

Pagan Son

Late one afternoon in 1969, photographer Art Brewer took a stroll along O'ahu's North Shore. At Pipeline beach, amid the world's most sublime waves, Brewer encountered a boy who resembled a white-haired, blue-eyed Mowgli, clinging to an unusually short surfboard, 30 years before that design became the industry standard. "I'm Bunker Spreckels," said the boy, shortspear of the sea in arm, "will you take some pictures for me?"

That name, the story goes, Bunker got from living in a pillbox in the jungle up above the North Shore, surviving on little more than the fruits that fell from the trees and the kindness of his friends. Brewer took a few dozen photos of Bunker, then 19-years-old, and did not see him again for years. Brewer did not know that before him stood a slayer of big surf, a legend in the making who would one day take his place in the pantheon of cool, on a barstool somewhere between Apollo and Dionysus.

Bunker Spreckels was born Adolph Bernard Spreckels III. Immigrant blood flowed through his veins. When Bunker's great-grandfather, Claus Spreckels, was 19, he sought the warmth and riches of other lands. Like his great-grandson after him, Claus took to the sea. The first Spreckels thus landed by ship in Charleston, South Carolina, though he would return year after year to the lowlands of Saxony when the pace of life out West wore him down. "Ruthless and jovial, progressive and exploitative," are the words with which German scholar Uwe Spiekermann [describes](#) Bunker's great-grandfather. Claus, writes Spiekermann, "represented fundamental American virtues: independence and liberty, courage and risk-taking." Indeed, by 1905 Claus had become a sugar magnate, amassed a fortune, and ensconced himself in high society. The Protestant work ethic had prevailed.

Though greatness seemed to flow through Bunker's veins, he

believed himself cursed. And perhaps he was.

Bunker's parents divorced just after he was born. His mother, a beauty named Kay, remarried with Clark Gable – yes, that Clark Gable. By all accounts, Gable was a wonderful father who loved Bunker as if he had been hewn of his own bone. For a time, Bunker's childhood was charmed. But in 1960, when Bunker was just 11-years-old, Gable fell ill and died. A year later, Bunker's biological father, Adolph Bernard Spreckels II, followed Gable into death, leaving a father-shaped hole in the heart of the heir.

Bunker took to the sea in Waikiki after becoming infatuated with the islands through images he had seen in surf magazines. From that day on, he nursed the shoreline like a wound. But all painkillers lose their potency to tolerance in time. Unfortunately for Bunker, surfing and drugs have always seemed to go hand in hand.

Before taking up residence in the jungle above Pipeline, Bunker haunted the beaches of California. The influence Hollywood exerted on an already oddball scene created a different breed of surfer altogether. Sex, drugs, and rock and roll met salt and sea. Bunker, by his own admission, had no problem selling “a little bag of this or a little bag of that to the kids, you know.” He lived like he surfed – fast. Readers will find many a wild ride shot through a grainy lense in “[Bunker77](#),” a biopic of the man and the myth.

In time, however, the North Shore offered Bunker with a reprieve from the hedonism of Hollywood. Soon this lost boy found himself living as Pan, by feel, off the land, no smoking, drinking, or drugs – just surf and the tranquility of the wild.

Everything changed when the wild boy turned 21. Bunker's family hired a team to find and snatch him from the wilderness, for Claus' wreath of gold was to be laid upon his

head. Bunker was set to inherit a fortune.

In the days leading up to his birthday, Bunker was already making generous plans to gift his friends a million dollars each so they might simply “go on the road and have some fun.” “If you had all the money in the world,” Bunker asked a friend, “what would you make? What would you like to build?” Bunker’s mind flirted with greatness.

But “gradually,” as Hemingway [wrote](#) of his own case, “then suddenly,” did Bunker’s simple life turn toward the extremes of decadence and hedonism.

He modeled and sold himself as a rockstar after Mick Jagger. He was the life of the party as marijuana and acid, the staples of surfdom, turned to cocaine and heroin. At one point, Bunker was accused by a local crime syndicate of dealing drugs on their turf. They beat him senseless. Naturally, Bunker took up martial arts in response; sun and surf became the instruments with which he cultivated his strength.

From here on until the day he died, not even a decade after the inheritance filled his cup, Bunker lived life moving from one transgression to the next. He was held steady amid the tempest, for a time, by two anchors: his beautiful girlfriend Ellie and surfing; that act of mastering nature, of bringing chaos to heel and finding order in the barmy tumult.

What seems to receive little attention, or at least not enough, is the fact that Bunker was clearly searching for a father through to the end. There were a few figures in his life after Gable passed away, some worse than others. There was a pagan man of Germanic ancestry in South Africa who seems to have reminded Bunker of Gable.

There is something at back of all this, something to this story of a pagan son whose ancestors came out from the forests of Germany to conquer the Romans, just as he came out from the

forests above Pipeline to conquer the surf, pressed on by the greatness of his blood and yet without a father to show him the way. And for how long can a man live at sea? It is rootedness that nourishes the soul.

On its face, Bunker's is the story of a young man who seems to have been born to die, of a boy who flew too close to the sun with wings of feathers and wax, of greatness stunted by greatness as it only could be. But the glory ascribed to that fate is betrayed by Bunker's last days, when drugs had reduced him to a shell of his former self. No longer could Ellie or the sea soothe his pain. Living the dream, it turns out, is not living enough. "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea," wrote T.S. Eliot, as if for Bunker. "By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown. Till human voices wake us, and we drown." All dreams must come to an end.

And yet one cannot help but wonder what could have been. What if Bunker had a fatherly anchor in his life? That, I believe, is an inheritance worth far more than its weight in gold.

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