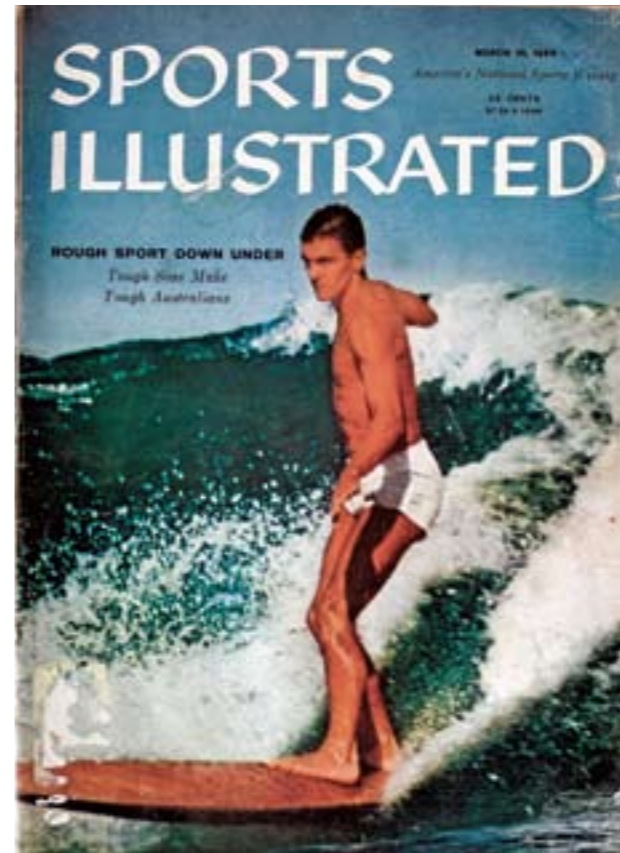


“FIRST TIME WE SAW MALIBUS WE DIDN'T KNOW THEY WERE CALLED MALIBUS.”



Words by Bruce Usher

Late winter of 2005, I received an unexpected phone call from Ross Renwick. We shared an art director/commercial photographer relationship during the '90s, and also the occasional, laconic, Palm Beach surf in the late '80s. He asked me to collaborate on a book about the iconic Sydney red gum! He added that I would have to invest 200 hours of photography to the project, and he would have 20 hours of writing. That was my left-of-field introduction to a large, framed and faded print of a magazine cover, hanging quietly on the wall of his living room. Each visit I was drawn to the Sports Illustrated cover, and its story. I interviewed Ross three times in 2007. He loved giving the short, sharp answer, devoid of many adjectives.

Ross commences the story, “I was working as a junior writer, pretending to be a journo at the Sydney Morning Herald, when I stated surfing. I’d go down to Bilgola Surf Club and take out this wide ski, probably 1953, and then I’d get a board out and start fucking around on that. I was in Avalon Surf Club for a year. It was a really

really built up. I remember Ross, he was one of the Bilgola blokes. I used to sell a lot of boards up at Bilgola – a lot being one or two a season – there was a group up there, and Ross was one of them, a dead-keen surfer.”

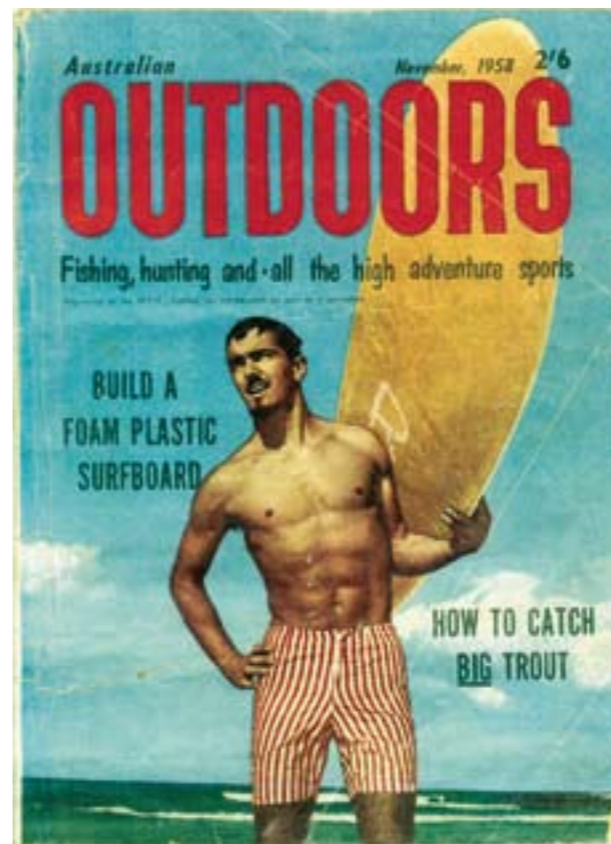
Avalon Surf Club. November, 1956. Ross was there. “First time we saw malibus we didn’t know they were called malibus. There was a surf carnival at Avalon and they (the Yanks) were there. Surf was six to seven. They were on balsa. I had a 16-foot board at the time, some had 18-foot boards.

“I was in Avalon Surf Club, had dislocated my shoulder and wasn’t competing. My arm was strapped, and the doctor said I would never surf again! I took my bandage off and they gave me Greg Noll’s balsa board. I went and surfed ... it was head-high ... really easy.”

Gordon Woods’ memory of the same era. “A bloke came into my workshop at Bondi Junction, and he said, ‘Gus, you have to see these Yanks!’ I said, ‘Where are they now?’ and he said, ‘They’re over at Manly’. The next day we went over, and

A Decade In The Life of Ross Renwick

Writer, surfer, raconteur, artist, ex-journalist and entrepreneur.



LEFT: ROSS RENWICK PORTRAIT BY BRUCE USHER. ABOVE: MAGAZINE COVERS FEATURING ROSS: SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, MARCH 10, 1958, AMERICA'S NATIONAL SPORTS WEEKLY; AND AUSTRALIAN OUTDOORS, NOVEMBER 1958. MAGAZINES COURTESY OF THE MICK MOCK COLLECTION.

dangerous surf club ... there were at least two guys who carried pistols ... killed guys for a job. I was swimming 400 metres in under five minutes at that time, and that was very fast. Then I moved to Bilgola Surf Club. Bilgola has probably the worst surf, in fact I was on a three-foot wave in two inches of water, got smashed and broke both my shoulders simultaneously.

“Started surfing the Bower in '54. Using a 16-footer that was 21" wide. Taking off way behind Surge Rock ... if you didn't get past Surge Rock you were in ghastly trouble, and it happened many times. They were terribly fast waves, and a big crowd was only five people. Six or seven of us guys from Sydney's North Shore rented a one-bedroom house on the hill, overlooking Newport, and we lived there at weekends. About a year later I dislocated my shoulder during a board race in huge surf at a Warriewood carnival, rescued from way out behind the point by Tim Bristow.”

Gordon Woods was making boards from his workshop at Bondi Junction in the mid-'50s, and made his board deliveries up to Newport and North Avalon at six o'clock on Saturday mornings. Gordon recalls, “It was like Noosa then ... heaven ... all these beaches were untouched, Bondi was

everyone was psyched out!

“The Yanks were staying up at the Army Barracks, on North Head, and that was where I collected the balsa malibu I bought from Bob Burnside. Later I met Greg Noll, who said it was half his! But Burnside got the money!”

Midget Farrelly remembers walking down Victoria Street, Manly, and was *shattered* when he saw the Yanks on their balsa boards. He was riding a Woods 14-footer at the time, and shortly after Avalon he got a hollow, 11-foot Wallace. Midget remembers that Tim Bristow won the board paddle race at Avalon that momentous day in 1956.

Ross Renwick knew that Gordon Woods had seen the Yanks' boards, and he went straight to his place and said, “Make me one of those!” That board was the first malibu (plywood) board in Australia.

Gordon recalls, “Ross said, ‘Make some’. So I made six. Ross got one, Bob Armstrong from Freshwater, George Simmer and Peter Rose from Queenscliff, plus Noel White from Torquay. The two other remaining balsa boards, left in Australia by the Yanks, went to Bob Evans, a Speed board, and Peter Clare and Bob Pike shared the other.

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ARTWORK BY TONY EDWARDS FOR BILLY BLUE MAGAZINE (DESIGN SCHOOL AD), PORTRAITS OF PIONEER BOARDMAKER GORDON WOODS (LEFT) AND GRAEME DAVEY (RIGHT), GREAT CONTRIBUTOR TO THE GRAPHIC STYLE OF AUSTRALIAN SURFING. ALL PHOTOS BY BRUCE USHER.



“I’m amazed that a lot of guys who went to the States or Hawaii in the early days, and saw balsa boards with fins on, came back and said nothing ... told nobody! I was stunned! We knew one board was here, Peter Lawford the actor brought one out, but nobody took it seriously, it was like a little, featherweight, toy board.”

A 15-year-old named Bob Head was also at Avalon. “We were in the boat shed, having beers and laughing after the carnival, about 5.30 or 6.00 pm. Next thing there was this deathly hush – this bloke caught a wave, and went straight across the face to the beach. And no-one could believe it! ‘Was that an accident?’ ‘What’s happening?’ ‘Is this how they regularly surf?’

“Next thing, the other bloke is doing it, but going the other way ... and from that point on ... it was unbelievable.

Bob Head said that local carpenter Dave Lyle had a board in the water three days later, and made 500 kit

boards. Four years later, Head and another three lifesavers turned up on the Cornwall beaches with Barry Bennett surfboards. Soon after, Bob started making Friendly Bear boards, and was one of the best surfers in the UK. He and the three other Aussies gave surfing exhibitions at Watergate Bay and Tolcarne Beach, in Newquay. Bob Head and partners started building Bilbo Surfboards in 1965. And on Ross Renwick, Bob added, “Ross was almost as famous in those early days as Tim Bristow ... but for other reasons ...”.

Back then, Ross used to rent a house on Sunrise Hill, at Palm Beach. Called Windyridge, it was one of the first homes in Palm Beach. In the late '50s, a lot of Americans on R 'n' R from Vietnam visited Windyridge, and they would invariably ask Ross if they could borrow some boards. “We all had two or three malibus then, so we could loan the Yanks a board. Maybe 50 guys came over during a period of a few years.”

Another Avalon surfer over the years, Steve Reynolds, remembers being at Newport Beach with his mates, including Mex Sumpter. “Tim Bristow came over and said, ‘There’s someone I want you to meet at the Arms, he likes big waves!’ And that was Ross!

“In those days you travelled a lot more for surfing. There wasn’t the territorial thing about surfing. Returning from Cronulla we, being the Mex, Bob McTavish, Rick Friar and myself, decided to go over to the Oaks at Double Bay. In the beer garden we were able to talk up a few ladies, convinced them to come over and enjoy the northern peninsula’s hospitality, starting with the Newport Pub. Ross was at the Arms, and when he saw them said, ‘You’d better get them down to Windyridge’. So we bundled them down there ... after a while we started to realise the chicks were far more interested in Ross Renwick than us! We ended up getting totally out of it, while the girls

were enjoying their fun with Ross, and both the Matthews brothers. Yeah, he was a chick magnet. Not that we worried too much, because Ross was always pretty good about it. The following day he came down and said, ‘Steve, I didn’t mean to, but with those lovely ladies that you brought last night, I couldn’t help myself.’” (Steve laughs)

“Come on over to Hawaii,” Greg Noll said to Ross, two or three weeks after the Avalon 1956 surfing exhibition. “I went over, and have been back about 10 times. Maybe more. Sunset was fabulous, fantastic. I don’t think anybody knew about Waimea back then in 1956, or early '57. Surfed Makaha several times, first in 1958. A big slingshot of a wave, beautiful. Fortunately we never had it at 25-foot! Got it at 15-foot, pretty scary!

“Normally stayed on the North Shore with Greg Noll, and kept in touch with him for a long time by letter.

“My last year was '63-'64! I was ruined physically by then, my shoulders!”

Artist Tony Edwards, aka Captain Goodvibes, lived in Windyridge 10 years after Ross’ residency, and reminisced, “Windyridge is no ordinary house. Perched high above Palm Beach, enjoying 270° views, and surrounded by acres of bush, it was a house out of a dream ... strange, rundown and wonderful. A broad, lattice balcony wrapped around two sides, with a semi-circular area on the northern side, where everyone gathered. For some reason the balconies were lined with old wardrobes.

“Ross told me this yarn in 1986 ... it occurred some time around 1965.

“Ross was sitting out the front with a mate, when there was a knock on the back door. Sick of the endless parade of uninvited guests, they immediately hid in one of the wardrobes. Having no shame, two young women came through the house to the front

balcony, took some beers from the fridge, sat down to enjoy the view and await the arrival of the residents.

“Ross and friend tossed up whether to come out or not. They stayed, figuring the girls would go soon, and that it would look a bit strange anyway. The girls had another beer. Ross and friend became more uncomfortable. More beer, more discomfort. The girls discussed how they fancied Ross, and drank more beer. After two hours, they left, leaving two sore and sorry men to ponder a lost opportunity. One of the girls was the very young and beautiful Olivia Newton-John.”

Ross surfed the Newport Pool Reefs! “You could get them way out on those big boards. They ran so well, had so much rail (at least 10 foot) in the water. You could get them almost parallel. I didn’t surf there a lot, as the Bower was a lot better. We would often paddle from Avalon down to Newport, or through the reef on to Bungan. Surfed Palm Beach Point and Kiddies Corner as much on 16-footers as malibus.

“HE WAS ALWAYS SITTING IN THIS MASSIVE, BLACK PLASTIC, LEATHER OFFICE CHAIR, FEET UP ON THE DESK, BLOWING SMOKE INTO THE AIR. WE ALWAYS MADE JOKES ABOUT HOW HE OBVIOUSLY COULDN’T WALK, AS WE HAD NEVER SEEN HIM STANDING UP! ROSS CAN STAND UP! IN FACT HE IS ONE OF AUSTRALIA’S ORIGINAL BOARDRIDERS.”

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“The American photographer George Levens was in Australia to photograph the surfing and SLSA culture. He asked a few people whom he should shoot for the boardriding. He came down and asked if I could surf. He had the first underwater camera, made of wood with rubber gloves inside. It seemed well made. He didn't swim well and said, ‘Go straight towards me and turn’, which I did, about 20 times on a crappy little wave. I didn't know where the photo was going to be used. Luckily the Australian Rugby Union team was in Canada, or America, and a few of them who knew me brought back a *Sports Illustrated* magazine, dated 10 March 1958, with the article. Otherwise I never would have known. Cover story was about ‘Tough Australians’, and a good to very good copy of the mag now goes for US\$45.”

Ross also made the cover of *Australian Outdoors* magazine on three occasions. Ross also wrote for the magazine on numerous occasions.

Australian Outdoor, the popular fishing, hunting and all the high adventure sports magazine, was the closest thing to a surfing magazine in the late '50s.

Ross highlights Bilgola as a special place back then. “Bilgola had crap surf, but it was the beach in the '50s ... could be 2000 people on the beach at Bilgola all the time ... 10 on Newport, five on Avalon. That's not true ... but it was the beach for girls!”

Midget Farrelly knew of Ross from his Bilgola days. “Ross drove around with an 18-footer hanging out of his MG. A charismatic, articulate and engaging clubbie who turned into a surfer, Ross stood out in a sea of boofheads.”

Ross surfed the Queenscliff Bombie a few times, on both 16-footers and malibus. First time at the Bombie on a 16-footer he took off on the shoulder. A few times he rode it with Nipper Williams and some others, including Bob Evans. Ross commented that it was a long way out!

He surfed with Midget a lot. “We would travel up and down the coast (Northern Beaches) looking for

waves. There would have been 20 good surfers around then.

“I was out at the Bower once, with the Bilgola surf boat. It was 12-to-15 foot and they weren't on the edge of it, they were right in the middle. They were going straight down, and I went behind them, which was really exciting. I've got behind surfboards before, as it was a good lair thing to do. It's not hard to get behind them on a mal.”

Tony Edwards introduces us to Ross' working life. “Ross is a very perceptive art director, and knows whom to brief for a particular job. A rare gift.

“The Captain never appeared in *Billy Blue Magazine*, wrong demographic, affluent North Shore, etc, but I did some artwork for Billy Blue Design School. As I recall, Ross came up with the idea and did a sketch of what he was after. I may have contributed the burning Alan Bond blimp, and the bomb in the deck chair, but the rest is Ross.

“He would design an ad with a particular artist in mind, and he was usually spot on. Like I said, there were very few art directors with that knack.”

Graeme Davey has been involved in the surf media business for a long time. He started back in 1977, as an art director for Golden Breed, then for the Pepsi Pro Junior. But predominately he's known for his collaborations with Albert Falzon and Jack McCoy. The result of that is at least 15 videos ... writing, producing, directing second units, and post-production. Plus voices, music and animation.

Better known as “Gravey”, he met Ross back in 1973, when they were working in advertising.

“He was always sitting in this massive, black plastic, leather office chair, feet up on the desk, blowing smoke into the air. We always made jokes about how he obviously couldn't walk, as we had never seen him standing up!

“Ross can stand up! In fact he is one of Australia's original boardriders. He's spun yarns of double-overhead Dobroyd Point, and Sow 'n' Pigs with ferries nearly capsizing. Byron Bay, way before Cooper and Greenough;

he was there when Midget donned his first crown at Manly; and can tell you the real truth from there to *Nat's Nat and That's That!* Palmy in the '50s! I've seen that photo; it's etched into some wall of my memory, like Da Cat at Malibu. They are all there on the steps on the Palmy shower block, maybe 10 or more, the ‘locals’, lined up and stoked. They all look super-straight, all but one, the guy on the end. He's got the vibe. He's the cat in the Wayfarers, cool, kick-back and charismatic. Yep! It's Rossco! More cool than Mr Whippy. More style than Dora himself!”

Ross on the harbour waves. “We surfed Sow and Pigs Rocks, inside South Head, in Sydney Harbour. Paddled out on malibu boards from Clifton Gardens, sometime before 1960. It's in an almost straight line between Camp Cove, inside South Head, and Obelisk Beach, on Middle Head. It was 12-foot-plus ... big! Not a great wave, and mostly a right.

“Once we surfed Clifton Gardens for three days. All the netting had been washed away, and it was 10 foot, going for a mile into the harbour. Dobroyd Point was not a very hard wave ... a bit of a scary take-off though.

“Those surfs don't seem to be coming up any more. There was a time, when I was starting, when we had a period of 10 years of very big surf. It might have been 1956 to 1966! Seemed to be lots and lots of big surf. I've seen the German Bank (Long Reef's outer reef) break, and the lip took seven seconds to hit the bottom. That's a long time, like it's in slow motion ... it was a very scary spot compared to now.

“Knees went on me about 15 years ago. Dislocated one of my shoulders 300 times, and the other 50. I'd sneeze and it would come out!”

But we let Gravey have the last word. “All that Ross was, he still is today. I see him at the point early, checking the waves, the wind and the tide. Even though his knees don't surf no more, his heart shines like the stars on the morning sea. And if you make the effort to say, ‘How ya goin' Ross?’ he'll invite you for a coffee, some place in the sun, and fill your head with possibilities of positive inspiration.” ●

“MORE COOL THAN MR WHIPPY. MORE STYLE THAN DORA HIMSELF!”

Footnote: In 1998, Ross Renwick was voted by *Adnews* magazine as one of the 12 legends of Australian design. He was co-founder of *Billy Blue*, and before that creative director for over 20 years. Chairman of both *Billy Blue Creative* and *Billy Blue School of Graphic Arts*. His design work from the past 40 years has been acclaimed and published in *Graphis* magazines (Europe), *Graphis Annuals* (Europe), *Tokyo Art Directors Annuals*, *The Art Directors Club of New York*, *Communication Arts* (USA), *UK Design* (Europe), *First Asian Graphic Art Biennale* (Teheran), *AGDA Annuals* (Aust. Graphic Design Association). Ross has won 10 consecutive *AWARD Annuals* (Australian Writers and Art Directors), and featured in many other national and international publications.



EXAMPLES OF ROSS RENWICK'S WORK, AS PRESENTED IN VARIOUS BOOKS. PHOTOGRAPHY: BRUCE USHER