

DVD Review

Barefoot Adventure



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I should begin this review first with a disclaimer, and that is that I grew up in Hawaii, where surfing was a sport well before Westerners like Captain James Cook "discovered" the chain of islands in the Pacific Ocean in 1778. More important than that, however, is the fact that despite growing up amongst some of the most renowned surfing locations in the world, in my 18 years of living there I never once paddled out to sea on that floating stick of fiberglass called a surfboard to surf the hallowed waves of my home state. Perhaps because of this, I was hit even harder by the waves of nostalgia as I watched Bruce Brown's 1960 surfing film *Barefoot Adventure*, recently released on DVD by Image Entertainment.



Brown ushered in the surf movie genre with his 1966 film *The Endless Summer*, about two American surfers who travel the world in search of "the perfect wave." Image has just released this seminal surf flick on DVD, along with Brown's earlier films *Barefoot Adventure* and *Surf Crazy* (1959), as part of what they're calling "The Bruce Brown Golden Years of Surf Collection." Later this summer, Image will add Brown's first film, *Slippery When Wet* (1958), as well as *Surfin' Hollow Days* (1961) and a collection of shorts (*Surfin' Shorts*) to the series. All that would be left at that point to complete the set would be Brown's 1994 *The Endless Summer II*, a "sequel" of sorts that updates the story and the surf cinematography of the original. (I have no word on when or if this title will be released on DVD).

Barefoot Adventure, like all of Brown's early surf films, is a pastiche of rather amateurish photography, shifting locales (here, between California and Hawaii), embarrassingly bad narrative skits, a hip jazz score, and a narration full of cornball humor — but all held together like glue by its awe-inspiring footage of big waves and the seemingly foolhardy surfers who rode them. You end up forgiving Brown the awkward and naïve turns at comedy, as you end up forgiving the scratches and dust on the film surface that are present for almost the entire film, in part because they're part and parcel of an innocence that resonates throughout the film. Even during those breathtaking moments of huge swells, pounding surf, and lonely surfers gliding down moving mountains of water, there's a refreshing fragility that comes through — after all, man may briefly be allowed to ride the waves, but conquer them he never will. In the end, the surfer must either "pull out" or suffer the humbling wipeout.

As he explains in the recently filmed piece that introduces the 70-minute film, exhibition was crude back in the early 60's, and Brown would often show his films while sitting on stage narrating with a microphone while a tape recorder played the film's music soundtrack. Because any tapes of the original narration have long been lost (says Brown, "I can't even remember if we had one to begin with"), Brown with the help of his son Dana has recorded a brand new narration to accompany *Barefoot Adventure*. And while Brown's commentary is surely that of a man looking back nearly 30-some years, evidencing a remarkable memory as he ticks off the names of now-obscure surfers, along with a self-deprecating modesty that constantly is poking fun at himself and the times, you can't help but think that Brown's original narration probably wasn't too much different.

This humility is something you don't often find in today's fast-paced and in-your-face MTV Sports and X-Games era of "extreme" sports documentaries. And while later Brown may have in his own way contributed to this accelerated and aggressive style (see his 1971 motorcycle film *On Any Sunday*), the experience of watching *Barefoot Adventure* is rather like the feeling you get when watching someone's old home movie footage. You don't feel like you're watching a film *per se*, but rather a collection of home movie reels spliced together to make an evening out of it. One ends up judging it not on how well it works as a film, but rather how well it works as document and evocation of a time when you could rent a house on the famed North Shore of Oahu for \$75 a month. Nostalgia surely exercises its pull here, but you don't need to be from Hawaii or a surfer to experience it—it comes through loud and clear through Brown's DIY aesthetic, his folksy narration, and his reverence for the awesome power of big waves and the quiet fortitude of the people who ride them.

Image Transfer

You won't come away from viewing this DVD marveling at the quality of the image, although one has to think that Image has done the best they could do with what was considerably less-than-idea source material. Given the nature of the filmmaking and exhibition practices of Brown, one can be reasonably sure that he edited the camera original 16mm footage and didn't use work prints. Brown himself notes on the back of the DVD packaging that much of the film had been taken apart for use in other films, requiring exhaustive restorative work by him and his son Dana. Considering all that, much of the image holds up quite well, helped immeasurably by the gorgeous Kodachrome reversal stock, still saturated after all these years. The dust, the scratches, and the splice marks inevitably become part of the fabric of the film experience, and after a brief adjustment period, I found them quite unobtrusive. With respect to the surf footage, much of it is shot from a distance and this too requires an adjustment of expectations, in this day and age of helmet cams and multi-angle sports coverage. In the end, however, I found that it lent the film a sense of anonymity and timelessness, while allowing the grandeur of the waves to steal the show.

Audio Transfer

Unlike the image, I think we can safely say that the quality of the audio on this DVD is a lot better than it would have been circa 1960, when Brown would have played the music soundtrack on an old portable reel-to-reel tape deck while he narrated the film live. Jazz saxophonist Bud Shank wrote the original score, which

he performs here with an ensemble that includes Shelly Manne on drums. At the time, Shank was one of the leading members of the "West Coast" jazz school, and I found the score quite a refreshing change from the expected and now-clichéd "surf-guitar" sound of a Dick Dale or the Ventures, and a good listen in its own right. Sound quality on the DVD is nothing to write home about, but then again what would you expect from only a narration and music score, with the odd (and somewhat comical) sound effect thrown in from time to time.

Disc Extras

There are virtually no extras to speak of, minus the scene access menu and the brief filmed introduction by Brown (he also makes an even briefer "visit" during intermission—yes, there's an intermission in this 74 minute film!). The fact the Brown has basically written a completely new narration for the film in a weird way sounds and feels like many DVD commentaries, in that Brown is obviously narrating his film at a distance of 30-plus years, and so therefore can't help but throw in contemporary comments and observations. Because of this, I didn't leave the viewing experience wanting more or feeling like I missed out on valuable information that supplements like a commentary normally provide.

Final Comments

With the release of this and the other Bruce Brown films, Image Entertainment continues an already outstanding lineup of off-the-beaten-path DVDs for the year 2000, following as it does titles like *Decalogue* and *Les Vampires*. One hopes that these releases will encourage Image and other studios to expose film and home theater enthusiasts to even more unheralded but important independent work from the late 50's through the 70's. Lest we forget, long before there was a *sex, lies and videotape* or the Sundance and Telluride film festivals, a diverse group of American filmmakers were making a very diverse group of films in a true "independent" style, often in the "amateur" gauge of 16mm with hand-cranked Bolexes. Image's release of these films by Bruce Brown gives me hope that one day soon we'll be able to see other maverick independent filmmakers' work committed to DVD — folks like George Kuchar, Frederick Wiseman, Robert Frank, Jonas Mekas, Robert Kramer, Shirley Clarke and Andy Warhol, to name but a few.