

# Warrior's Wake

*The Art and Raging Times of Rick Griffin*

by Steve Barilotti

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**There's a real danger in having all your gods listed on your Rolodex, especially** in a cult as young as surfing. Most of the pantheon is still alive, which makes them damnably human, so...vulnerable. A living legend is still quite capable of being overweight, aged, petty, broke, bigoted, drunk—of using terrible grammar or passing gas in your fawning presence. Clay feet are an occupational hazard.

But in fact, my sole encounter with Rick Griffin, the eccentric genius behind Murphy and some of surfing's most provocative and enduring icons, did nothing to enlighten or take away from the mystique that enveloped him. There was no time for the paint to chip. It was terse, uncomfortable and over in seconds.

But he was a bona-fide hero of mine. I actually knew first of Rick Griffin not from Surfer, but from Zap Comix, those brilliantly carnal "head comics" of my confused puberty. But later, as a surfer, I marveled at his masterful poster art for Pacific Vibrations and the classic Five Summer Stories, lingering outside the Granada Theater on those cold nights in Santa Barbara. When I went to work for Surfer some ten years later, I was proud to be associated with him, however tenuously, via the magazine. Here was one of our alumni that had made the big time—crossed over into doing world-acclaimed poster art for legends like Jimi Hendrix and the Grateful Dead—yet still returned sporadically to the magazine to contribute some mind-altering surf art.

This day, however, Rick had returned not to visit the old campus, but to retrieve the original artwork he'd done over 20 years earlier. I recall a lank, rather piratical-looking man in black jeans, calf-length boots and a tight black T-shirt, storming out of the Surfer offices with some drawings under his arm. He walked past me in a grumbling huff—clearly and sincerely pissed-off. Apparently, over the hazy decades, some of his strips from the 60s—Murphy, the

Griffin-Stoner Adventures, and various spot drawings—had simply disappeared into the black archives.

Although I was keen to introduce myself, to tell him how much I dug "Tales from the Tube," (the all-time jam session of surf comics) I didn't feel it right to disturb his flow of righteous anger. More to the point, he was a pretty big guy, and in his current mood I felt he might have let me—yet another waffling magazine minion—have it where I lived. I backed off under his stare. He got into a nondescript van and rumbled away.

As the poet at the memorial said: "It was a raging time to meet Rick Griffin's eyes."

**But now three years later, through some twisted serendipity, I was** travelling up to San Francisco to his wake as the magazine's designated mourner. Rick had been killed days before—his classic Harley Heritage Softail going down at speed when a delivery van unexpectedly turned as he attempted to pass. He went into a coma and died two days later. "He went out like a warrior," one of his riding buddies told me.

So, I was there to cover his wake but I had some unfinished business to tend to. I was still going to meet the man—through his friends, family and associates. And the more I learned about him the more I wished I'd simply stuck out my hand that day and told him how I liked his stuff. He probably would have just laughed in that big biker baritone of his and said: "hey man, that's great...thanks."

At the memorial an eclectic assemblage of groomed bikers, graying coifed hippies, young Deadheads, Born-again yuppies, family and curious tourists were milling around the Cannery courtyard. One bespectacled sixties survivor was standing silent in the back holding up a yarn god's-eye mandala. He told me that it was a "focusing channel," one of the images Rick had borrowed from the Huichole Indians in his travels through mainland Mexico. He made it one night on an inspiration, using one of Rick's drawings as a model.

In the background the music of klezmerim (Sp.) sax, that zany-yet-melancholy Yiddish riff, was snaking through the mourners. The pungent scent of burning white sage, long used by the native Chumash to purge the air of harmful spirits and speed meditative thoughts was drifting in the air. Earlier, Mitchell Holman (Sic-get spelling TK) sang a tune he wrote for Rick, "Celebrate his Parting."

Former rock-promoter Chet Helms, the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia, artist Alton Kelly, and other luminaries from the Haight renaissance, were lined up at the bar to speed Rick's journey.

In sum though, The City couldn't have bought a more beautiful day. The fog stood off at the Golden Gate all morning, not daring to go further, flags, kites and sails popping and whirring through the blue. It was more a scaled-down happening than a wake. Rick might have had a really good time here.

**In the national obits Rick was described as one of the premier poster artists of the S.F. hippie era who had gotten his start drawing cartoons for Surfer Magazine.** In truth, however, the Murphy that most surfers remember—the frogfooted, stoked little gremmie—had been missing in action for nearly 30 years. After a bad stretch in 1964 where he'd lost his job, hit the skids, and attempted suicide, Murphy was retired while Griffin himself stepped forward to go on mad escapades—both in real life and the Griffin-Stoner Adventures. And although in the late sixties a psychdelicized Murphy returned, quickly followed by a born-again version in the seventies, it wasn't really the same Murphy—these incarnations had their own agenda to promote—and it wasn't necessarily surfing.

To most of the world, Rick's work will remembered for his contribution to the counterculture, with the surfing connection limited to those who followed Surfer in the early years. Rick himself was ambivalent about his early work for Surfer, alternately stoked and a bit embarrassed by them. To claim Rick as our artist would be the height of presumption.

Except....

**Richard Alden Griffin was born to Jim and Jackie Griffin on June 18, 1944,** a little over a year before the Enola Gay would drop the Fat Boy on Hiroshima. His father, Jim Griffin, an aircraft engineer at North American, received the news of Rick's birth via telegram while serving in the Navy. Rick grew up in Palos Verdes, among the truck farms and eucalyptus trees and learned to surf at Torrance Beach when he was 12. As a surf-stoked teenager at Rolling Hills High in the late fifties he was one of thousands of kids swept up in the post-Gidget "surfin-craze." A self-taught doodler, he started out copying Mad magazine cartoons and soon developed his own surf characters that he would draw on his friends' T-shirts for

50¢ apiece. Greg Noll, the legendary big-wave domo who ran a shop down in Manhattan Beach, took an interest in the young Griffin's talent and offered him some work.

"You could just see this kid's talent just falling all over the place," recalls Noll. "He was drawing all these bitchen little guys. They would just appear before your eyes. So I made him a deal—do me a price list and I'll make you a board." Rick's professional career began.

Soonafter, Rick met John Severson at a Torrance High screening of "Surf Fever," one of Severson's films, and he tapped the 16-year-old Griffin to contribute a strip to the second issue of "The Surfer," Severson's fledgling new surf magazine. The 27-year-old Severson, who was also an artist, recognized the immense potential Griffin had, and acted as mentor for the young cartoonist.

"Although there was this sort of frantic Don Martin (Mad Magazine) look to his early stuff," says Severson, "he absolutely captured the surf stoke of that era. It was very naive and innocent—everybody was just starting out. In those early years if you thought of an image of the magazine, it was very closely connected to Murphy."

The first strip Rick contributed was called "The Gremmies," in which a crew of surf-stoked neophytes, moving in antic "Peanuts" lockstep, fly to Hawaii, take one horrifying stare at the enormous Sunset shorepound, and scurry back to the Mainland. It was simplistic, somewhat spare and crude, but the sense of relentless and simultaneous motion was already firmly imbedded in his works. Rick's images didn't just jump off the page; they hooted, screamed, screeched, bounced and ricocheted into your lap. In the next issue he isolated one little potbellied grem and called him Murphy. The every surfer was born.

The early Murphy was in many ways a personification of Griffin himself—the hot-dogging adolescent sneaking into the Ranch and dodging marine patrols at Lowers. Through Murphy he was able to indulge wild surf fantasies—of surfing with cavemen, smashing a surf-spy ring, winning the Huntington contest in the best underdog "Rocky" fashion. And although it may be disputed, Rick claimed to have brought the international surfers' battle cry "Cowabunga!" to the surf world via Murphy. The Murph was an instant hit, and became so popular at one point that he even made the cover shot.

But what surfers remember most about Rick's strips are the waves. Exaggerated...distorted...great thundering precipices gone amok. Only a true surfer could have conceived and drawn them. They are the waves of dreams, yet real at the same time, each one offshore-brushed and hollow as a courtyard well.

"The surf stoke in his drawings was incredible, says Steve Pezman, Surfer's publisher since 1971. "He drew waves that you could feel sucking out, the whoosh and awooo!—you could just feel the surfing sensation of those waves—those renditions of perfect, peeling tubes. No one had drawn them with such feeling before. I think it's a testament to Rick that the waves of Bob Peneulas (Wilbur Kookmeyer) and other surf artists are an unabashed tribute to him."

Rick continued as official Surfer staff cartoonist until 1964 when his creative well began to suck sand. He took a leave of absence to clear his head. He was hitchhiking north to San Francisco to catch a freighter to Australia when the car he was in crashed outside of King City, flipped, dislocating an eye and nearly killing Griffin. The accident left facial scars that profoundly altered Rick's classic surfer good looks, his perception of himself, and finally, his art. After his recovery Rick grew a beard, wore an eyepatch and began to cultivate a darker, svengali-like look. Things changed.

On his return to Surfer, Murphy was indefinitely furloughed while Griffin himself, in cartoon persona, took centerstage with the escapades of the Griffin-Stoner adventures. In these preposterous surfaris, written by then-editor Pat McNulty, Rick Griffin and legendary surf-photographer Ron Stoner traveled the globe looking for waves, but invariably got sidetracked into outrageous capers at the local fleshpots. Some examples: Griffin bullfighting in his boxers shorts in Tijuana, jamming with the Beatles in London, using a giant catapult to get to the Pipeline lineup, or causing a riot in Paris by tandem-surfing the Place de la Concorde fountain with a Pigalle (Check Sp.) hooker. Invariably, the duo left behind a long trail of incensed authorities, ruinous expenses and wistful local girls.

But Rick's art had changed radically too. It became more sophisticated and worldly—dense, ornate imagery surrounded by loads of filigree and flowery mandalas. The lettering also took off in unexpected trajectories—compressing, expanding, distorting and growing so intricate as to be almost illegible at times. And the new strips made sly references to Rick's newfound San Francisco influences—The ZigZag man, hookahs, hippies, be-ins, music, bands,

drugs—a move that displeased many of Surfer's conservative advertisers. But this was 1966 and Rick was definitely part of the pharmaceutical vanguard. Over the course of a year the face of surfing began a subtle change from the clean-cut Jantzen boys into shaggy underground wave mystics.

Around this time he also began to play music with a proto-art band called the Jook Savages, a group of artists-musicians Rick had met in 1964 while attending Chouinard Art Institute (now Cal Arts). They made a trip to San Francisco to play in 1966 at the Psychedelic Shop, and although the band disbanded soon after, the poster announcing their arrival was cosmic enough to attract attention to Rick. The next summer he was commissioned to produce a poster for a landmark non-event: the 1967 Human Be-In in Golden Gate Park. This, the first of the famous "happenings" (after Ken Kesey's Acid Tests), featured reading and speeches by such underground notables as Timothy Leary, Jerry Rubin, Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and music from the cream of the San Francisco scene—Jefferson Airplane, (more examples—TK) Rick's poster heralded the burgeoning counterculture that would soon engulf the world. Surrounding the Be-in poster is the proclamation: "PowWow—A gathering of the Tribes: Bring the color gold, bring photos of personal saints and gurus and heroes of the underground, bring children, flowers, flutes, drums, feathers, bands, beads, banners, flags, tangerines, incense, chimes, gongs, cymbals, symbols...joy."

And the tribes of surfing and the heads meshed easily from the start. The counterculture readily embraced surfers because surfing at its core is an earth ritual with an outlaw soul. Surfers didn't have to validate themselves to the enlightened—they were already accepted by their nomadic outsider status.

"Rick, like the rest of us, was on a mission to turn on the world," says Jerry Garcia. "It was like, 'if you like that, you're gonna love this!' I dug Rick's stuff because it related so well to my own psychedelic experiences. And he had this incredible range. When he did the cover for Aoxomoxoa (The Dead's landmark 1969 album) we expected, and got, a very strong central image—a mandala really. But later on, when he did Wake of the Flood a whole other approach, a more painterly style, emerged. It transcended that cartoon look and became fine art. And everything he ever submitted

after to us always nailed it—boom!—like it grew out of the center of the earth. He just got better and better."

After the success of the Be-In poster he did a series of now-classic concert posters commissioned by rock promoters Chet Helms of the Family Dog and Bill Graham of Fillmore fame. It was here that his fascination with heraldry—the use of strong central images evoking war, regeneration and warning—came into full bloom. His art went ballistic as mind-blowing renditions of skulls, eyeballs, Hopi masks, wings, snakes, beetles, embryos, wombs, flames and waves exploded across the canvas. Some classics: A skull-brandishing flying eyeball, stepping out to announce the arrival of Jimi Hendrix at the Fillmore; A multi-tentacled, speaker-mouthed, mustachioed alien slithering through a hatch to hail the Doors landing in Denver; Janis Joplin at Winterland. He became the contemporary of the other San Francisco "head artists"—Alton Kelly, Stanley Mouse, Victor Moscoso and Wes Wilson—and collectively they were known as "The Big Five" of psychedelia. Rick's work in Zap comics during that period is now coveted collectibles.

**When Rick returned to Southern California and Surfer in 1969** to help work on Severson's film opus, Pacific Vibrations (in which Rick appears surfing at the Ranch and painting a Keseyesque magic bus christened "Motorskill"), he also brought back Murphy. In a way. The new Murphy, like Rick himself, had been transformed. The naive little grem was now a Hopi demi-deity, surfing across a landscape of the savage, expanded mind. But the waves, spinning off to flaring infinity, were as throated, dangerous, absolute, and stoking as ever. The strip ended with Murphy babbling a pentangular riddle: "Sator, Arepo, Tenet, Opera, Rotas." Stack the words on top of each other in a certain order and they spell the same words forwards and back, up and down. Supposedly if you figured it out, you'd win a free subscription to Surfer Magazine. It was never divined.

The poster for Pacific Vibrations was originally envisioned by Severson to be a young couple in love looking at the ocean. What he got, after months of pleading and haranguing, was a masterpiece. Subdued and incandescent at the same time, it surges off the page. It's a literal wet dream, a sensual voyage of wave and womb and fertility imagery. The poster was a direct homage to his wife Ida and

the birth of his daughter Adelia, which had occurred while he was painting the piece.

Severson should have known. It was impossible for Rick to separate his art from himself. Whatever Rick was experiencing—the stoke of surfing, drugs, music, a call to Jesus, the wonder at his children's births, metaphysical musings—was always translated directly the vellum.

"Underneath the intense imagery he would always had this broad message he wanted to communicate," says Severson, "and it would hit you right between the eyes." Or as Steve Pezman puts it: "He painted from the heart—he never compromised himself. If it came down to it, he would always compromise the client before he compromised his art."

Although Rick was notorious for being a poor businessman—his integrity concerning his art was irreproachable. "For Rick there was only two types of art...good art and bad art," says Gordon McClelland, Rick's close friend and one-time agent. "He didn't distinguish between commercial and fine art. Rick would put as much time and sweat designing a business-card logo that would make him \$100 as he would doing a major commission piece worth thousands of dollars. Everything he did had to be perfect—his best effort."

But paradoxically, Rick's attitude toward his art after it was finished was very non-proprietary, to the exasperation of friends and family who felt that he was often taken advantage of. "He never believed that people would try to rip him off," says daughter Flaven. "But if they did, his reaction was always: 'Don't worry about it, I can always paint more.'

Rick continued to contribute various pieces to Surfer throughout the seventies, which at one time included a born-again Murphy quoting scripture as he pulled into giant tubes. He also drew the "Mexico" and "Maui" strips, which grew out of his world travels Gordon McClelland (Sp.). But perhaps his best-remembered piece from that period is the poster for Five Summer Stories, depicting the godlike blond surfer (perhaps a matured Murphy?) luring us to unknown coasts with a glowing bar of wax.

In the Eighties on Rick did very little work for Surfer, concentrating on a sublime body of work for the Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa and later for clients such as Aerosmith and the Grateful Dead. But Murphy made one last appearance in 1987. This time a

shadowy towhead pored over tomes of druidic runes, musing on the connection between the Dragon Heresy, Big Wednesday and the new surf spots beginning to appear around the globe. It was strange stuff, dark and not readily grasped. The last panel has Murphy slipping out, head bowed in a battered trenchcoat, to catch the dawn patrol. Again, he had changed. His nose had grown out; he no longer seemed so cute. When pressed for an explanation, Rick simply said, "Murphy's grown up." Supposedly, so had we.

**Rick had a lot of personas, but it would be safe to say that he was** first and last, a surfer. It bookend his life, starting as a shop rat at Greg Noll's shaping room in the late 50's and ending at Mystos, a powerful cold right north of San Francisco in the 90s. There were some dry gaps, some lasting years, but he never stopped calling himself a surfer. For the last few years Rick was living in Petaluma, California, surfing with a new group of friends who knew him not as a underground celebrity, but as just a fun-loving, if bit tilted bear of a guy, who loved big waves, great rumbling bikes, kids, and pizza with tons of shrimp and artichoke hearts on it.

"In a way, he was just like a kid surfing for the first time," says Steve McAlpin, a surfing buddy who was planning a Malibu trek with Rick a week before the crash. "He had this rotten, blown-out wetsuit and this old single-fin pintail with the word "Murphy" on the tail. But he was stoked as hell just to be in the water again. For a big guy he surfed with this very delicate and graceful style, always ending with a big, swooping kickout. He really loved Mystos—the fog, redwoods and mystique of it. He told me about a week before he died that surfing was all he wanted to do."

Larking around North Beach and the City, the site of Rick's ascension into Acid Valhalla, I've come to realize that the genius of his art is that it was at once for the masses and the aficionado. During the Haight's zenith you could have one of Rick's pieces for the trouble of taking it off a nearby telephone pole. Earlier for the price of a Surfer. But you wouldn't know its real value unless you were part of the tribe—one who could understand the significance of the cryptic icons and the enigmatic runes. Yet the music and art of that time is the most viable artifact of that brief, giddy time of enlightenment—vital, elemental stuff now being honored through emulation by the new generation.

But for surfers it gets a bit closer to the bone. Through Rick we learned about a lot more than just surfing: art, the underground, music, foreign culture, religion. And along with little Murph we grew and evolved. The metamorphosis of Griffin's surf art is a set of fascinating roadmarks of where we, as a culture and a tribe, were at and where we heading. But perhaps his most lasting gift to surfers, is that with the little Murph, innocent and eternally stoked, he gave us our first and best face.

Cowabunga, Rick.

Authors note: On Aug 22, the ashes of Rick Griffin were paddled out to the lineup at Mystos by his daughter Flaven and two other close friends. His parents and small group of close friends were in attendance. By all accounts it was a sunny day, a beautiful service. During the entire ceremony, a large hawk of indeterminate species circled close to the mourners, at one point making a flapping pass within arm's length of a group of departing friends. The spot is to be renamed "El Griffo's."