



WORDS BY BRENDON BOSWORTH
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CRAIG KOLESKY

SHAUN TOMSON

**BUSTIN'
DOWN
THE DOOR**

The extraordinary life and times of
South Africa's surfing revolutionary

He is one of surfing's first professionals, one of our country's greatest wave riders and an international poster boy for the sport in his era, but perhaps Shaun Tomson's pivotal role was to prove that surfing was a pursuit as achievable as soccer, cricket or any other popular sport.

In 1974, while on a university holiday, 19-year-old Tomson – who was already a top seed on the South African amateur circuit and had claimed two of his six Gunston 500 titles – took his futuristic style to Hawaii's hallowed ground, the North Shore. He, his cousin Michael Tomson and a cohort of Australian pioneers, all luminaries in their own right, kick-started a seismic shift that transformed the discipline forever.

'I had this deep-seated belief that we were as good as any other athletes; I was never willing to accept that we should be considered second-class,' says Shaun, considering each of their roles in the genesis of professional surfing. 'We all had something that we brought to it. There was a synergy that just created a much bigger picture than each of us separately. It was this collective energy that made the sport happen.'

'When we got over there in '74/'75, we had to go all out,' says Tomson. 'To make a name for yourself you needed to get notoriety from both your peers and the surfing media. The only way you could do that was by putting your ass on the line and surfing the biggest, most radical waves possible.'

That's exactly what Tomson did. With unrivalled physical tenacity and a soul-consuming passion, Shaun attacked the Hawaiian frontier, challenging spine-snapping waves and continually buckling the boundaries of what was deemed possible on a surfboard. Most agree that Tomson's inventive style was eons ahead of its time. The way he rode the barrel at Pipeline – backhand, far back in the tube, wide-stanced, expertly negotiating the foam ball – is the substance of legend and considered the bedrock of modern barrel-riding. >>>

SURF'S UP: A 53-year-old Shaun Tomson offers a glimpse of what made him IPS World Champion in 1977



LOCALS ONLY

How southern surfers took on Hawaii's best (and nearly got killed for doing so)



Bustin' Down the Door tells the lesser-known story of a tumultuous season in 1976, where Shaun had to buy a shotgun to protect himself against a hoard of pissed off, hulking-up Hawaiians known as the Black Shorts, or Da Hui. The catalyst for their angst? Aussie Rabbit Bartholomew, high on the collective wins of '75 and the concomitant media hype, had penned a vainglorious article entitled 'Bustin' Down the Door', stating explicitly how and why the Southerners were the best surfers in the world. This did not sit well with the Hawaiian guard, many of whom had been paying their dues on the North Shore long before Rabbit and company had sprouted their first underarm hairs.

Rabbit lost a few teeth in an attack that landed him in an emergency ward. He and his Southern peers were banned from surfing on the island. They were continually harassed and issued death threats by goons with elephantine arms and tempers that could flare like diesel on a bush fire.

'We all feared for our lives,' says Shaun without a trace of exaggeration. 'It was a very real fear. There was no police presence in Hawaii; you couldn't phone the cops to help you. The North Shore was like another country governed by its own laws back then.'

Thankfully, after weeks of hiding out in a hotel room on the other side of the island, sneaking in water time, constantly harangued, the foreigners reconciled with the locals by way of a peace treaty mediated by Hawaiian big-wave legend Eddie Aikāu.

1 could definitely bend time.' His voice drops, soft and gravelly, as he discusses his uncanny ability to pilot his way through almost any barreling slab of ocean Oahu cared to throw at him.

'That was a long time ago. I can't do it now, but I could bend that wall, I know I could. It was very special for me, very rare.'

At the close of the '74/'75 season, Tomson won the coveted Hang Ten American Pro, which was held at Sunset Beach in 12 to 15-foot surf. After this crucial achievement, he made the decision to put university on the back burner and focus on becoming a famous surfer, even though at this stage there was no organised world tour or international professional surfing body.

The story of this eminent sojourn is grittily encapsulated in the film, *Bustin' Down the Door*, co-produced by Tomson and based on Aussie surfer Rabbit Bartholomew's book of the same name (see side panel).

A story that does not get mileage in the film, but which Tomson feels strongly about, is the way in which some of the

surfers who've carried the sport forward since the inception of the World Tour have been used as marketing mules by large surf brands, without receiving what Tomson believes is equitable remuneration.

'There is a whole generation of pro surfers who were completely taken advantage of by some of the big brands,' he says. 'That's the one indictment I have of the surf industry. A few shareholders made their hundreds of millions and never equitably compensated the surfers who drove the brands home in the consciences of their consumers.'

Untold tales and indictments aside, one gets the sense that Shaun's path was pre-ordained; he was made to be great. A born athlete and ardent competitor, he admits he surfed 'more than anyone else on the planet' during his 14 years on the World Tour. Disarmingly intelligent, he conveys his thoughts and philosophies without a single superfluous word. He was, and still is, a clean-cut ambassador. He proved that surfers were not all freeloading drop-outs, but consummate professionals who deserved their place in the global arena. As attested by the frequency of emails and phone calls from my mother's book club circle asking about the wellbeing of their teenage pin-up boy, he was also a heartthrob in his day. Most of the book club clique reckon they still wouldn't say no to a quiet bottle of wine on the beach with the 53-year-old.

Growing up under the mentorship of his father, Springbok swimmer Ernie Tomson, Shaun was cut from chivalrous cloth, stained with all the dictums of proper sporting conduct.





SEA DOGS: Rabbit Bartholomew, Mark Richards and Shaun Tomson today

'SURFING HELPS YOU PUT YOUR LIFE IN PERSPECTIVE. IT PUTS THINGS INTO BALANCE. THAT'S THE FIRST LESSON SURFING TEACHES YOU'

'I was lucky to have such a good dad,' he says, his olive-tanned face breaking into a broad smile. 'He taught me a lot about the honour of sport: if you lose, you lose like man. When you win, win like a gentleman.'

'The decision the judge lays down is final. You can cry, you can scream, you can humiliate yourself, it's not going to change anything,' he says. 'You just say well done to the winner and move on to the next thing. Simple. It's something I took with me through my career, through my life and into my businesses.'

'Sport was important, but he taught me to keep it in perspective. Sport was never life and death. The most stoked I ever saw my dad was not when I won the Pipeline Masters in 1975 or when I won six Gunston 500s or the World Title in '77. It was in 1972 when I won the SA champs in Cape Town. I'd been really sick for a week and a half before, and I'd lost 7kg. He told me not to surf, but I did anyway. When I won he came up to me and put his arms around me and cried. It was because I committed – I put my ass on the line and I went for it.'

Commitment. It's one of Shaun's defining characteristics and has informed his approach to surfing, business and life. Throughout his professional career, he was engaged in developing numerous businesses in South Africa and abroad. Some of these grew into successful ventures which he later sold for healthy amounts. Others crashed, causing Shaun to doubt himself and his vision.

The entrepreneur's flagship brand was Instinct clothing, a seminal surf label worn by hipsters from Durban beachfronts to the

streets of California. After building this company with his partners, the Holdens, he sold in it 1990.

During this period he opened two stores in the USA which were successful for a number of years, and also started a shop called Surf Beat in Durban. After 14 years of competing around the globe, Shaun hung up his contest vest and returned to the University of Natal to finish the BComm degree he started when he had just left the army. Once finished, he tried his hand at developing another business in South Africa called Tomson.

'That was very unsuccessful, and I lost a lot of money,' he says without bitterness. 'I made the fundamental error of chasing sales instead of building the brand. I think the surf brands that have been successful have really gone after a core market, with a good product and great marketing. I was impatient and I didn't do it the right way. I'd done it before and I thought I could take some short-cuts.'

Following this downfall, Shaun and his wife relocated to California where he worked for a company called Patagonia. When the contract came to an end, he did a short stint with O'Neill Apparel and helped resurrect the near-bankrupt company. But, for someone accustomed to piloting his own ventures, such forays would never be satisfying. So Shaun left O'Neill and, together with his wife, started Solitude Clothing. It is in this tale where one sees the bitter and the sweet, the cruel and the humane, the poles that have shaped the life and times of Shaun Tomson.

'For a number of years we were successful, but then we nearly went Pearl Harbour,' he reflects. 'We couldn't fund it, the sales got too big. It just got out of control. I remember sitting at my desk on the Friday. Our friends came to help us deconstruct the whole office.

They took everything, but I said they had to leave the company work station.'

'The next day a friend called me from a baseball game. He was wearing one of our shirts and this guy came up to him and said, "Man, I really like your shirt." My friend told him that unfortunately we were closing. The guy said "No way, I love that brand." He and his father were investors. We met on the Sunday, did a handshake deal and moved all our stuff back in on Monday. A few years ago, we sold the company to one of the biggest apparel brands in the US. We still receive royalties.'

The challenges for Shaun Tomson haven't just come in the form of flailing business ventures. Two years ago, his only son Matthew passed away at the tender age of 35. It's something Shaun is still coping with, something he'll always carry with him.

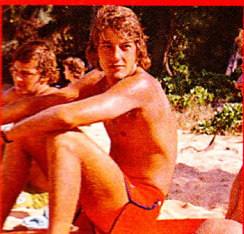
'Surfing is definitely part of the healing process. It's something I can always go back to. It's an anchor, something that can give me some peace and comfort. It's something I've loved that I haven't lost.' He pauses, his usually serene eyes reddening as he grapples with the raw emotions. 'It was a very tough time for me.'

Life has dealt Shaun Tomson some uneven hands, but he's faced them with an equanimity and inner resolve that's quite simply inspirational. To impart what he's learnt along the undulating road, he has written his book, *Surfer's Code*, which provides a philosophical, yet simple, guide to applying what he's gleaned from the ocean to life in general.

'Surfing helps you put your life in perspective,' says the sagacious statesman. 'It gives you a freedom and a release; it re-energises you. It puts things into balance. That's the first lesson surfing teaches you.'

Balance. It's something that Shaun embodies, something many of us strive for, but few ever achieve. □

TOMSON'S JOURNEY



- ▶▶ Born 21 August 1955 in Durban.
- ▶▶ Shaun and his cousin Michael dominate amateur surfing competitions in the late '60s.
- ▶▶ Travels to Hawaii at age 14 to learn about the powerful surf. Witnesses the "Biggest Wave Ever Ridden" by Californian Greg Noll.
- ▶▶ Wins SA champs in Cape Town in 1972.
- ▶▶ By 1975, he and Michael are an integral part of the 'Free Ride' generation in Hawaii. Their success sparks attacks by local surfers until a peace deal was eventually brokered.

- ▶▶ Wins coveted IPS World Championship in 1977.
- ▶▶ Relocates to Santa Barbara, USA, to pursue business interests.
- ▶▶ His son Matthew dies an accidental death on 24 April 2006 in Durban while playing the 'choking game'.
- ▶▶ With the support of family, friends and the global surfing community, the Tomsons continue to push on with life, business and environmental interests.
- ▶▶ Co-produces feature film *Bustin' Down The Door* which premiered in Cape Town this year.