

RAY GUN

but a whole new element, there was an uproar. It was pretty divided; some people loved it and some people hated it. Since the parent publication had no real interest in investing in a new magazine that wasn't going to be an immediate profit center, they didn't want anybody from the *Surfer* staff wasting any more time on it, so they interviewed a bunch of people, and they brought me in. At first I ostensibly was going to make it a more conventional magazine. Conventional meaning less weird, much more palatable to the surf industry, yet able to attract outside national accounts and an urban readership, people who viewed the beach more as, and this is getting intellectual, a metaphor, as opposed to just, you know, "There's a wave out there and I want to surf it and it is a really good wave."

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(Neil Feineman)

way, both David and I were free-lancers hired on an issue-by-issue basis and I was told that I had to make the magazine profitable or at least break even on each issue, although nobody really cared. I mean, I got there, and I asked "Who reads the blue lines?" and the answer was "nobody." So I asked "Well, who approves the covers?" and again "nobody." I thought, "this is just great!" I was taking about a three thousand dollar a month loss just by being there, but I really didn't care. My goal was to give air to subjects whose essence was being missed because they were forced into conventional publishing modes. Although I was hired to create, and completely revamp and tame this beast, as I got into it, I realized that they had instinctively done an extraordinary job of hitting it just right with the first issue. What they needed to do was to elevate the writing above their puff kind of "surfing is great," which didn't reflect David's tendency towards much darker images and him not being a surfer. I couldn't really relate to the extreme egocentricity of the traditional surf world, which I felt was the fatal flaw in the beach life style, because it reflected an almost colonial mentality.

Is this interesting?

EMIGRE: Very.

NEIL: It seemed to me that surfers, who really had an almost Aryan mentality, were no longer reflective of the reality. The beach was no longer an isolated entity and was, in fact, for lots of artists, lots of black people, lots of gay people and lots of women of achievement and none of these people was getting any coverage at all. Also, there were real problems, such as massive pollution, gentrification and loss of identity. EMIGRE: **In one of your intro's, you tried to sum up what *Beach Culture* was all about, and seemed to struggle a bit. You ended up writing that *Beach Culture* had "one common thread, the refusal to blindly accept authority or limitations at face value." That seems to be the editorial focus of every fanzine in America and hardly sets you apart from many of these magazines.** NEIL: It doesn't set

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me apart from the fanzines, but believe me, it set me apart from the surfing magazines, which were my immediate environment. And because I didn't have the backing and the support of the parent company to get through the first year or two, when I could actually attract national advertisers, I was really dependent, completely dependent, in fact, upon ads that were pulled from the surf and skateboard industries. And while that quote is not at all a radical position within the general publishing world, the world of graphic design, or the skateboard world, or whatever, it was an incredibly radical stance to come from so deep within the ruling view of the surf industry. EMIGRE: **But didn't that scare off advertisers? What you just said reminds me of a very funny letter that was published in *Beach Culture* №6. The letter was a response to the *Pauly Shore* article that you published where you obviously insulted a true surfer. Did you ever feel that with your editorial direction you would run the risk of alienating the readers that *Beach Culture* implied it was for and, perhaps, subsequently, scare off advertisers, too?** *Beach Culture's ads seemed to get less with each issue.* NEIL: You're asking two questions. I wasn't really worried about scaring off advertisers. When I started working at *Beach Culture*, I had no expectations that there would be so much resistance within the surf community to this magazine or to the message implied by just questioning authority and questioning the localism and the roots that existed. The publisher of *Surfer* magazine, who was at that point the publisher of *Beach Culture*, told me that I was going to alienate 95% of the surfer readership with *Beach Culture*, that they would not be interested in this magazine. I didn't believe that, and when it started happening I didn't really care, because I thought that the real audience I was looking for was the beach persons who the surfing magazines weren't reaching. I couldn't really care less about alienating traditional surfers, because they wouldn't carry the magazine; they thought it was weird and strange. I was much more concerned about alienating a person like myself and that's what I kept telling David. I said "Look, we are doing this magazine for two people, and if we think it is true to its roots, and if we think that it's saying something important, then I really don't care what people say. There will be people out there who will find us and who will respond." I tell you I had people showing up in my office like they were making religious pilgrimages. The receptionist would call me up and say "They're here, please come get them, because they are so weird!" EMIGRE: **What kind of people were they?** NEIL: They were disenfranchised surfers, they were skateboarders, they were the oddest assortment of people I have ever seen, and they would literally come in off the street. I discovered some of my best contributors through that and some of my worst as well. We were so amazed that people actually liked it, and were making efforts to meet us, because we were getting so much resistance inside our office. It was a very schizophrenic position. Any-
way, to answer your question, I thought that letter was very funny but it was reflective of the incredible resistance within the traditional surf community. But I had a mission and a letter like that told me I was doing something right. The people that we alienated the most were the people who advertised in *Surfer* or its other sister publications, *Powder* and *Snowboarder*. We alienated those people, but they never advertised with us in the first place. They'd say "You're too intelligent, you're too sophisticated," or "You're too old." I knew that they read *Beach Cul-*

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ture, though. But we never lost an advertiser over editorial contents. **EMIGRE: What did you lose them over?** **NEIL:** They went out of business, that's the truth. **EMIGRE: Perhaps because their ads in *Beach Culture* didn't reach the right audience?** **NEIL:** No. Within one year, the skateboard industry went from being a ninety million dollar industry to a fifteen million dollar industry. I literally had to deal with a battered industry when I started working for *Beach Culture*. But, and you can call the credit people on this one, virtually no default. I had people sending in \$100 checks a month to pay for their ads over time. This was a magazine that really hit its target market more than any magazine I've worked with in fifteen years. People who advertised with us really bent over backwards to remain with our magazine. We didn't even have an ads sales staff. David sold eighteen or twenty pages of ads for the last issue and even designed some of them. The one thing I never worried about was advertisers being worried. **EMIGRE: Let me get back to the contents of *Beach Culture* which, as you said before, were obviously about much more than just the beach. You often used the beach simply as a metaphor, but at times, to me, it was a bit farfetched. For instance, the story on the Replacements started off with "Minneapolis in January is hardly anyone's idea of a typical beach town" and further on "... swum against the currents of corporate rock." It almost seemed as if the title "*Beach Culture*" was perhaps too restrictive for what you really wanted to do with this magazine.** **NEIL:** They had picked that title before I joined the magazine. I never liked that title. **EMIGRE: Anyway,** The Replacements was David's favorite band. The band wasn't really doing anything. I called their publicist just to make David happy and it turned out that Paul Westerburg was in the office and the publicist said "I'll give you five minutes with him." Paul had never heard of *Beach Culture*, it was just that the publicist was doing us a favor. He put him on, and I thought, "Okay, I know I only have him for five minutes, I've heard the guy, although I don't even like the band." I knew nothing about them. It wasn't like I was prepared for that interview; it was just one of those things, so I asked him a few questions. He felt the same way, I'm sure. He was like, "Huh?" Finally he said, "Well, I've given you enough time," and said goodbye, and hung up. That's exactly how it happened and, of course, not having a staff and not having an editorial budget to speak of, I was thrilled. I thought "I got The Replacements!" Minneapolis as a beach town in the winter is the most idiotic thing I've ever heard of, but I thought that was funny, and since I didn't have a lot of corporate people looking at me asking "Why are you running this article? It's so dumb," we went ahead and published it. A better example would have been the John Wesley Harding article that we published. Readers would call me up about that and ask "Why are you doing an article on John Wesley Harding?" I really love his music and we hit it off and logically, if I had to actually stretch it, he was from a beach town in England, but that had nothing to do with him. Subsequently readers would ask, "Why put him in?" But I put him in because I like him, and I think he is important and I think, on an attitude level, it works. He wrote an article about Graceland and Coca Cola and Howard Finster and the relationship between those things and Graceland doesn't have anything to do with the beach, but... **EMIGRE: Let me interrupt you for a second. Did you, at the beginning of this answer, mention that there was no distribution for *Beach Culture*?** **NEIL:** There was very little distribution. **EMIGRE: On the one hand you say there was a tremendous following...** **NEIL:** There was, but I am using relative terms.

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EMIGRE: I am trying to establish how successful *Beach Culture* really was. **NEIL:** Success is a very strange term. Was it successful in terms of a bottom line? In fact, it was about to make money when we closed down, so it was going to be successful very quickly, in terms of magazine standards, within seven issues. We were hitting the break even point with the exception of one issue, which David went way over budget on. **EMIGRE: Which issue was that?** **NEIL:** Issue Nº3. The true story on that is that we were told that there wasn't going to be an issue Nº3, and that we should just leave because they hadn't sold ads. And I felt like "What, we're here illegally?" And they said "Well, there is no authorization for your project." I told them that we were not leaving, and that I paid David out of my own pocket and that I wouldn't take a salary for that issue. So we stayed there without telling anybody else and I just became a monster, bribing people from the ad department. It took us four months to get it published, and to this day I was never reimbursed. **EMIGRE: But in the end for whom was it successful besides yourselves?** **NEIL:** It was very successful in terms of our careers. It was about to make money, but in the end they claimed that there was ultimately a huge loss. I don't know what the actual bottom line loss was, but I think it was minimal. We had, without the benefits of any sort of launch whatsoever, a following of, I would say, seven to ten thousand people. Now that's not a significant number of people in the grand scheme of things when you talk about *Details* magazine or any *Condé Nasté* type of publication, but essentially, on a steady basis, that's how many copies we sold on the newsstands. **EMIGRE: How many subscribers were there?** **NEIL:** There were

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no subscribers. We had three different distributors and with one issue we didn't even have a distributor. But it was successful, although you might think I am crazy, because on a conventional publishing level it was a disaster. Again, what I felt was so amazing was that without any subscriptions, without any staff, without any support, without any launch, we consistently sold between seven to ten thousand copies. I couldn't get interviewed enough. We had a press kit that was thicker than the magazine. This was without the benefit of any sort of publicist or whatever and, although this is David's contribution, I can see that on certain levels we opened up a style or at least helped give credence to a type of design that became incredibly influential afterwards. Our biggest concern, and my concern for David as his partner in crime in this thing, was that people would not see that. By the time they actually got to *Beach Culture*, after seeing other magazines or ads that had been inspired

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by *Beach Culture*, they would think that we were following the leader. I was told that the advertising director at Nike had a completely Spartan office with one coffee table and the only ornamentation in his office was a copy of *Beach Culture*. I would hear things like this all the time. Just on an emotional level I thought the magazine was a very successful piece of work. **EMIGRE: Was it successful then mostly because of the design?** NEIL: No, I think it was the whole thing. We didn't know each other. I went to David and said: "Here's the deal, I am giving you work that is going to live up to your design." And my reviews have been just as good as David's reviews. I have stacks of reviews from *The New York Times* and *Esquire* talking about the writing in *Beach Culture*. **Anyway,** I was not afraid to take my words and marry them to something that was a very flashy, overpowering design, because I knew that once you got around to reading them, they were going to hold your attention. As an editor I got slammed in my community left and right, by people who usually didn't bother reading the magazine. They felt that my art director was hurting my writing. **EMIGRE:**

You are every graphic designer's dream editor! I was reading your introduction in issue №6 where you talk about the design awards that *Beach Culture* won and you say that "speaking from an editorial point of view, it is a unique pleasure to have the words you love be treated with such visual brilliance and respect." Being a designer myself, I could hardly believe this statement coming from an editor, since most editors consider their words as sacred. And your writing wasn't just interpreted by a designer; it was at times made entirely illegible. Could you try to explain what it is that David did that made you let him get away with some of these extreme designs? NEIL: We had disagreements throughout the process, generally one major fight per issue. There was one instance in particular where he had made type illegible that I felt was information-oriented and very essential to the reading of the piece. I told him that he couldn't do that. Not that, "You can't do it," but "This is why you can't, etc.," and he laid off. There were a lot of articles that he was allowed to play with in terms of illegibility. Most of the pages that were illegible were pages like the contents page, the "Coming Up" page; stuff that was just pages that I felt were irrelevant to the deeper meaning of this magazine. I wanted the reader to spend time with the magazine. And if the pages

that he obscured were pages that typically lead to making the reader's job easier, I couldn't have cared less. When you went through the magazine on a page-by-page basis, there were very few pages where the actual text was illegible. I heard that *Beach Culture* was considered illegible, but there was really no type obscured that I thought was essential. There were always articles that I liked better than other articles, and in those cases a strong design could prop them up, but most of the time, text and design were equal. **EMIGRE: What are the most important changes you need to implement in order for Ray Gun to last beyond six issues?** NEIL: What do you mean? **EMIGRE: Ultimately, at least to me, the real success of a magazine depends on whether it can survive and run a profit. It's easy to go your own way and lose money. That doesn't take much talent.** NEIL: I could have been successful with *Beach Culture* had I had a more supportive backer. It wasn't a question of having enough backing, it was a matter of having a supportive backer. Editorially and artistically, and David fights with me all the time on this, what I had planned to do with *Beach Culture* was to work on it for about ten issues and then functioning in a supervisory capacity, turn it over to

"IN AN UNDERGROUND YOU DON'T HAVE THE NOTION OF SUCCESS OR FAILURE, YOU JUST HAVE THE NOTION OF MAKING SOMETHING. AND THAT'S WHAT SAVES YOU. IT'S NOT HOW PROFESSIONAL IT LOOKS, IT'S BECAUSE YOU ARE DOING WHAT YOU ARE DOING BECAUSE YOU BELIEVE IN IT.

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Tony Arefin