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Surf, skate and street-art legend **Craig Stecyk** spawned the "extreme" generation, but these days he's an absentee dad.

BYLINE: By Joe Donnelly

BODY:

Decades ago, Craig R. Stecyk III tagged the walls near his seedy surf spot at Pacific Ocean Park, then a crumbling pier of abandoned rides and amusement parlors straddling the Venice and Santa Monica border. Among the graffiti were the terms POP and DOGTOWN running horizontally and vertically in a cross, a rat's head in the skull's position over crossbones, with the warning, "death to invaders." At first, these markings were little more than youthful insolence, meant to stake territorial claim for his band of surfers and skateboarders, many of whom were recently glorified in the documentary Dogtown and Z-Boys. In the '70s and '80s, though, through enterprises like Jeff Ho's Zephyr Surf Shop, Dogtown Skates and Powell Peralta skateboarding company, these images would become among the first widely disseminated skateboarder graphic art; the first icons of a radical, street-savvy youth culture that reflected the attitudes of Stecyk and his Dogtown peers. Meanwhile, in magazines like Skateboarder and Thrasher, Stecyk's photos and essays about the scofflaw Z-Boys skateboarding team created and spread the Dogtown myth to eager adolescents across the country.

For this, many people credit Stecyk with all but inventing, and at the very least codifying, the modern skateboard ethos. For this, also, he has been called an outlaw and a reprobate. But, to those in the surf and skate communities, he's more often viewed as a groundbreaker, the original skateboard artist -- even a god. Yet, in person, **Craig Stecyk** doesn't look any of those parts. In person, he looks like a walking joke about the contrast between the physical and the metaphysical.

Metaphysically, it could be argued that he's a big-bang theory incarnate, a major player in the decisive events of the past 25 years that have characterized the surf and skate cultures and, as a result, set the stage for how much of the world looks and feels to a large segment of the under-30 crowd -- call them Vin Diesel fans, if you want to look at it that way.

Physically, Stecyk's more demure. He's rangy and bald, with a bearing that might be imposing if he didn't droop like a shirt hung on a hook instead of a hanger. The droopiness may come from the time tumors were removed from his spine, or from when his knee had to be rebuilt, or his shoulder reconstructed. Then there's that face, which suggests Clint Eastwood's sidekick in those movies with the orangutan.

Instead of god or outlaw artist, he looks more like your average joe. Except, maybe, for the smile. It's a Mona Lisa one, inscrutable, slightly bemused. There's something in that smile that says he's a step ahead of you. It's the smile of a guy who can read the ocean. A guy who knows days in advance when a swell is gonna break at the old Malibu Pit, where

the spirit of Miklos Sandor "Da Cat" Dora III still hums in his ear like the sea breeze blowing across the Pacific Coast Highway. It's the smile of a cat that didn't get any milk, but instead drank your beer and smoked your cigarettes and left behind a quick sketch on a napkin for payment. The smile, like the man, confounds friends and strangers alike.

Robert Williams, the famed "lowbrow" artist who's known Stecyk through many of his embodiments, had a typical reaction when he first met him. "I didn't like the guy," recalls Williams. "It took me a long time to understand him because he talks in abstract parables. Then, once he's in the background of your life for long enough, you begin to understand him, and even like him."

Understanding Stecyk is the difficult part, largely because he's so elusive. He likes to stay in the background, a Wizard of Oz behind the curtain. He rarely comes forward to take credit or even cash the check for what he's done. Some say he fears acclaim and others say he's scared of responsibility. Maybe he just likes it that way. Whatever it is, thanks to the popularity of the Dogtown and Z-Boys documentary, the mainstream is getting its first fleeting glimpses of Stecyk as the man who (under the alias John Smythe) first photographed and wrote about Dogtown and the Z-Boys in a hyper-intense style that is still being copied in skateboarding magazines today.

Known as the "Dogtown Chronicles," his photos, articles and essays appeared in Skateboarder magazine from 1975 to 1980 and are often regarded as a print-journalism branch of the punk movement. Long a cult phenomenon and gospel within the skateboarding community, the series eventually caught the eye of Spin writer Greg Beato, who published a nostalgic article about the feats of Tony Alva, Stacy Peralta, Jay Adams and company -- the Z-Boys -- called "The Lords of Dogtown" in 1999. Always eager for fresh "extreme" fodder to feed the kids, Hollywood got interested based on the article, which led to this spring's well-regarded Dogtown and Z-Boys documentary (which Stecyk co-wrote with director Stacy Peralta and which is now out on DVD).

The Dogtown phenomenon, billed in the doc as "the birth of the now," and the "birth of the extreme" in the DVD, has since become a cottage industry. Recently, Stecyk protege and renowned punk and rap photographer Glen E. Friedman published Dogtown -- The Legend of the Z-Boys, a photo history of the era that includes a compilation of Stecyk's Dogtown-era writings. There is also a big Hollywood feature film in the works that will put Stecyk and the Dogtown myth on parade for an even larger commercial audience. Fred Durst of Limp Bizkit is slated to direct. Vans shoes, an original Z-Boys sponsor, has reintroduced an entire line of Dogtown shoes, shirts and hats. Everyone from Peralta to Tony Alva to Glen Friedman will tell you none of this would have happened if Stecyk hadn't been there at the beginning to portray the breakthrough energy and attitude of the Z-Boys in his own myth-making way.

Beyond all that, skateboarding, and its spiritual forebear, surfing, has become the language of youth -- shaping stylistic approaches to television (SK8, City Guys, MTV), sports programming (ABC's X-Games, NBC's Gravity Games, the Olympics), movies (xXx, Blue Crush), music and music video (Sublime and Beastie Boys' videos, Warped Tour, Family Values Tour), fashion (X-Large, X-Girl, Stussy, Vans, Gotcha, Alpha Numeric), and marketing (try to find a youth-targeted commercial on TV that doesn't feature Tony Hawk) and, most profoundly, the current art scene. In the art world, skate and surf artists fill hip galleries like Los Angeles' New Image Art and have made their way to as venerable an institution as the Whitney, which recently featured surf and skate artists Margaret Kilgallen and Chris Johanson at its biennial.

From the Dogtown hype, to the X-Games, to MTV's Jackass (a direct descendant of

Stecyk's early skateboarding videos for Powell Peralta) to even the Red Hot Chili Peppers name-checking Dogtown on their new single, the signs that we've been indelibly marked by the hand of **Craig Stecyk** are everywhere.

"His interests became society's interests," says Skip Engblom, a partner in the Zephyr Surf Shop that spawned the Z-Boys in the mid-'70s and the skate team's manager. "It's just that he had the ability to articulate what he was feeling through his artwork, painting, photography and words. He was able to articulate things and create an entire universe."

Some people would jump at the sort of recognition Stecyk seems primed for, but when the spotlight shines on his corner of the stage, he recedes into the shadows. He renounces his role in the making of the Z-Boys documentary and claims to want nothing to do with the Hollywood Dogtown feature. He's in no hurry to explain how this universe came to be, even though he's the likely answer. In fact, he seems pained when asked to comment on his role in the current culture.

"There's nothing worse than someone talking about himself," Stecyk bemoans. "It's absolutely the most boring fucking bunch of shit. Just talk to someone else and whatever they say about me is fine."

OK. Here's someone:

"I was 21, and it was like God walked in the door," says Aaron Rose.

Rose, an artist and curator, is referring to the time back in 1992 when he put together one of the first exhibits to focus on the skateboarder art explosion at his catalytic Alleged Gallery in New York. The show, a precocious demonstration of the talents of a whole generation of visual and conceptual artists, featured artists like Ed Templeton, Barry "Twist" McGee, Chris Johanson and Mike Mills -- who grew up in a street, surf and skate culture shaped by **Craig Stecyk**.

"I think that Craig and the movement he was a part of -- the whole Dogtown phenomenon -- had an incredible effect on this whole generation of artists that I'm a part of. I took art classes my whole life, but the first time a piece of art moved me was seeing the Dogtown cross painted on a wall in Venice," says Rose, currently curating a three-year-long billboard display that will feature some of these same skate artists. "It was like, "Oh, art can be cool, it doesn't have to be boring or unreachable."

This sort of homage turns Stecyk's enigmatic smile into a grimace.

"I mean, you know, uhhhhh," he groans, "let's talk about the triangulation of the back of fucking coupes or something."

The what? Chicken coops?

"No, power transfer and coupes versus, like, open vehicles where there's no struts across the top. Trigonometry or something...three-dimensional models."

This is typical Stecyk. He twists talk about his past into debates about Fords versus Chevys. He turns retrospect questions about his life into historical lectures about his hometown and era. Even as the curtain slowly peels back to reveal the wizard as a man, Stecyk defies easy understanding or critical categorization. He's as broke as ever, bearing a painful divorce, suffering the deaths of many who matter to him, has no permanent address, pays bills with certified checks and stubbornly refuses to cash in on the current

acclaim.

The only explanation he offers: "I didn't choose this life. It chose me."

Forget about the mainline and the fast lane; the edge of the glide is all that is of value. The true skater surveys all that is offered, takes all that is given, goes after the rest and leaves nothing to chance. In a society on hold and a planet on self-destruct, the only safe recourse is an insane approach...We're talking attitude. The ability to deal with a given set of predetermined circumstances and to extract what you want and discard the rest. Skaters by their very nature are urban guerillas; the future foragers of the present working out in a society dictated by principles of the past. The skater makes everyday use of the useless artifacts of the technological burden. The skating urban anarchist employs the handiwork of the government/ corporate structure in a thousand ways the original architects never dreamed of; sidewalks for walking, curbs for parking, streets for driving, pipes for liquids, sewers for refuse, etcetera, have all been reworked into a new social order.

-- John Smythe, a.k.a. **Craig Stecyk**, from the "Dogtown Chronicles," Skateboarder magazine, 1980.

The words are now accepted fact, but when Stecyk wrote the "Dogtown Chronicles" and manifestos like "Skate and Destroy" for Thrasher magazine in 1980, they offered put-upon kids the oldest new way of looking at things in the book, which was basically, "Fuck you! You suck! We're going do things our way!" In the hands of the Z-Boys and the next-generation skaters like Mark Gonzales and Christian Hosoi whom they inspired, that attitude rapidly morphed skateboarding from a tame distraction for surfers caught on a day without waves into a subversive and rebellious lifestyle for kids everywhere. It was the official sport of punk. In retrospect, it's not surprising that **Craig Stecyk** would be the one to sound the rebel yell. He was in the right place at the right time and had the right tools. If he will admit to anything, it's that he's a product of his environment, having come of age in a place and time when the extraordinary was everyday. Consider that he grew up next to a bust of Will Rogers and an attendant plaque that read: "The Main Street of America ends here."

"Just another victim of Manifest Destiny" is how he puts it. He's not kidding about that. Both sides of his family have colorful histories that Stecyk doles out in small, cryptic parcels. Grandparents with whispered IRA links, frontier homesteading, scandalous interracial miscegenation with Native Americans on the western plains, a grandmother who went to the grave thinking the government would eventually give back the land she lent to Teddy Roosevelt for Yellowstone Park -- these oral histories spun his own family's mythology. It's no wonder Stecyk would eventually turn his ear and narrative sense to the landscape of surfer heroes, skateboarding rebels and outlaw artists outside his door.

The Ocean Park neighborhood in south Santa Monica was a lucky place to be born, and 1950 was a good year to be born there. While the East Coast was retiring into a post WWII stratification, a good 300 years of practice under its belt, Southern California was still an unruly adolescent. There was money to be made in defense, aerospace, Hollywood and a thousand offshoots of those industries. On the Santa Monica/ Venice border, life was boho and beat in the purest sense: You didn't have to sweat the rent, and cops and city ordinances were few and far between.

Stecyk didn't have to look far to find transgressive lifestyles. His father was a photo documentarian in the Army Signal Corps during the war. "He was one of the first guys to photograph Hiroshima; the ground was still warm," says Stecyk. Both his parents were artists, too, setting up a ceramic shop in their courtyard. They encouraged young Craig to

experiment with the materials at hand, be they cameras or clay.

For work, his father painted cars at an auto assembly plant and became both a friend and business associate of legendary car chopper George Barris. Stecyk talks about when his dad drove one of the very first '55 Thunderbirds from the assembly line.

"His first impulse was to drive the thing over to George's, which was a couple blocks [from the plant] in Lynwood, and they customized it before day one," says Stecyk. "The attitude was, 'You can't drive this stock thing.' It had a continental kit, different trim, fender extensions."

Before long, Craig was a regular in Barris' shop, apprenticing under the likes of Kenny "Von Dutch" Howard and Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, both of whom fathered the custom car culture craze in the '50s and '60s by reviving the pin-stripping tradition long after manufacturers had ceased putting such fanciful touches on stock cars. The work of Von Dutch and Big Daddy in turn bled into the lowbrow art phenomenon of R. Crumb, Robert Williams and Zap Comix, a style of art that has recently been brought back to prominence in part by Juxtapoz magazine.

"I had access to all of them. I remember the paint, the technique, the materials. I had all that stuff around me. I was aware of it all. I mean later, obviously, I used a lot of it," says Stecyk, who still spends much of his time prowling the desert junkyards of Riverside and San Bernardino counties for parts to use in art projects. "Somewhere in there, there might be the whole idea of maybe deconstruction, or assemblage or something. The whole concept that you could take different elements and put them however you wanted to do and then change it around any time you wanted to. That was just how the people I knew did things."

Stecyk is quick to point out that this accumulation of influences wasn't in the least bit self-conscious. Given his environment, it was merely inevitable.

"It was what you thought America was supposed to be," he says. "Isadora Duncan danced nude down the streets of Santa Monica. C'mon, there was a lot of stuff going on. Robert Benchley [the humorist and one of Dorothy Parker's circle; the guy who, most importantly, said, 'There are two kinds of people in the world, those who believe there are two kinds of people in the world and those who don't'] was drinking at the pier with Stan Laurel. Mae West was down the street. There were honky tonks, full-on carnival red light districts. It was a fun neighborhood. Then you'd have these women in bat costumes."

The women in bat costumes were the nuns who taught him at grade school. They were suspicious of Craig from the start because he came from a mixed Catholic/ Protestant household. Their fears were confirmed when, in art class, the young boy painted a purple barn with a black sky. "All the bells went off. It was a Catholic school," says Stecyk. "There were tests and stuff."

Before long, he was sent for a series of psychiatric evaluations. Fortunately, the psychiatrist was a progressive thinker and thought it was fine that Craig's favorite color was black. He was recommended to a high school program for kindred eccentrics.

"At that point, I think Craig understood art had implications," says Skip Engblom, Stecyk's accomplice in more than a few guerilla art stunts, such as planting a fake bomb on Santa Monica Beach on Independence Day to protest patriotic celebrations at the height of the Vietnam War. "I think he saw that, through art, you could create impact. I think that might be one of the things that sent him on the path."

His environment also determined the type of artist he would become. It was not to be an effete, establishment sort, molded by painting fruit bowls in a Swiss finishing school, even though Stecyk did take a side trip into the formal art world, earning a master's degree in fine arts from Cal State Northridge by 1974. Although his stint in Vietnam is clouded in mystery because of his refusal to discuss it, Stecyk's professor at Northridge, Walter Gabrielson, believes Craig was trying to find "some truth" in formal art after his disillusioning war experience -- which his father's decorated service in WWII may have compelled the young Stecyk to sign up for. Gabrielson, who counts Stecyk as among the handful of "original" students he met during more than two decades of teaching art, says the academic bureaucracy "failed" Stecyk. The budding artist quickly returned to the streets where he had grown up sidestepping clashes between two rival Latino gangs vying for turf in a ghetto section of beach between the jurisdictions of the Santa Monica and L.A. police departments.

Meanwhile, Pacific Ocean Park, developer Abbot Kinney's unlucky dream of a Mediterranean-style resort at the Venice and Santa Monica border, sat crumbling into the sea. North of there, the 10 Freeway was under construction, cutting a swath between north and south, leaving a wake of abandoned buildings and juvenile mischief. The local boys called this area of benign neglect Dogtown.

"For me, it was an endless source of material. You'd go in and rearrange furniture [in abandoned houses] so it looked better. Take out the windows so the air moved better, cut holes in the roofs to change the light. Paint up the walls. There were clubhouses, wardrobes. Pictures were still on the wall," recalls Stecyk. "I would venture about gathering up detritus from block after empty block and add it together, making these walk-in assemblages. I suppose, in that sense, it was empowerment."

It also offered a lesson about progress, and its little-publicized side effect. "When they were building the freeway, it went through the heart of the neighborhood and created a barrier, and people who lived together went to different schools. [We witnessed] the continuity and the social structure torn apart, people moving, houses vacated. What emerged was a DMZ."

The theme of progress and dislocation would stick with Stecyk and pop up frequently in his more personal artwork. But, meantime, he and his friends threw block parties, because the cops rarely ventured into this area. The construction zone offered other possibilities, too. "I started riding skateboards on it," Stecyk recalls. "We'd ride down the off-ramps into the traffic on the 405. The first time, it was accidental. After that you'd do it on purpose."

"All the interesting girls would hang out there because all the interesting guys were there."

In the water around the rubble of Pacific Ocean Park, the scene was equally amplified. A testament to both inspiration and indifference, the pier, jutting as it did for hundreds of yards into the ocean, formed a dangerous but enticing surf break where the local surfers went through their rites of passage. The break became the proving ground for the Zephyr Shop surf team and famous skaters like Peralta, Alva and Adams who became the Z-Boys. They'll tell you being a Z-Boy was great, but you had to cut it at POP first.

Taking cues from the local gangs, Stecyk began tagging his own tribe's turf with graffiti, creating icons and images that would find their way onto the Zephyr Shop surfboards and skateboards and later across the country and eventually into skate culture's lore. The Dogtown cross, the "vato" rat-bones icon, the ominous warning of death to invaders sprayed in a familiar hand on the concrete walls of their local break -- all became marks of

a movement that would wait years to be given its name.

Craig Stecyk was profoundly influenced by his friend and mentor Mickey Dora. This could account for some of his idiosyncrasies, or what friends might call his "obstinacy." Those who know Stecyk have said you have to understand Miklos Sandor Dora III to understand Craig. As a person and as a persona, Dora loomed large along the waterfront and in Stecyk's life. Though 15 years his junior, Stecyk had an almost spiritual connection to Dora, right down to the III at the end of their names. Dora, along with Johnny Fain and Lance Carlson, ruled Malibu Point and were known as the three kings. Dora may or may not have been the best surfer, but he was the most charismatic character. Whether he was mooning judges at the peak moment in a contest (he disdained the idea that surfing grace could be quantified with points) or whether he was hanging out with Hollywood celebrities, dark, mysterious Dora defied the conventional Beach Boys' stereotype of the blond surfing bimbo. Frequently called the surfer of the century, Dora was the James Dean antihero of surfing, the type of guy whose magic everyone wanted to rub up against.

Together, Stecyk and Dora set about shooting holes in the Gidget-glossed surfing image of the early '60s that drove kids in Ohio to cruise around with surfboards strapped to their cars and that also unleashed a flood of kooks on Dora's hallowed Malibu surf breaks. By the late '60s, the friendly surfing fad all but forced Dora from the scene at the height of his powers -- only to see him resurface in stunts and hoaxes put on with Stecyk. For example, after long absences from the public eye, Dora would show up in photo shoots for *Surfer* magazine that set him against a desert background in a wig and fur coat, flashing diamonds or standing in front of Camarillo mental hospital holding a surfboard adorned with swastikas. Dora's refusal to take part in the commercial surfing craze prompted graffiti and bumper stickers around Malibu that said, "Where's Mickey?" or "Free Mickey Dora."

The point is, Dora did his best to perpetuate the image of the surfer as a rebel living outside convention. Stecyk pitched in with a series of articles for *Surfer* magazine in the late '60s that resharpended the radical edge of "the sport of kings" and separated the poseurs from the real deals. The works are now viewed in the surfing culture as important exercises in contrariness and iconoclasm. They drew lines that needed to be drawn: There were kooks, and there were surfers who understood the culture of surfing and the antiestablishment statement it made. The difference had always been known at the Malibu Pit. Articles like Stecyk's satirical "The Cracker Jack Conspiracy" in 1968 would tell the rest of the world.

Perhaps Stecyk's most formidable dissent from the newly scrubbed-clean surfing image was "Malibu: Curse of the Chumash," which appeared in *Surfer* in 1976 under the nome de guerre Carlos Izan.

Done in vignettes, "Chumash" is a dense, 450-year history of the development of Malibu and its surf scene using the area's long-gone original inhabitants as a metaphor. It became an instant classic and inspired many surfer artists, Chris Wilder among them, to reflect their surfing subculture back to the world in a less-sanitized manner than *Gidget* or *Beach Blanket Bingo*. Most notable of these artists, perhaps, was legendary psychedelic-era poster artist Rick Griffin, best known for his work with the Grateful Dead and Jimi Hendrix. Griffin based a painting on "Chumash" that has become a staple of surf-culture exhibits.

"By the mid-'70s, surfing had gotten kind of groovy, and there was much less subversive stuff. That's what made 'Curse of the Chumash' so significant...because in that Jackson Browne world, we got a dose of Lou Reed. It was a really self-critical, subversive look at what had become, at least to the world, a cliché -- and that is Malibu," says Sam George, editor in chief of *Surfer*. "[Craig's] point of view didn't jibe with the direction of 'surfer as

product spokesperson' that the sport was going."

Though Stecyk continues to write for Surfer's Journal, these early contributions helped establish much of the cultural history with which today's surfers paddle out into the water, just as his "Dogtown Chronicles" and his later contributions to Thrasher were among the earliest articulations of a new, aggressive lifestyle oriented around skateboarding. It was all uniquely Los Angeles.

"He helped define the way people here lived and our identity. How [people saw] themselves regardless of whether they skateboarded or not," Aaron Rose says. "Stecyk helped shape a modern understanding of the California dream. It's grittier than the Beach Boys, but it still has that idea of self-determination and freedom and all the things we Americans believe in."

Influential as these early writings were, it was Stecyk's work with the Powell Peralta skateboarding company that truly turned skateboarding into a populist counterculture movement. If the Z-Boys heralded a radical change in skateboarding's action and attitude, Powell Peralta ensured that the change would become a popular phenomenon. For better or for worse, it was during the Bones Brigade era at Powell Peralta that the revolution was sold. Photographer Glen E. Friedman, whose Fuck You Heroes tomes are the textbooks of this movement's genesis, calls the Powell Peralta era "Stecyk's great rock 'n' roll swindle."

By 1980, original Z-Boy and world-champion skater Stacy Peralta had teamed with enigmatic Santa Barbara businessman George Powell to create what became the biggest commercial skateboarding company in history. Peralta wisely brought Stecyk onboard as the creative director. Together, Peralta and Stecyk drew a blueprint for reaching the prized demographic that is still being imitated today. The trick, they realized, was that you didn't try to sell a line of bullshit that young people were far too cynical to buy. In fact, you made fun of the traditional marketing approaches that did just that. Many firsts stemmed from the philosophy. For instance, when Powell Peralta assembled its skate team in 1981, standard procedure had been to print a T-shirt with the team's name on it -- like Zephyr Skateboarding Team -- and then send the boys off to competition. Hopefully, they'd win and attract allegiance. To that end, Powell Peralta corralled a veritable hall of fame of skaters: Tommy Guerrero, Steve Caballero, Lance Mountain and gangly kid named Tony Hawk, among others. From the outset, however, Peralta and Stecyk were determined to be as innovative at presenting the team as its skaters were on their boards. It began with the name.

"I wanted to call it a different thing," recalls Peralta over breakfast on Main Street in Santa Monica, today a tidy and safe version of their old stamping grounds. "Stecyk said, 'Bones Brigade,' and I said, that's perfect." Peralta explains that the idea was to storm contests and the world without calling their team a team because it was more than that.

"It was a lifestyle, that's what it was all about," says Peralta.

Some of the industry standards Powell Peralta established seem obvious only in hindsight. One was adorning the full skateboard deck with edgy graphics, many of which were evolutions of Stecyk's early street art, such as the signature Rat Bones icon.

"Everyone said you couldn't do that because there's a kicktail and you can't bend the silkscreen. We said, 'We think you can,'" Peralta says. "It completely started that graphic trend. Now, [full-length graphics are] standard issue."

Then, there were the T-shirts, adorned with B-17 bombers with Bones Brigade printed in

military lettering, bombs lining the sleeve. "That shirt was such a hit and so disturbing to so many people," recalls Peralta. "Right now it sounds tame. But back then, whenever you put something on a shirt, it was a 'literal read.' [Our imagery] had no reference to skateboarding whatsoever."

At action-sports trade shows, the Powell Peralta booth was a mini-forerunner of Lollapalooza (an event at which Stecyk would later be a guest artist). One year Powell Peralta's booth was a detailed reproduction of a 1950s gas station. The next year it had a full bar with operational slot machines, later it was a vintage pinball arcade, later a tattoo parlor.

Greg Escalante is a partner in Juxtapoz, Culver City's Copro/Nason Gallery and a sometime consultant to Laguna Arts Gallery, venues that are striving to put grassroots subcultures like skating and surfing into a larger cultural context. Over time, he has befriended Stecyk. First, though, as an art major at Cal State Long Beach, he studied him.

"Stecyk went beyond the museums and got it out there with the surfers and the skaters, against their will at first," he says, speaking of the trade shows. "But it was different. It was a stunning, bold thing to me. He took what he had in museums and brought it to the trade shows."

Like many who got sucked into this world, Escalante's biggest charge came from the visceral thrills of the Bones Brigade videos that Stecyk directed and which bore titles such as *The Bones Brigade* and *In Search of Animal Chin*. The best was *Future Primitive*.

"It was a skateboarding movie. At that time, the worst movie I'd ever seen was some skateboard movie by a guy named Hal Jepson, a surf video guy who was making a skating video. It was playing at the Surf Theater in Huntington," recalls Escalante. "So, this video is called *Future Primitive*. I know it's going to be bad, but I just want to know how bad it's going to be. I watch it and right from the beginning, it's good. It's so good it blows my mind. It had high production values, good music, good story and good visuals. It was super-intelligent. I thought, whoever made this movie made an art movie disguised as a skate movie. I ended up watching the video over 35 times."

It's easy to dismiss a piece of trivia like a skateboarding video, but, for many, *Bones Brigade* videos were like punk rock. They were subversive, irreverent and full of manic energy, like the skate movement itself. With the *Bones Brigade* and Powell Peralta in general, the evolution that began with the *Z-Boys* and that took skateboarding from a distraction to a lifestyle to an influential, multimedia creative field became complete. The career arc of former skate punk Spike Jonze demonstrates how it resonates today.

Picking up where Powell Peralta left off, Jonze did his first filming for the Blind skateboarding company, including *Video Days* with skateboarding hero and future artist Mark Gonzales. His videos took the high jinks of the *Bones Brigade* videos to even more deviant levels, including driving a Buick off a cliff in one scene. Like Stecyk and Peralta, Jonze went on to establish his own skate company, *Girl*, in which he's still active, before becoming a music-video director. He's famous for *Beastie Boys* videos, including "Sabotage," "Root Down" and "Sure Shot," which incorporate skateboarding in the footage. These days, of course, Jonze is best known as the co-producer of *Jackass*, the MTV series about the crazy stuff skateboarders do, and as the director of *Being John Malkovich*.

Other artists, like Mike Mills, followed similar paths. Mills went from semi-professional skateboarder to skateboard graphic artist (*X-Girl*) to director music videos featuring skateboarding (*Air's "All I Need"*) to television commercials (*Gap*, *Miller Genuine Draft*)

and, along with Jonze, Levis) that frequently retain the grainy, jump-cut, high-speed, street-level feel of the Bones Brigade movies.

For Larry Reid, a Seattle-based punk impresario and the city's Center for Contemporary Art curator, the Bones Brigade videos were the shots heard 'round the world in a budding counterculture that has only recently become mainstream.

"What Craig was doing was almost transcendent. [He spoke] to America's youth in a language he was inventing in a way, but everyone understood. [It was] just this collective unconscious response to the words, images and attitude in those videos. These people were telling a story, and that story was defining a movement. We're all used to it now from MTV, but this was before," says Reid, who claims Stecyk's work inspired him to open the Craven Image Gallery in Seattle -- an influential underground nightclub, punk rock clubhouse and art gallery. "Craig wasn't just the poet laureate, he was the artistic savant. He was the apostle of the birth of this youth-culture movement that pretty much permeates our [American] culture. It's even finally infiltrating fine art."

Given the importance of emblems in the skateboarding and surfing worlds, it's perhaps not surprising that skateboarding has launched an art movement of major significance. Artist Shepard Fairey, known for pasting his Obey Giant stickers in public places, a stunt that later evolved into billboards and a cult phenomenon, found inspiration as a kid in Skateboarder magazine's early "Dogtown Chronicles," in Thrasher's "Skate and Destroy" and in Stecyk's work with Powell Peralta.

"Whether it was accurate to [Stecyk's] intention or not, the vato rat was the skateboarding version of Kilroy was here. The endurance of this skateboarding iconography is pretty amazing, too, in that it beckons you to look back into the history of it because the context doesn't give away what it's about, necessarily, which is what I love about street art," says Fairey. "I think it goes back to a very primitive urge to not necessarily mark your turf in an aggressive way, but in a way to signify what you're about and also to reach out to other people who are similar. That's what I always loved about skateboarders; they always seem to leave evidence of their existence behind in ways that are sometimes destructive, sometimes creative and sometimes a combination of the two."

The pop culture magazine Tokion recently dedicated an issue to tracing the growth of this art movement, dubbing it "The Disobedients." Although it profiles a diverse lot, there is a clear unifying theme.

"Looking at the issue, they are all skateboarders, except about three out of a group of about 30, and Tokion is not a skateboarding magazine," says Fairey, who's among a mix of artists including Ed Templeton, Margaret Kilgallen, Thomas Campbell, Barry "Twist" McGee, Geoff McFetridge, Mike Mills, Mark Gonzales and Jonze who're making waves in the art world.

"It's not an intentional thing," says Fairey, "it's just who the people are who're affecting popular culture, [who're] starting to be embraced by the fine art world -- but who, before they were being embraced, were doing skateboard graphics, album covers, clothing lines, whatever. The stuff every 17-year-old lives by. This thing is a document of our time."

Tokion's "Disobedients" issue comes with a pullout poster charting the history and family tree of "The Disobedients" with an East-to-West map. **Craig Stecyk's** name is at the top of the map, on the West side, right above Dogtown.

"The thing that's ironic and the thing that sometimes annoys me with the culture is that it's

taken 30 years for people to appreciate Craig," Rose says. "Stecyk should get a 10 percent cut on every ad that's made in America these days, anything by Mike Mills, Spike Jonze or Levis or Adidas. They all go back to him."

For a guy who in his younger days spent a lot of time sneaking into empty pools with scofflaw skateboarders, Stecyk has little tolerance for nonsense. Almost everyone familiar with him describes him as intellectually intimidating. In person, though, there's a melancholy about him. Some friends trace this mood to his recent parting with his longtime partner and wife, artist Lynn Coleman. It's been an unpleasant separation, and, as a result, a good deal of Stecyk's work is tied up in legal proceedings. The break happened a few years ago, after Stecyk had traveled to the Maldives. At sea, he had a bad reaction to medicine for an ear infection. It made him delirious. He passed out and banged his head on the deck.

"I was laying in the sun on the equator for hours, and that's not a good idea," says Stecyk, who suffered severe dehydration. Though he was in rough shape when he got back, he immediately went to San Francisco to work on a show -- Surf Trip -- with Barry McGee. He was exhausted, manic and obsessive. Working didn't help.

"I'm not known for my user-friendliness when I'm focused on doing a show anyway," Stecyk admits.

Though Stecyk's difficult demeanor had long been a joke among friends, this time they were worried about his sanity. Something happened after the Maldives, and a breakup of his marriage followed. It's obvious that the split has taken a toll on him. A friend said he's never seen anyone as sad as Stecyk not kill himself. The friend says it was the death of faith for **Craig**.

Stecyk resists the conclusion, as he does most attempts to characterize him. "I hear all kinds of rumors about what I'm supposedly about. Let's see...I never made it back from 'Nam. I made a killing off a movie, and I live on Malibu Point. I play horses for profit. I am currently committed to a mental hospital. How would anyone know what's true? One man's mania is another man's modus operandi."

Could be. Stecyk's sadness, though, is the kind that evokes empathy, for sure, but can also evoke humor and art. It may have been there for a long time before the Maldives, or the divorce. It could also be fallout from people close to him -- Don James, Ed Roth, Mickey Dora and Margaret Kilgallen, among others -- dying lately.

The sadness comes through when he's asked about his life and career, which he claims not to think about at all. Then he's asked what he does think about, and he says, "Well, today I'm thinking that 18 people who I've been connected with have died in the last year, and this morning they called me and told me that a friend of mine has gone into pneumonia and he's unconscious and it's a matter of seconds, a matter of hours, a matter of days. I mean that's 19 that I know about.

"I try to see good in it," he says. "There's something good in it somewhere. That's what I try to find."

The reason Stecyk has trouble talking about himself and his legacy could be that such conversation seems arrogant in the face of all this encroaching mortality. "I don't know if you have any control over what you do," he says. "It's pretty egocentric to assume that...you are responsible for anything. There are a lot of circumstances, varying forces that are brought to bear for anything to come to pass."

Stecyk drives an old Chevy El Camino that was given to him by a friend. He claims to have practically no money. When he's in town, he crashes at either his family's house in Ocean Park or his girlfriend's pad in Venice. Otherwise, he goes wherever his artistic pursuits take him, living out of motels in the desert where he scours junkyards for inspiration, staying down at Laguna Beach where he curates the current Surf Culture exhibit at Laguna Art Museum (more on that below). When asked how he makes a living, he jokes, "Not very well." He steadfastly clings to a gypsy life in these times of direct deposits and online bill paying. Opportunities to cash in on his commodity, like the current fascination with all things Dogtown, do not appeal to him. In fact, Stecyk has distanced himself from most of the hoopla surrounding Dogtown and Z-Boys. So much so that he claims not to have seen the documentary since its award-winning debut at the 2001 Sundance film festival. He's also said no thanks to participating in the forthcoming, Fred Durst-directed Hollywood Dogtown feature, for which Stacy Peralta is writing the screenplay. Stecyk's involvement has been limited to signing away his life's rights. He says doing so bars him from discussing his past in detail, particularly the Dogtown era, something he's glad not to do.

"In that sense it was the best deal I ever made," he says. "So all of it never happened. It was a life I never led."

His disdain for Dogtown nostalgia is based on his insistence that his contributions to the skate culture were coincidental. "I was sort of an incidental documentarian. The skateboarding thing I got involved in because Tony Alva asked me," he says, perhaps apocryphally. "I had shot pictures of them all, and I was kind of doing it, but I didn't have any interest in the magazines or any of that stuff because it didn't have anything to do with my life."

It's as if Stecyk were leading two lives: One under the aliases of John Smythe and Carlos Izan, who documented and popularized the lifestyles of radical skaters and surfers; and another as **Craig Stecyk**, conceptual artist, a man focused on creating a thematic body of work that is as far removed from the current, highly commercialized skate culture as graffiti is from Monet.

For example, in the early '70s, long before the Z-Boys surf or skate teams, Stecyk went about the desultory streets of his neighborhood dressing them up with large aluminum poles he planted in the ground that were marked with fluorescent icons. They were called Streetrods. At the same time, he bolted cast-bronze plaques bearing his trademark Calavera mask on walls across the city. Both projects were anonymous public offerings that hinted at secret worlds beyond the radar of mainstream society. They were symbolic of the dissident nature of his crew, whose members were executing guerrilla art protests like Bomb Plant, in which he and Engblom buried that surplus bomb painted with Russian insignia on the beach. When high tide revealed it to the July 4, 1968, beach crowd, people fleeing the sand saw a man dressed in bomb-squad gear rushing to carry the shell safely away. That was Stecyk.

His interest in using public spaces to make loaded statements with art grew more pointed with Road Rash. For this early-'80s project, he drove across the country with a casting furnace in the back of his truck gutting every dead animal he found, casting them and then sewing their hides back over a bronze caste. He then bolted the animals to the ground where they had been killed -- symbols, in his mind, of man's rapacious drive for a better life somewhere over the next horizon, or with the next invention.

Perhaps those themes were no better illustrated than in 1989's Northwest Passage and 1990's Frontera. The former was an installation Stecyk did at Ruth Bloom's much-missed

gallery in Santa Monica, a thriving venue for underground artists before Hugh Hefner took it over in the early '90s for Playboy Studios West. The intention of Northwest Passage was to illustrate the penalty exacted on life and the environment by sheer wantonness. The story was told through a painstaking assemblage of Day-Glo cast ducks, a shotgun rotating in a turret, a decaying marsh and pictures of famous duck hunters through the years: Harry Truman, Ivan the Terrible, Hitler. Typically, it was a critical success and a commercial bust.

"I thought there was something so unique about what he was doing, and we ended up doing two or three large installation exhibitions. His work was never easy work to sell," Bloom says, laughing. "He's definitely one of those people who could use a MacArthur genius grant for his work."

Frontera also appeared in Bloom's gallery. For it, Stecyk went to a spot on the U.S./Mexico border and built a shack made from effluvia such as license plates discarded in the crossings. The artist inhabited the shack on and off for 18 months, documenting things with the trash left behind in the desert outside the doors of his art-piece/living space. Later, he assembled this experience into a montage that told the desperate stories of illegal immigrants.

"It was absolutely amazing," recalls Judy Spence, a renowned art collector and local psychiatrist. "There were four different border stories and each one broke your heart more than the one before."

An experiment is under way at the Laguna Art Museum that attempts to resolve the conflict between the lowbrow identity that cultural institutions typically assign to the beach culture -- which Stecyk represents (whether he wants to or not) -- and Stecyk's own conceptual art projects/ambitious journalistic endeavors. It's called Surf Culture: The Art History of Surfing, and it's a summation of the decade that Stecyk, museum director Bolton Colburn and others have spent discussing how beach culture has come to symbolize the California dream. With Stecyk's Papa Moana exhibit in 1989, Kustom Kulture in 1993 and now Surf Culture, the collaborators' point is that this beach culture-inspired California dream is now an integral part of the youth-and-freedom-loving American psyche. "Surf Culture is about getting a sense of what this culture really is," says Colburn. "The idea that surfing has been...an icon that represents the idea that somehow you have pleasure in your life now. You know, you don't have to work your entire life and die and go to heaven to have pleasure -- you can have pleasure in your lifestyle and at work. That's what surfing has come to represent."

Papa moana is a Hawaiian phrase that means "ocean board." The Papa Moana show used surfing to explore the impact of the mainland's cultural imperialism. For instance, the exhibit's corrugated steel facade employed the primary building material in the Pacific Rim during the 1940s and '50s, an era that saw the rise of primarily U.S. military and colonial intervention in the Hawaiian Islands. The Stecyk-made surfboards propped against the exhibit's facade were shaped in the tradition of the kahunas (Hawaiian kings) and were adorned with symbols conveying mana, or spirit.

The symbolism got more intense once you entered the installation. The Aloha Ha montage featured artifacts from the mixing of Anglo and Hawaiian culture, among them a broken-down Philco floor radio (popular during the territorial period) that served as a table for snuffed cigarette butts, beer, sunglasses and a postcard of a bare-breasted Hawaiian girl submissively offering a lei. A Japanese ceramic cup and fan symbolized that the islands were long ago overrun by haoles (whites) and the Japanese, Filipino, Portuguese, Koreans and Chinese they brought in to work the plantations. A neon sign on the blink flashed "Aloha" and then "ha."

Four years later, Kustom Kulture was one of the first major institutional attempts to put the lowbrow art of the likes of Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, Robert Williams, R. Crumb and Raymond Pettibon into context with the custom car movement of the '50s and 60s, which had begun in the South Bay.

Kustom Kulture opened not long after the death of the movement's spiritual godfather, Kenny "Von Dutch" Howard. Stecyk cocurated the exhibit and wrote the catalogue's historical essay. It was a major undertaking that furthered the role of cultural historian that Stecyk had been playing in surf and skate magazines for years. The show brought together a seminal group, including Greg Escalante, Robert Williams, Thrasher's Kevin Thatcher, and, of course, Stecyk. The group followed Kustom Kulture's success by starting Juxtapoz magazine in 1994. Today, it's the fastest-growing art magazine in the country, mostly because it's the first in a long time to trade in the language and culture of the young.

Surf Culture is on display at Laguna Arts through October 6, after which it goes on tour to Australia and other international destinations. Stecyk is again the curator and author of the companion catalogue's main essay. The exhibit contains thematic elements and artifacts in keeping with both Papa Moana and Kustom Kulture as well as contributions from a vast array of artists, such as Kevin Ancell, Chris Wilder and even Stecyk's ex, Lynn Coleman. The exhibit is a history of surf art, featuring everything from posters for movies like *Endless Summer*, to the surfboard used by Colonel Kilgore (played by Robert Duvall) in *Apocalypse Now*, to the political art of Raymond Pettibon's giant-wave murals (coded with messages like "the next president should be a surfer"), to the "surfer-crossing" road signs that Cris Hicks got permission to post in the town of Encinitas, and, especially, Ancell's painting of battered Hawaiian "hula" girls fighting back against haoles with M-16s and grenades. The exhibit also presents an impressive lineup of surfboards, from the earliest planks to today's tricked-out short boards, that documents the long progression of surfing from a small, insider coterie of "soul" riders to the global granddaddy of "extreme" sports it is now. In the end, the show is perhaps the most comprehensive look to date at surfing's enduring power as a lifestyle and a metaphor.

"It really goes back to the kernel of what it is to be an American, the idea that you can do things without traditional impediments," Colburn says. "You're not going into a caste system. There's a possibility that you can be something great. What you're seeing ties into that, because, in the extreme, that gets manifested in subcultures like surf culture and car culture, where literally you are on the outskirts of the social norm and you're really pushing the envelope. You can say it's rebellious, and it is, but on the other hand, it's so American. I don't know if we would have arrived at this, or if this dialogue would have gone the direction it's gone without Craig's influence."

In his less-guarded moments, Stecyk forgets that he's a man who has given up claims to his past. He accedes to the undeniable evidence that he was and still is a part of something that matters. He just contends it should be understood that it isn't he who matters.

"[It's about] the theory that you were part of a related group of people and you were interacting," he says. "The nuances and relationships had value, and it wasn't about what any one person accomplished." Stecyk says the beach culture has at its heart an ancient sense of community. "In Polynesia that's more of an attitude because it's more clan-related, more village-related, more archipelago-related. In surfing, that's kind of the thing."

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