



# OPINION: GIMME SUBSTANCE!



## Gimme a surf film I can sink my teeth into!

by Myke Bartholomew

4 months ago

I am in dire need of a new surf film. And by “new,” I’m not referring to the release date. The past couple evenings have seen me coddled on the couch by a thin blanket, fighting a looming cold. Over the course of those nights, my DVD player has been on more than usual. Steering clear of typical grandiose, Hollywood sponsored, cinematic adventures, I chose to spend time watching smaller budget surf films that focus on my love of wave sliding. I visited several movies that all sounded promising. Films like *Sight Sound*, *Modern Collective*, *Missing*, *Gathering*, and *Slow Dance* just to name a few. Each included surfers who’s style and persona interest me, so I went into them with high hopes. But at the end of each, I was left with a repetitive feeling of emptiness and a strong sense of dissatisfaction. In processing my emotional response, I have come to one simple conclusion: they’re boring.

I mean no disrespect to the respective directors. The movies are their artistic expressions and I dig that. As a fan of the creative mind, it’s hard for me to see anything but good in those willing to put together something

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Comments 20

([HTTP://BEACHGRIT.COM/2015/10/opinion-gimme-substance/#disqus\\_thread](http://beachgrit.com/2015/10/opinion-gimme-substance/#disqus_thread))

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Comments 24

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World champ's elaborate pageantry; title contenders rise to surface...

by Derek Rielly

Comments 45

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for me to see anything but good in those willing to put together something imagination-based for all to see. My disillusion comes from wanting more. Since their inception, surf videos have followed the same general archetype. Waves, music, limited dialogue scattered through a brief interlude, waves, music, music, and waves. What I have found when studying this method, is that I don't want more waves and music. I want more substance.

Firstly, at the time in which we are living, professional surfers have surpassed the minor celebrity and meager paychecks of their predecessors. We have seen the surfing world move beyond the realm of a beer slugging counterculture to a bonafide and legitimate billion dollar industry. With that came higher profile and higher paid athletes. *Athletes*. People with alarm clocks and trainers and nutritionists and coaches and corporate sponsors and a higher regard for their profession. They have become more evolved and subsequently more interesting. So why not let us see more of the people they *are*? Not more of them doing the same barrel stance or backside alley-oop or vanilla-flavored post-heat interview. But more of them navigating the other 99% of their existence that expands beyond the ocean. We've seen it before in Jack McCoy's *Blue Horizon*, where he contrasted the likes of the late, great competitively charged Andy Irons to the tranquil, bare-footed, ocean activist Dave Rastovich. McCoy took viewers inside their worlds. We got to follow Andy and see what he was really thinking during one of the most intense periods of his competitive career. We also got to see the stark juxtaposition of Rasta's free-spirited, wandering lifestyle on the coasts of New Zealand. We saw interviews with their families and gathered firsthand input of who they are as people. We got to know them on a deeper level.

We saw this even before with one of the most soft-spoken, but performance-loud individuals in our world, Mr. Timmy Curran. In the 1995 family-made biography *Here and Now*, we got to see Tim surfing his home breaks. We got to see Tim with his friends. We got to see what Tim did when the surf was flat. We got to see how Tim ordered his boards. We got to see *Tim*. We got to satiate our curious desires of learning who the quiet and humble kid from Ventura was by going into the world we couldn't see in standard surf videos. And how many of us wore that movie out as a result?

What I am trying to say is that I'm nosey. I want to know what time Kolohe wakes up in the morning. I want to know what Jordy eats for breakfast. I want to know how many times a week Julian trains and what kind of exercises he's doing. I want to know what they do when I'm sitting at work wondering what they're doing in between contests. I want to see their

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Slater, Reynolds, out, Fanning strong, Bede dials nines...

by Derek Rielly

Comments 16

([HTTP://BEACHGRIT.COM/2015/10/MYSTICAL-ECSTASY-DAY-2-QUIKSILVER-PRO-FRANCE/#DISQUIS\\_THREAD](http://beachgrit.com/2015/10/mystical-ecstasy-day-2-quiksilver-pro-france/#disqus_thread))

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Comments 4

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normal lives. Think Fuel TV's *Firsthand* but like three times as long. If corporate companies want me to buy boardshorts and button-downs based off the gents who endorse them, I need to know more about those gents to really understand who I'm supporting. I need to know if their character is really worth my admiration, and not just because their sponsors make that decision for me.

Secondly, I want to see more culture. How many of these directors film in remote places that a vast majority of us have yet to visit? Places in the far corners of the globe that require three planes, a boat, two car rides, and a never ending walk to get to. Places with no internet. Places with a welcoming and loving group of natives who live a lifestyle far removed from the chaotic existence which engulfs most of the world. I want to see more of *that*. I don't want to just see the waves that break in those places, I want to see the people who live there and pass by those waves every day. I want to see how life is lived beyond the limited perspective of work, work, work and the commuter infested 405. Sure, I can travel there. I can visit them with my own earthly body, but I have to save the vacation time first! In the meantime, I want to live vicariously through the surf media that is readily available on the short weeknights that follow the long workdays. I want to zone out and have a pseudo-vacation to those places while I'm saving for my next plane ticket to actually get there.

A couple of recent films I really feel got this right were Taylor Steele's *This Time Tomorrow* and Jason Baffa's *Bella Vita*. Steele's *This Time Tomorrow* had some of the most amorous and persuasive cinematography I had yet to experience. The way he romanticized each of the four stops on their escapade really sucked me in. Think of how he captured the essence of the kind people of Tahiti. How he layered some indigenous music over the footage of streets in Mexico. The way he focused on ships, trains, and the environmentally hardened Alaska. I mean c'mon. He actively chose to break away from surfing in order to shoot footage that solely included the environment and inhabitants of the places they visited. And that really did those locations a beautiful justice. He showed us more than just Rasta and Ando painting on their aquatic canvases. He introduced us to their overall experience. By the end, it felt like I had taken that trip with them and when the credits showed, I was severely disappointed our journey was over.

This effect is mirrored in Baffa's *Bella Vita*. Focused not just on Chris Del Moro or the act of surfing, Baffa expanded the moral of his film to revolve around the Italian culture. He showed us the way Italians live. How they

focus on community. How surfing is a small pastime that further strengthens the collective bond that already unites them. We got to learn the history of surfing's pervasive influence throughout the country. We met shapers, chefs, coffee growers, and wine makers. It was an adventure that introduced us to the myriad aspects of Italy that go way beyond just the sole perspective of waves. I can't say definitively that my interest in traveling to Italy was as strong before seeing *Bella Vita* as it is now, but regardless, the film absolutely 150% influenced me to add it to my bucket list.

In the end, I just want more from our surf filmmakers. I want to see them take courageous steps beyond the safety nets of waves, music, waves, music, waves, credits. I want to see them utilize a broader perspective to provide us visibility of worlds that strongly interest us as surfers and movie watchers. Most use surf videos as a means to experience what surfing has to offer when we can't physically surf. Therefore I feel our filmmakers have a responsibility to entertain us with more than just the same old buffet. And by all means, if there are any other current films that scratch the itch of exactly what I am discussing, please enlighten me. I am definitely open to suggestions.



BELLA VITA FILM (<https://vimeo.com/59266826>) from Bella Vita Film (<https://vimeo.com/user16057170>) on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com>).



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**Badger** • 4 months ago

As surfing tends to be roughly 8 years behind the rest of the creative universe I'd say we're due a Epically Later'd cross with SHOWstudio pretty soon.