

A person in a dark wetsuit is sitting on a surfboard in the middle of a vast, blue ocean. The person is seen from the back, looking out towards the horizon. The water is a deep, textured blue, and the sky is a lighter, hazy blue. The overall mood is serene yet powerful.

Wiped Out

Big-wave surfing was the world's most dangerous and thrilling sport, until crystal meth nearly sank it

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
DANE PETERSON



By the time Vince Collier pulled his truck out of Santa Cruz and onto California Highway 1, Shawn “Barney” Barron and Darryl “Flea” Virostko could feel the LSD taking hold of their brains. They drove north. To the left, the Pacific Ocean looked cold and gray under a winter sky. Metallica blasted from the stereo, but the mood in the truck was subdued. The four surfers in the car—Collier, Barney, Flea and Zach Acker—had all heard the stories. Underwater caves. Shark-infested waters. A half-mile paddle out to a wave that, this time last year, was better known as an outright danger for fishing boats than as something anyone in their right mind would try to surf. Barney, Flea and Acker were three of the best young surfers from Santa Cruz. Now they headed toward a rite of passage that actually meant something to them: surfing the big waves at Mavericks for the first time.

It was early afternoon, February 1990, when they reached Half Moon Bay. Collier turned the truck off the highway and zigzagged through side streets until he found the small parking

lot at the base of a cliff. The white radar dish of the Pillar Point Air Force Station hovered high above. From the back of the truck, Collier produced a collection of oversized surfboards. He barked orders. Paddle close and keep away from the “bowl,” a cauldron of churning, foamy whitewater that would sit on your chest and hold you under as it dragged you toward an outcropping of jagged, toothy rocks.

From the shore, it was difficult to make out what they were paddling into. But as they drew closer, it began to look less like a wave and more like the entire Pacific heaving upward and flopping over on itself. It was a real monster—20 to 25 feet high, with some sets coming in bigger and faster. They sat on their boards and watched with glassy eyes as waves rolled over into barrels that spat like Yellowstone geysers.

This is crazy, Flea thought.

For a long time they waited, watching the cold, lonely sea fall on itself with a thunderous clamor. Then Flea began to paddle.

“What are you doing?” Collier yelled.

There were no photographers on the cliffs that afternoon, no sales reps from the surfing companies, no contest judges or surf-magazine editors. All those would arrive soon enough on Santa Cruz’s surfing scene—along with money, drugs and stardom. In a few short years, these young surfers from Santa Cruz would become some of the most famous in the sport, forging a reputation as wild men, traveling the world in packs in pursuit of the planet’s biggest waves and filling the pages of surfing magazines with images of suicidal drops off moving mountains of water.

But that afternoon it was just Flea, high on LSD, deciding that he was ready to paddle for the breakers.

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There were surfers in Santa Cruz long before anyone had heard of the sport in southern California. In 1885, three Hawaiian princes rode 100-pound redwood planks near the mouth of the San Lorenzo River in front of a crowd of bemused fishermen and loggers. After the Hawaiians left, the locals kept at it. The waves are almost always good in Santa Cruz. The



HE TOOK THE SURFER OUT INTO THE BAY, WHERE SCHOONERS EMERGED AND DROPPED 150- TO 200-POUND BALES OF THAI WEED.

town sits tucked between the sea and redwood-covered mountains, along a bend of Monterey Bay that enjoys ridable surf no matter which way the wind is blowing. Despite the unforgiving conditions—frigid waters, jagged rocks, plenty of sharks—Santa Cruz is something of a surfer's paradise, as locals won't hesitate to remind you.

It has attracted paradise- and thrill-seekers for centuries. In the 1790s, Spanish Franciscan monks set up a mission in Santa Cruz overlooking the San Lorenzo River; in the 1960s, Ken Kesey staged his first acid-test parties in the town. In 1970, a pharmaceutical salesman from Pennsylvania who had for decades dreamed of moving his large Irish Catholic family to a cliff-side home in Santa Cruz finally did so. When he bought his lot, he took his young son to admire the view.

"That's going to be the view from your bedroom," Vince Collier's dad told him.

By the time he was a teenager, Collier had discovered that the Santa Cruz his dad envisioned as an idyllic childhood setting could actually be a violent arena. In the early 1970s a

string of serial killers earned Santa Cruz the moniker "murder capital of the world." There were stories of parks haunted by massacred Native Americans, of Victorian homes occupied by the ghosts of murdered brides. Perhaps it's the fog or the silence of the redwood forests, but the town has long inspired horror, from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* to the 1987 vampire teen cult classic *The Lost Boys*.

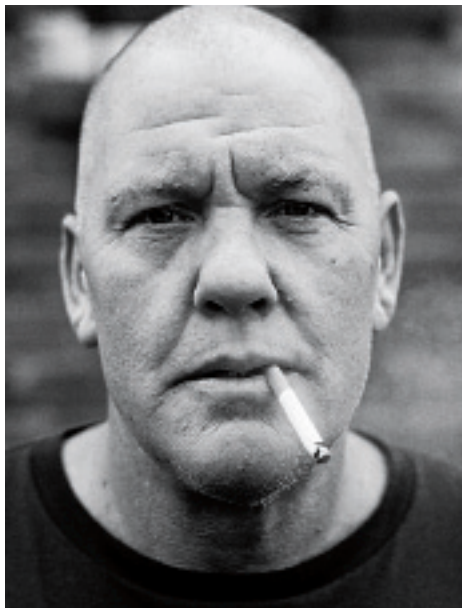
From his bedroom, Collier could see the lighthouse that kept watch over Steamer Lane, a surf spot where locals hunted for waves in packs. Surfing the Lane required following a strict pecking order. Those who stepped out of line often found themselves the victims of violence. One day Collier rode a wave he wasn't supposed to, and an older surfer tore his new wet suit. Collier hated being bullied on his home turf. He retrieved a baseball bat from his garage, and when the surfer came up from the water, Collier hurled the bat at his head, sending the man tumbling back down the cliff.

The bat incident became Santa Cruz lore, marking the moment Vince Collier established himself as the alpha male of Steamer Lane. At

the time, though, Collier was scared to death. He had nearly killed a man and didn't know what kind of retribution that would bring. Collier sought out Joey Thomas, a respected surfer and surfboard shaper who, after arriving in Santa Cruz in the late 1960s, quickly realized he needed to learn martial arts. But Collier was going to need more than a friend with a black belt; if he really wanted protection, Thomas told him, he should go up the mountain to see a man who went by the name of Jeff Ayers.

Ayers was known around town as a biker, someone who operated on the periphery of the scene. The few surfers who knew Ayers describe him as a megalomaniacal charlatan, a chameleon with a closet full of interchangeable costumes—carpenter, fisherman, businessman—that fit his various purposes. He looked like a cross between Jack Lemmon and Jack Nicholson and had charisma that could "direct traffic."

"Everybody feared Ayers," says Anthony Ruffo, a former pro surfer who is a few years younger than Collier. "He was fucking crazy."



Darryl "Flea" Virostko, Vince Collier and Anthony Ruffo, survivors of the Santa Cruz surf scene.



Collier and Thomas went up the hill to meet Ayers at his ranch compound north of Capitola. As they approached, stepping through a cluster of cars and motorcycles, Ayers's dog rushed Collier and bit his leg, drawing blood. Ayers laughed.

"I want you to go up to my house," Ayers said. Collier scowled.

"You better go up there," Collier remembers Thomas telling him. "He's going to help you out."

In Ayers's house, Collier found many things to impress an aggressive teenager's fitful imagination: gym equipment, guns, drugs. Ayers gave Collier marijuana and hash to smoke and sell, and taught him how to fight, shoot guns and clean and assemble weapons blindfolded. In the middle of the night he took the teenage surfer out into the bay, where mysterious schooners emerged from the thick fog, swung their davits out over the deck and dropped 150- to 200-pound bales of Thai weed. Ayers and Collier packed the marijuana into ice chests and covered it with store-bought salmon.

Starting in the 1970s, Santa Cruz's reputation as a sleepy, isolated port with limited Coast Guard activity made it a hotbed for drug smuggling. Locals hid marijuana fields in the redwood forests and opened surf shops to launder their income. Occasionally, marijuana ditched from smugglers' ships would wash ashore like kelp. Collier soon learned that Ayers ran drugs and guns and had friends in Mexican gangs as well as in the California Highway Patrol.

The other surfers at the Lane grew to fear Collier. He could now surf any wave he wanted. With his square, bulky body, Collier wasn't built like a surfer, but he attacked waves like a bull. Along with his unlikely best friend, Richard Schmidt, a quiet and mild-mannered surfer with a distinctive bushy blond mustache, Collier became known as one of the best surfers in Santa Cruz. His first sponsorship came in the form of a suitcase filled with \$30,000 in cash, given to him by the owner of a west-side surf shop that was a front for a marijuana-growing operation. Collier traveled to competitions and eventually made the pro circuit. In Hawaii, Schmidt's smooth style at Sunset Beach and Collier's penchant for beating on Australians who tried to surf their spots endeared the Santa Cruz surfers to the North Shore locals.

Back home, Ayers pulled Collier in deeper, taking him into the woods, where they tied indebted clients to trees and beat and branded them. Ayers would also tie up Collier, pour



Ruffo, a former professional surfer, sold methamphetamine to supplement his sponsorship money.

fish guts over his bare chest while laughing and then cut him loose, sending Collier into a rage. He found out Ayers was slipping him steroids and noticed he collected books about mind control.

"I was like, Fuck, this guy is brainwashing me," Collier says.

Then one of Collier's friends blew his brains out while high on cocaine—the same cocaine Collier sold. It was the final straw. Collier sent Ruffo up the hill with a message: He was done. For the next four years, Collier was sure Ayers was going to kill him. Collier kept a shotgun tucked under the driver's seat of his truck and recoiled every time he heard a motorcycle engine.

"I had guns all over the place," Collier says. "I used to sit in my tub with a cigar and a shotgun. I thought I was Clint Eastwood."

Ayers never came. Time passed. Collier bought a house a few hundred yards from where he'd grown up on the west side of Santa Cruz. He turned the garage into a small shaping room so he could earn money making

surfboards like Joey Thomas. He got married and tried to settle down.

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In the 1980s, long before Santa Cruz became a bedroom community for Silicon Valley millionaires, it was still a hard-nosed town of second- and third-generation immigrant kids, Italian fishing families, Mexican and Filipino migrant workers and surf-obsessed residents. One local surfer, Richard Novak, took the town's rebellious and reckless image and used its name to brand a skateboard company that he co-founded. And yet, even though by the late 1980s "Santa Cruz" had become recognizable all over the world, the town was still considered the boonies by the southern California-centric surfing industry.

Collier lived on Dufour Street, a block of quaint bungalows on postage-stamp-size lots. He spent most of his days surfing a few blocks away at Steamer Lane. But when the waves weren't worth riding, he made surfboards in his garage, where the neighborhood groms (surfer slang for "kids") would pop in.



Ruffo, Virostko and Collier in 2016.

Shawn Barron lived across the street. Everyone called him Barney, like a circus clown, and he fit the role: curly red hair, long pale face, freckles. Down at Steamer Lane, he was always doing flips and acting the fool. He made paintings that looked like bizarre alien dreamscapes and was chatty in a way that girls couldn't seem to get enough of. Sometimes Barney got lost in squirrely, pseudo-philosophic ramblings, the side effect of a manic depressive, bipolar brain that was kept under control with daily doses of lithium.

Darryl "Flea" Virostko lived up the block. He earned his nickname not just because he was small but also because he was tenacious and stubborn—he stuck to waves. "Small dick, big balls" is how his friends described him. Flea's balls could make him act like a real asshole. Once when they were kids, Flea and Barney were skateboarding outside Collier's house and Flea mouthed off to Collier's wife. Collier pinned Flea to the ground, held a lit cigarette to his face and threatened to burn his eyes out. Flea had heavy, serious eyes that flickered with wild hunger and reminded Collier a little of himself.

At the Lane, they called Collier "King." If a surfer stepped out of line, Collier broke the fins off the offender's surfboard or grabbed

his leash while he was on a wave. Sometimes the King had his horde of groms sit on the cliffs and toss rocks at unwitting surfers, shouting, "Valley go home"—a reference to interlopers from San Jose. The law of the Lane could be brutal and unforgiving, but to Santa Cruz's young surfers—many of whom came from modest means and broken homes and whose parents were fighting their own battles with drugs or alcohol—there was a certain comfort to be found in the rituals of tribal rigor.

In 1989, Collier took his wolf pack to Mexico, and they made a scene. They had never seen so many photographers on the beaches. Barney spent much of the trip cavorting with the lensmen—walking on his hands, attempting impossible tricks in the water. By the time they left, someone had snapped an image of Barney's goofy mug—mouth agape, eyes wide with wonder as he passed through the crystalline cascade of a translucent blue 10-foot barrel—that ended up on the cover of the September 1989 issue of *Surfer* magazine.

Barney's cover changed the way the young surfers thought about themselves and their pastime. Flea had started a surfing team with his dad at Santa Cruz High School, but what Barney did had nothing to do with

competition. Barney got on the cover of a surfing magazine by being Barney. They could do that. They could all flip and spin; they had off-the-wall, memorable nicknames. All they needed were the photographers.

"In high school, we figured it out," Flea says. "Once the magazines caught on to what we were doing, they were like, 'Who are these fucking kids?'"

They started earning as much as \$300 a month from sponsorships, which was enough to surf all day and drink all night if they slept on each other's couches and floors. And then, less than two years after Barney scored his first cover, Collier took the boys up the coast to a spot so far off the surfing industry's radar that a Half Moon Bay local named Jeff Clark had managed to ride it alone for 15 years before anyone took notice.

It's difficult to overstate how much Mavericks changed the sport. Its discovery opened a new era of big-wave hunting. Companies offered cash to those who rode the biggest waves of the year. These surfers invaded the popular imagination as daredevils who cheated death by harnessing the power of titanic waves. The gladiatorial stakes of big-wave surfing were cemented in 1994 when Hawaii-based Mark Foo, one of the world's best, died while



“WHEN YOU GOT A MAGAZINE COVER, WE’D CALL IT ‘COVER ACID’—THOSE GOOD, NATURAL ENDORPHINS. METH GIVES YOU THAT FEELING.”

surfing Mavericks for the first time. No one epitomized the sport’s newfound heroics more than Laird Hamilton, a Hawaii-reared, floppy-haired blond who came at the extreme sport with a stoic discipline, a rigorous diet and a herculean sense of purpose.

Then, in 1999, at the first Mavericks competition, Flea showed up with newly bleached, leopard-spotted hair. He took suicidal drops off the sharpest peaks of the day’s biggest waves—and won. To celebrate, the boys rented rooms at the Dream Inn near the Santa Cruz Wharf, carried the furniture to the beach and lit it all on fire. Collier took so much acid he got lost in the hotel for three hours. When the police showed up and discovered it was only local boys celebrating the biggest win in professional surfing, they turned a blind eye.

Seeing Flea surf at Mavericks was enthralling, almost horrifying, like watching an auto accident in slow motion. He didn’t so much harness the power of nature as he seemed to put himself at the mercy of nature’s indifference. Unlike a lot of surfers, Flea doesn’t talk about big waves with transcendent pretension. For him, the thrill was simple. When Mavericks was breaking, Flea would spend hours in the water, suffering brutal wipeouts and asphyxiating hold-downs. As his arms turned to rubber, his mind pleaded to return to shore.

“You’ll surf for three, four hours and you’ll think, Oh my God, I’ve got to get the fuck out of here,” Flea says. “And then you kick out of another wave and think, I want a-fucking-nother one. You’re psyched. You have so much adrenaline. The energy is so high it’s crazy. Adrenaline is the strongest thing in life.”

After Mavericks, Santa Cruz was swimming in sponsorship money. Jason “Ratboy” Collins, another young Santa Cruz surfer, landed a 360-degree spin during a demonstration at the Lane that almost single-handedly introduced aerial tricks to the pro circuit. Santa Cruz surfers traveled the world in packs. They got into brawls in South Africa, raised hell at trade shows in Vegas. Flea won three Mavericks championships in a row. In a 2002 article, *Vanity Fair* dubbed him “the Tommy Lee of surfing.” When asked about his workout routine, Flea told the magazine he “beat off a lot.”

At his height, Flea was raking in \$12,000 a

month, cruising by Steamer Lane in a convertible Chevy Impala with a chain-link steering wheel and hydraulic suspension.

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“When Santa Cruz guys did good,” Anthony Ruffo says, “we all did good.”

By 2000, it felt as though every surfer in Santa Cruz was making a living at the sport. Even the older guys like Ruffo earned enough sponsorship money to get by. But then the surfing industry began to change. Companies stopped throwing as much money around, and almost overnight Ruffo’s sponsorships dried up. He was in his late 30s, and the only thing he had ever done with his life besides surf was work at a bakery—and sell weed. So Ruffo started selling a new drug to make ends meet: methamphetamine.

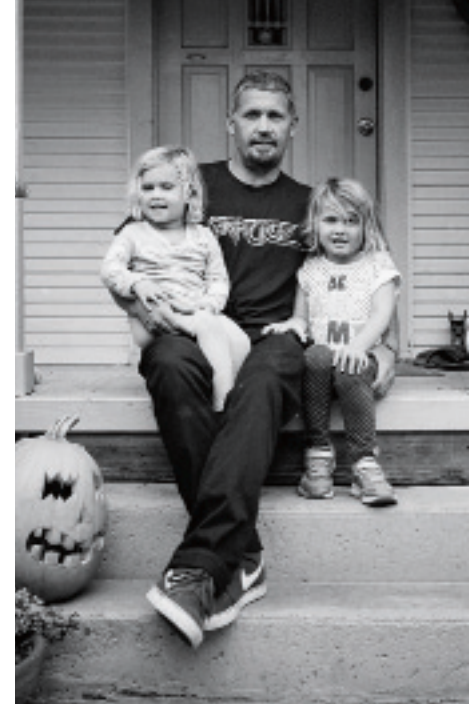
In the mid-2000s meth hit California hard. By 2005 the state had experienced a 100 percent increase in meth-related arrests. Santa Cruz surfers became poster children of the epidemic. Young surfers were afraid to walk by the Lane. When pro surfer Nat Young was growing

up, his mother drove him to the beach rather than risk having him walk the few blocks from the cliffs. It was rumored that meth was being used as a big-wave performance enhancer. More common were stories of strung-out big-wave surfers: a paranoid Peter Mel on the roof of his house, trying to disconnect the telephone wires; Jeff Spencer losing his home and living like a lost boy in the caves by the beach. In 2007, a surfer from Monterey named Peter Davi—who had been surfing another new big-wave spot called Ghost Tree with Ruffo—was found floating facedown in a kelp bed. Davi’s drowning shocked Santa Cruz. He was a family man, not one of the Steamer Lane wild men. Nevertheless, the coroner’s report found meth in his blood.

Ruffo says meth’s appeal was that it offered so much more than a rush. When he smoked meth, he felt good about himself—he felt like he did when he won the 1985 O’Neill Coldwater Classic or when he opened a surf magazine and saw his image frozen on a wave, framed by a crescent of whitewater spray.



“I looked up to him,” Ruffo says of Collier, pictured here. “He didn’t fuck around.”



Left: Virostko and Ruffo in the water. Right: Virostko won three Mavericks championships in a row before meth ended his career. Today, he runs a sports-based rehab program.

“We’d call it ‘winning acid,’ or when you got a cover, we’d call it ‘cover acid’—those good, natural endorphins,” Ruffo says. “What meth does is give you that feeling.”

Perhaps no one was more publicly ravaged by meth than Flea. It got to where he took so many beatings at Mavericks, his friends feared every wave would be his last. At the 2008 Mavericks competition, Flea showed up late for his heat, took two disastrous wipeouts, landed the biggest wave of the day and then disappeared for the remainder of the tournament. Later that same year, exhausted and dehydrated, he fell backward off a cliff at Davenport, north of Santa Cruz. He was airlifted to a hospital in Santa Clara. When he was released, he headed up the coast to find Vince Collier.

Flea’s body was too broken to surf. He didn’t know how long it would be until he could feel Mavericks again. At Collier’s place in northern California, all Flea could do was lie around. Why hadn’t he died when he fell off the cliff? It seemed as though everyone else around him died. His uncle, whom he idolized, had recently passed away. The day he won his first Mavericks competition, his friend died of a brain aneurysm. Another friend died of cancer the following year. When Peter Davi died, Flea had to break the news to Davi’s son. And yet there he was, broken and bruised but not

dead. He could think of a dozen times when he should have been killed. Once, his leash got stuck in the rocky reef at Mavericks and he took wave after wave on the head. That day, it felt like the only way he wouldn’t drown was if he found the strength to do a sit-up with a mountain pressing on his chest. And yet, his leash broke. He didn’t die.

Holed up at Collier’s, all Flea could think about was drinking and smoking meth. When he was finally able to surf again, he didn’t. Instead, he combed the beaches of Santa Cruz and bought cases of spray paint at hardware stores. Flea’s sunken, scabby face haunted the town. He was a pariah, a cautionary tale. His house, once the surf scene’s social center, became a hoarder’s den and a flophouse for meth-heads. Uncashed sponsors’ checks lay buried beneath piles of spray-painted driftwood.

Having watched Flea waste away for more than two years, his family and friends organized an intervention. Richard Schmidt counseled him to go to rehab; Joey Thomas threatened to break his legs if he didn’t. Afterward, Flea purchased two gallons of vodka and a massive bag of meth. Two weeks later, in August 2008, he showed up at Beacon House drug rehab center in Monterey County and blew 0.28 into the Breathalyzer, slightly below the threshold for an alcohol-induced coma.

Since walking into rehab that day, Flea hasn’t taken a single drink or drug. But by the time he got out, he had lost his house, his sponsors and his career. A friend helped him find a janitorial job at an apartment complex over the hill in Silicon Valley. He made coffee each week at his Narcotics Anonymous meetings. Other surfers have survived meth and rebuilt their careers. But now that Flea has sobered up, he feels burned by surfing. He takes responsibility for his addiction, but he also feels the industry turned a blind eye when he was spiraling out of control. When he most needed support, surfing dumped him.

“When they’re using your likeness and making all the money, they’re all for it,” Flea says. “But when I said, ‘Hey, I have a drug problem,’ it wasn’t like, ‘We want to send you to rehab—you’ve done all this for us, and we want you to get help.’ They just went, ‘See you later.’”

In 2012 Flea announced his retirement from big-wave surfing, and in 2014 he opened FleaHab, a sober-living environment that uses surfing and other sports as a way to help kick addiction. Flea started volunteering with Barney at an organization called Operation Surf, which teaches the sport to wounded veterans. He says he identifies with the way the vets talk about combat, about the terrible adrenaline rush you feel when people are trying to kill



you and how hard it is to adjust to life when they're not.

Like Flea, Barney soured on pro surfing. After the sports-apparel company Volcom dropped him from its surf team, Barney could be seen down at the Lane, shouting at another surfer they'd all grown up with, Ken "Skindog" Collins, who worked as a Volcom sales rep. Barney began to focus on his art. He made paintings for all his friends. When Ruffo was convicted of selling meth and sent to jail, Barney painted a tongue-in-cheek portrait of the older surfer behind bars. Anthony Tashnick, a pro surfer who lived with Barney for a while, remembers coming home in the evenings and finding him standing in his garage, painting, still in his wet suit.

On May 5, 2015, Barney collapsed and died in his home on Dufour Street. He was 44. A memorial video produced by Volcom attributes his death to a genetic condition he shared with his grandfather. However, the Santa Cruz County coroner reported that Barney's death was caused by "a rupture in his heart facilitated by methamphetamine use."

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On a rainy Friday morning in April, I meet Flea at FleaHab, situated in a small two-story house in a quiet neighborhood in central Santa Cruz. Most Fridays Flea takes his recovering addicts out surfing, but as the boys emerge for coffee, he encourages them to use the rainy day to work on job applications or run errands.

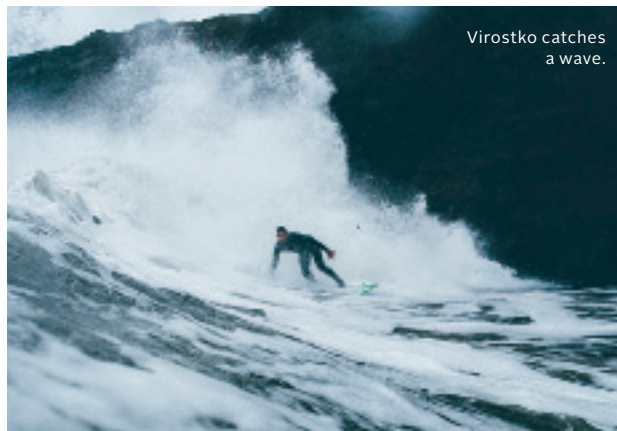
After Barney's death, Flea told a local paper that he wished no one had found out about his friend's drug use. Barney wasn't a heavy user. He had mental-health issues and had been medicated in one form or another his entire life. His mother had recently passed away. Even when drugs are part of the equation, no one can really know what's going on inside another man's head.

"It's a shame the toxicology report outweighs everything," Flea says. "People go, 'He was a drug addict, and he died from drugs.' But you know these people, and they're such good people."

By many accounts, there has never been a person in Santa Cruz quite as beloved as Barney. After his death, hundreds of people showed up at Steamer Lane for a memorial service in the water, more than had paddled

out for Jay Moriarity, the much-loved surfer whose life was commemorated in the film *Chasing Mavericks*. The mayor declared May 5 "Barney Day." During a tribute on a local radio show, friends spoke of his generosity and genuineness and told stories of his wild, inspiring surfing; his clownish, violence-defusing antics; his affection for the kids with cystic fibrosis whom he taught to surf; his unhinged mind, which was both a crutch and a source of his particular artistic genius. And they told the story of Barney the miracle worker. On the

FLEA'S HOUSE, ONCE THE SCENE'S SOCIAL CENTER, BECAME A FLOPHOUSE FOR METH-HEADS.



Virostko catches a wave.

day his friends paddled out at Stockton Avenue to spread Barney's ashes in the ocean, they found marijuana buds floating in the breakers.

"We called it Barney's weed," Ruffo says. "Barney did it."

On the one-year anniversary of Barney's death, the old crew is gathered at Steamer Lane. *Trophy Man*, a sculpture Barney made by stringing his surfing trophies together in the shape of a humanoid, sits on the grass by the parking lot. The barbecues are out. Flea chats with Ratboy while sipping a non-alcoholic beer.

Ruffo is in his standard out-of-water garb: boardshorts, flat-brimmed ball cap, wrap-around sunglasses and a tank top that reveals a toned, tanned body and tattoos—an homage to the Hawaiian princes who first surfed Santa Cruz on his back, the name "Peter Davi" written in script across his forearm. He says this is the real Santa Cruz, the community, the sense of brotherhood, the fact that all these guys grew up together, climbed mountains together, fell down together, and yet they're still here for each other. The drugs, the wild stories, the deaths—sure, that all happened. But Santa Cruz has always been a crazy place, Ruffo says, going back to the days when Spanish soldiers lassoed grizzlies in the mountains and dragged them back to town to fight their strongest bulls.

"That spirit hangs around," he says.

I ask Ruffo what happened to Jeff Ayers. He's not sure—he disappeared, was never arrested.

"When I saw him last, a few years ago, he looked like an old man," Ruffo says. "He was a portion of the man he used to be. I was like, 'That's the guy you used to fear?'"

Later, Flea takes us in his truck down the coast to Capitola to pay a visit to Collier. In recent years, Collier's health has been in decline, and a degenerative eye disease is slowly blinding him. But we arrive to find the boisterous, bombastic legend. We talk about Ayers, the early days at the Lane, the brawls with Hawaiians and Australians at Bells Beach. Collier seems to enjoy rehashing the war stories. He says he's working on a memoir. He doesn't get out in the water much anymore; it's difficult with his eyesight. But he still paddles out on occasion, the old blind

King making his way back into the lineup at Steamer Lane. These days, though, he mostly sits on his board, feeling the rise and fall of each passing swell, listening to the shouts of the surfers and the cries of the gulls and seals in the distance.

"People are like, 'Why are you not going?'" Collier says. "And I'm like, 'You know what, man, I've caught a lot of fucking waves. Be glad I'm not taking every wave now, because you wouldn't be out here.'"

Collier roars with laughter and flashes a smile at Flea. ■