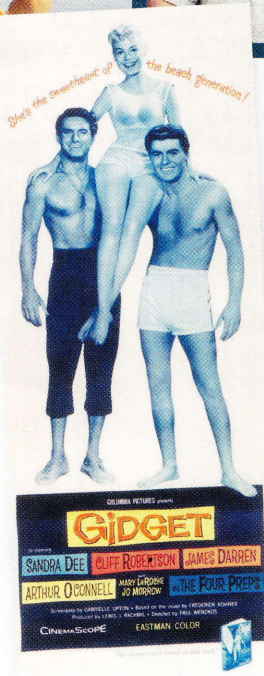


Gary Busey, who would later dust off his Hawaiian shirt to appear alongside Keanu Reeves in the Kathryn Bigelow thriller, *Point Break* (1991). In that film, the gang of surfers are armed robbers rather than the usual stoned dropouts. Hippie philosopher or violent criminal, the Hollywood surfer is frequently portrayed as an adrenaline junkie, and *Point Break* cranks this angle up to the max.

Closer to home, Bruce Beresford's *Puberty Blues* (1981) might be described as the anti-*Gidget*. Like *Gidget*, it began as a book, was turned into a film, and was eventually adapted for television in 2012. Unlike *Gidget*, it paints a pretty grim (if more realistic) picture of teenage beach culture – an aggressively masculine milieu in which, as one character makes clear, “chicks don’t surf!” But not surfing seems to be the least of their problems.

Besides, chicks *do* surf, and have surfed for decades. Although a tad corny and formulaic, John Stockwell's sports-adventure-romance *Blue Crush* (2002), set around Hawaii's famed North Shore, reflects a new breed of confident young female boardriders (Australia's Layne Beachley has a cameo role), and its storyline incorporates the rise of professional surfing.

But the thing about characters and plots is that they get in the way of the surfing. That's why, for my money, the surfing-film genre *par excellence* is the documentary. Indeed, the first surfing movies – most of the surfing movies of the 1950s and early 1960s, in fact – were low-budget doco-style productions, made by and for surfers. And let's face it: most iconic surf films are documentaries. What surf fan doesn't know *The Endless Summer* (1966), directed by Bruce Brown, the king of surf documentary-



GIDGET FILM POSTER, 1959

makers? Ninety-five minutes of spectacular footage, exotic locations and twangy guitar music (courtesy of The Sandals), this classic follows two Californian surfers as they roam the planet in search of the perfect wave. I can still recall watching it, captivated, on Saturday-afternoon TV when I was 13 years old.

Australia, not surprisingly, has produced its share of great surf documentaries, notably Albert Falzon's *Morning of the Earth* (1971) and one of the most successful Australian surfing flicks ever made, David Elfick's *Crystal Voyager* (1975). *Voyager* concludes with a hypnotic 23-minute slowmo sequence, for which surfer-cinematographer George Greenough strapped a camera to his back, so we see all the watery tunnels and curls from his (wide-angle) perspective.

Such films celebrated countercultural ideals – personal freedom, communion with nature and other values integral to the surfer's way of life – but more recent offerings have taken the documentary form in new directions: *Bra Boys* (2007), for example, explores social and racial tensions in the Sydney suburb of Maroubra.

Whether you prefer surf fiction or surf non-fiction, nothing beats the vicarious pleasure of watching people riding huge waves and doing it well. To quote a line from *Drift*: “It's unreal, man.”

by David Cohen

» *Drift is in cinemas 2 May. David Cohen is a Brisbane-based writer. His most recent article for The Big Issue, 'My Word: Surf Life Waiver', was published in Ed#429.*