

Jack on wave with his 10-kilogram Milliken high-speed movie camera in its distinctive red marine housing.



Jack McCoy

A Tale Of Two Technologies... And A Few Other Life Lessons.

Award-winning surfing cinematographer Jack McCoy combines a WW2-vintage bomb-aimer's film camera with the latest solid-state technology HDV camcorder for his productions. Interview by fellow surfing nut Bruce Usher.

I first met Jack McCoy in about 1973... I had just finished my flirtation with Bolex movie cameras, 16mm film and Miller tripods. And, in a partnership with two friends, gave birth to a surf movie called *A Winter's Tale*.

Jack McCoy was showing the Californian filmmaker McGillvery Freeman's film, *Five Summer Stories*, throughout Australia and we often shared advertising space in *Tracks* magazine. Thirty-four years later, a still lanky – actually 194 cm tall, McCoy

is a master of the moving surf story. He injects his burning passion for the story with lashings of his trademark super slow-motion cinematography, both above and below the waves. It's very much a symphony of art and technology.

All of it is held together by his fitness – *serious* fitness – and his 'gift of the gab'. Jack is a showman. He comes from a media family and understands the value of a personal connection. When touring his Surf Film Festival, Jack personally introduces his films.

Jack isn't a photographer – he briefly tinkered with 35mm still cameras before discovering a passion for the moving picture and the movie theatre – but his vision is no less creative or, indeed, finely-tuned to his audience.

Blue Horizon – his 2004 feature film – picked up an award for Best Reportage Documentary at the Sports Movies and Television International Festival, winning from a field of entries from over 90 countries. Jack has recently moved from a tape-based



"I was shooting anywhere from 100 to 200 frames a second with the Millikens [the normal movie frame rate is 24 fps] and that plays it back eight times slower than normal. Because it happens so quickly, the shutter makes beautifully sharp pictures.

Capturing The Moment

"When I started working with Billabong in the early '90s I got my first Hi-8 camera [the Bolex had no sound] and that opened up the opportunity to capture some audio and off-the-cuff things that were happening which would enhance my story lines.

"There's nothing better than hearing what a person talks like or what they're thinking and with *Blue Horizon* I pretty much used it for that. Like when Andy Irons [who won World Titles in 2002, '03 and '04] lost a heat in Tahiti I was right there, and I could say, 'How do you feel Andy?' And he replied, 'How do you think I feel? You just asked me how I lost the heat, you know'.

"So it's emotion and capturing the moment with audio... and that's pretty much what I try to use the video cameras for. But with film you need a sound recordist and a whole bunch more gear. And it has to be set up next to you, and you can't keep rolling film like tape.

"The whole thing that got me into this business was the Californian surf film maker of *The Endless Summer* fame, Bruce Brown. He came to my high school auditorium and showed his surf movie. My Dad took me to the show, Bruce introduced the movie and then, at half time, he had door prizes and at the end of the show he would talk to you.

People would sit around and listen to his stories and I just thought 'This guy is so cool'.

"One day I was lying around in the shore break of my local beach - which is Kailua on the Hawaiian island of Oahu - on one of the rare days when it was OK.

"A wave came over me and, for the first time I looked inside the wave and I did it again. I was so amazed at what I had seen and I went straight home to tell my Mum. I figured that if I could take a picture in there - to show what it was really like - maybe she would understand why I was so ga-ga about the whole thing... the water and surfing. After Bruce Brown inspired me, I went to every surf movie I could. A couple of years later he gave me the job of being the poster gremmie in my area. I would put them up and after the show I would collect them, take them to school and sell them for 25 cents each and buy extra lunch.

Film Festival

"In August 2000 after Laird Hamilton rode that amazing wave in Teahupo'o, Tahiti, that broke the sound barrier for what could be done in tow surfing, he and I made a little film about it. I wanted to share that movie with people on the big screen in the way I used to do it in the '70s and '80s - take the film around to theatres and let people look at it larger-than-life.

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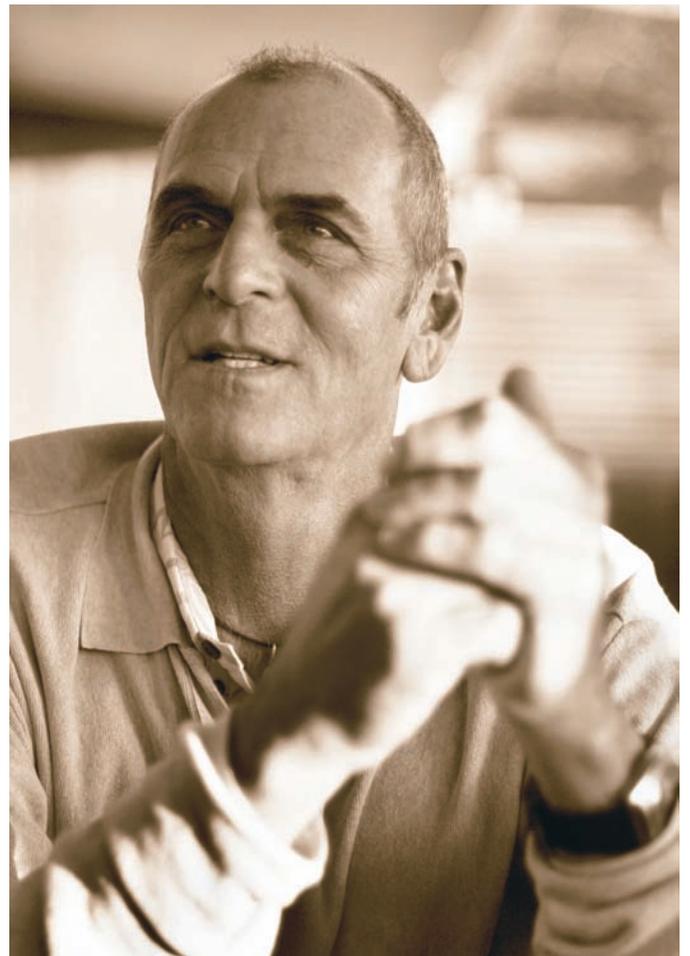
"Around this time I thought it would be wonderful to run a little competition to encourage people to make their own short films. Because technology is advancing so quickly, everybody has video cameras, laptops or a computer and every computer has a little editing system. Everybody is making their own movies. The winner would be shown in our surf film festival as we go around the world.

"We approached Panasonic with the idea and they loved it and we ran what was called 'Surf Shorts'. These films had to be no more than six minutes long, and we would get 80 to a 100 entries. The winner became the curtain raiser of our film festival.

"I'm not one of those people that get stuck in the mud with technology. I embrace whatever is coming out if I can use it. I'd always been a Sony guy, a diehard... once they came out with the Walkman I was with them for the rest of my life. I used Sony cameras pretty much exclusively too, so when I started working with Panasonic it was a big emotional decision to try something new and go with another company. But I kept an open mind and started using their products. They were so advanced with video technologies, their cameras were really incredible and allowed me to capture the things that I wanted to do. For instance, the HD camcorder I use now has a 13x optical zoom that is fantastic for

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Portrait of Jack McCoy by Bruce Usher.



broadcast camera to the new Panasonic P2 HD solid-state memory card technology and is currently in the pre-production stage of his 25th film on surfing. Yep, 25 of them.

"For an old film guy," Jack says. "Learning these new digital video workflows has been a very big curve, but I like a bit of a challenge. Five years ago, on *Blue Horizon* - my last big feature film - I used about 80 percent film 20 percent videotape. We obviously used a lot of tape from historical footage and different surfing contests. I was using two cameras for that production. One was the trusty old spring-wound Bolex which is a truly reliable workhorse. The original surf movie Betsy.

"We all started making our films back then watching the guys before us - Bud Browne, Bruce Brown and Val Valentine. John Severson and Greg Noll. They all used the Bolex. Stick a fixed [focal length] lens or a zoom on the front and the pictures were amazing and gave a great film look. I used that as my main land camera from the first surf movie I made in 1975, right up to 2002. The water cameras I use are Millikens, built in 1941 and 1945. These were very reliable, tough-as-nails, cast-iron cameras weighing 12 kilograms, and they were set in the bomb bay doors to film bombs dropping or for reconnaissance. They shot at very high speed and the mechanism is still, in principal, one of the finest you can get in its field. Even today, it's incomparable.



Camera photographs by Bruce Usher, copyright 2008.

surfing... and I can put a doubler on it and I'm able to pull in a surfer shooting from the beach.

"With *Free As A Dog* [made after *Blue Horizon*] I shot as much as 60 percent on video and in post-production I was able to treat the footage so it didn't look so hard-edged and more film-like. Then I read about Panasonic's new P2 HD technology which is high definition video combined with solid state storage.

"I had the chance to work with some people who knew these cameras and that helped form my decision

"These Millikens were very reliable, tough-as-nails, cast-iron cameras weighing 12 kilograms and they were set in the bomb bay doors to film bombs dropping or for reconnaissance."

to go into high definition video as the main shooting source for my next production. I'm still using my high-speed film cameras for certain things, mainly in the water because they haven't yet invented a high definition video camera that will shoot 200 fps.

Keeping Fit

"My wife has me going to the gym and on the cross-trainer for about an hour and then I do some stretching and sit in the sauna. I try to paddle or swim at least five days a week.

"If you can paddle you can catch waves when they come. I'll go out and swim up and down the beach with my fins on for an hour or two. I boogie board a lot too, because I often use one as a form of camera platform.

"I really like the perspective of being out of the water. I used to sit in the water and swim with my cameras, but now that I can have a viewfinder on my

camera I like to sit up a bit higher. Boogie boarding keeps my legs and lower body in shape.

"After *Surf Shorts*, Panasonic asked me to become involved with a program called KWN which is short for Kid Witness News. With KWN it was pretty much the same thing as I was doing with *Surf Shorts*. Panasonic gave 80 cameras to 80 schools around the country, plus the editing systems to allow them to make a short film of less than five minutes on any subject.

"Panasonic asked me to become an ambassador to that program so I go out with Shane McLachlan from Shooting Picture and we do an hour-long seminar. Shane covers the technical stuff and I talk about the inspiration of creating the story and the creative ideas. I love it immensely. At this stage of my life, to be able to give back and share is great. OK, I get looked after a bit by Panasonic, but it's really a labour of love.





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“I’d be sitting in that class, swearing at him... hating my father. Thirty-six girls and Jack in the class. All my friends would walk by going, ‘Hey, McCoy! What’s up secretary girl?’ Man, it was heavy, but now I light candles for my father... I can type between 120 to 130 words a minute without thinking.

“Last Saturday I was in the water for five hours at Avalon [on Sydney’s northern beaches]. The surf was pumping and it was gnarly getting out. You had to jump off the swimming pool, get swept out to sea, and then swim across to near the Little Avalon Reef next to the southern headland. Then I had to swim back in to clean some spots on the front of my [lens] port and that took me 45 minutes, then back out again.

“Hours later, tired and attempting to come in against a fast flowing outgoing tide, I got caught in the rip at the south end of Avalon and got taken out level with headlands. No problem, I thought, and I’m just plodding along, slow turtle-like, working against the current. “Then I got caught in the current from the Northern end of the beach that is funnelling out in the middle of the beach. That’s when my legs started cramping up and there were a couple of stages where I’m thinking that I had better raise my hand... But the whole thing about being a waterman is remaining calm, focused and feeling comfortable. It took me like 50 minutes to get in. So I’m a firm believer that swimming and paddling are great exercise. It doesn’t build up bulky muscles... look at me. Look at these skinny little arms, they’re long and lean.”

Jack has moved into high definition video recording with Panasonic’s P2 HD system AG-HVX200 hand-held camcorder (in a marine housing). The P2 HD system employs solid state memory modules which are a big attraction because of their durability.



Other Little Life Lessons

“I grew up on the beach and all I thought of was being on the beach. I didn’t even know I was at school! However, going into 11th grade I had a crush on this beautiful, studious, intelligent girl who ran the student body. I figured that if I became a little bit more involved in the student body, studied and got better grades she might notice me.

“I got into the speech club. My father was in radio and television so it’s obviously in me... and I got involved in original oratory. I wrote a thing about high school drop-outs. I came within inches of winning the State School (Oahu Hawaii) Competition. Beaten by a blind young man who did a speech on ‘America, The Way I See It’. I had no chance! I wasn’t really that competitive, but I was really surprised how far I got. But when I heard this kid’s speech, I voted for him too!

“In my last year of school, my Dad made me take typing. I said, ‘Dad, no boys in their right minds take typing. It’s a job for secretaries’. And my Dad replied, ‘Son, there’s these things called computers coming and they’re all going to be running keyboards. Trust me.’

Adrenalin And Inspiration

He isn’t exaggerating. Jack’s arms are indeed long... in fact, they’re more like oars. He is six-foot-four in the old scale and a powerful, but very relaxed 95 kilos.

Recently, he’s been using a water ski jacket whilst filming in the water and that lifts him out of the water an extra inch to give a better camera angle and also a faster return to the surface after diving under large waves. Going under with all 12 kilos of the high-speed Milliken camera, he has to double up with the water housing tight against his chest so it won’t swing loose and break a leg in the underwater turmoil.

Talking of turmoil, Jack’s raised the bar a few notches with his current feature film project and candidly admits he has probably bitten off more than he can chew. However, as he’s always talking about how “an adrenalin rush will loosen up extra space in the brain”, no doubt these problems will be solved in his next watery workout.

The tentative release date for Jack McCoy’s next surfing film is February 2010.