

# ENTERTAINMENT



## 'Z-Boys' Soars Over Summer Blockbusters

By SEAN SMITH

Stacy Peralta, Tony Alva, Peggy Oki, Jay Adams, Wentzle Ruml. To most, these names mean nothing, but as a kid growing up during the '70s in Southern California these guys (and girl) were my heroes. I remember running to the local surf shop to snag my copy of Skateboarder Magazine.

When I got it home I studied each picture, trying to learn the moves of my heroes. When I rode my skateboard in front of my house, I tried to emulate the fluid and aggressive moves that had become known as Dogtown style. Director Stacy Peralta's "Dogtown and Z-Boys" transported me back to those glory days of skateboarding, where a rag tag group of belligerent skaters changed the sport of skateboarding and, to a larger extent, youth culture forever.

More than a documentary about the birth of extreme sports, "Dogtown and Z-Boys" is a vivid cultural history of an offshoot of Southern California life—the convergence of style, attitude and sport that grew from the filth and crumbling barrio of South Santa Monica and Venice Beach, where, as Wentzle Ruml, one of the Z-Boys, says, "The debris [met] the sea."

The Z-Boys were the Zephyr Skate/Surf Team, a misfit family of aggressive surf rats who surfed the crumbling and often dangerous piers of Santa Monica under the tutelage and sometimes-tyrannical leadership of outlaw surf shop owner/shaper Jeff Ho. The Zephyr Surf team was the epitome of the new aggressive surf style, which included a localism that forced them to protect their turf with the ferociousness of a street gang, sometimes hurling concrete chunks, glass and rocks at intruders to their secret spot.

During the afternoon, when the wind "blew out" the waves, these inventive kids turned to skateboarding. By the 1970s skateboarding had nearly disappeared, thus forcing the Z-Boys to reinvent the sport. True to their upbringing, they brought their aggressive surf style to the concrete waves of local playgrounds.

The turning point came in the mid-'70s when Southern California experienced an extreme drought. The drought forced Southern Californians to drain their swimming pools. These pools, left empty and abandoned during the day, became the proving grounds where the Z-Boys took skateboarding vertical.

The Dogtown style, perfected in the pools of the valley, brought the Z-Boys into the spotlight in 1975 at the first organized

skateboard competition in years, the Del Mar Nationals. Here they showed up with their homemade boards and non-conformist style that the mainstream skating world didn't understand.

Catching the traditional skaters off-guard, the Z-Boys—Jay Adams especially—channeled their rage and sense of liberation to create some unexpectedly graceful, and groundbreaking moves.

The film is hardly objective, and becomes self important at times, but the impact that these down-and-out kids had on the larger world is important. The subjectivity of the film is saved, however, in its personal connection, which makes for a vivid, passionate and often lively documentary.

For non-skaters and skaters alike, Peralta brings to life the energy of guerrilla raids on empty swimming pools and the sheer primeval charge of pool sessions, competitions and skating with friends on playgrounds. All of this is brought to life with an amazing collection of professional film, amateur 8mm footage, fantastic still photos and a combination of oral history and narration (done fantastically by Sean Penn).

What makes the film even more compelling is Peralta's acute understanding (he was a founding member of the Z-Boys) of the birth of this cultural institution.

He appreciates the friendly rivalry of street-level competition which drove these kids to create something important from nothing, he elucidates the corporate greed and crass commercialization that ultimately breaks up the team and some of the friendships, he relates to the graffiti art and hot-rod culture that contributed to the look and attitude of extreme skating, and he relishes the ethnic diversity which was a part of the Z-Boys aesthetic.

Set to a bracing soundtrack of '70s rock 'n' roll and driven with an amped-up, jittery cinema graffiti style, reminiscent of current skateboarding videos and '70s surf and skate films like Paul Rapps' "Go For It," Hal Jepsen's "Cosmic Children," or Greg MacGillivray's "Five Summer Stories," Peralta leads us transfixed through this wonderful landscape of youthful rebellion, exuberance and freedom.

"Dogtown and Z-Boys" is by far the best film I've seen all year, its no wonder it took home the Audience Award at last year's Sundance and received the best documentary award at this year's Cannes.

It is, however, in limited release and may be difficult to find. If you can't see it in a theater, make sure you seek out the video or DVD when it's released.

### MOVIE REVIEW: He Said/He Said

## Skateboarding Film a Turgid Ordeal to All but Hardcore Skating Enthusiasts

By PETE BROOKS



What the blankety-blank was I doing wasting a perfectly good Sunday afternoon watching a documentary on '70s skateboarding delinquents?!

What long-forgotten venial sin had I been consigned thus to make atonement for?!

What twisted quirk of a malevolent...

Oh, wait—that's right. I made Sean go see "Attack of the Clones" a couple weeks back. My bad.

The name of the '70s skateboarding flick in question—currently playing at a run-down art theater in the bad part of a town near you—is "Dogtown and Z-Boys," and unless you go into it as a skate aficionado, you will want to stay away—far away.

"Z-Boys..." is a fawning, mistey-eyed love letter of a movie written and directed by a couple of its principal subjects (a fact they don't mention till the movie's over, by the way).

It seems "Dogtown" is the area of west L.A. these kids hailed from, and the "Z" in "Z-Boys" stands for the Zephyr Surf Shop where they all hung out, dude. Hope that's all you need to know about the plot—that's all there is.

After that, strap yourself in for 90 grueling minutes of pookoo beads, tattered bell bottoms and endless old home movies of slacker kids goofing off in their neighbors' back yards.

The makers of this doc should have heeded Steve Martin's advice to John Candy in "Planes, Trains and Automobiles": If you're going to tell a story, have a point!

The great documentaries have a narrative thread, and at the end, there's some kind of payoff—something happens; we learn something that changes how we consider all that preceded it.

The big pay-off at the end of this one is we learn that only one of these twerps ended up doing hard time in the big house. That's more an indictment of the criminal justice system than it is a defense of the "skateboard culture" concept they're selling here.

On that point, I'm not sure I agree that cutting class and hanging out with your bros qualifies as a legitimate counter-culture, either. It sounds more like Intro To Being A Homeless Guy, 101.

Moreover, on a technical level, the film-making prowess brought to bear here is scant, and that's being generous. After the first 30 minutes of intercutting between surfers and skateboarders, even I got it: These lunkheads started out as surfers. No way, dude!

Let's move on.

The film did have one thing going for it: Sean Penn as the narrator. There was a time when I thought I'd pay money to see Sean Penn read a telephone book.

I only wish this film had been as riveting. I've sat through paint-drying marathons on the Weather Channel that were more involving.

Just the same, it's clear Penn's affection for this alleged sub-culture is heartfelt, however misplaced.

In contemporary interviews with the "Z-Boys" interwoven throughout the film, it also becomes clear where Penn got the inspiration for the character that established him onscreen, stoner/surfer Jeff Spicoli.

Duuuuude!

I tell you, I haven't seen this many tools in one place since I got lost in the Craftsman aisle at the mall Sears store.

Which is not to say that this a picture without a point of view; to the extent that these fellows can construct an intelligible sentence at all, they do their level best to drive their agenda home.

Said agenda is summed up early in the film, when one of these wizened has-beens squints at the camera and proudly draws his big picture, vision-thing thusly: "There were no goals, there were no aspirations."

That sounds like how I spent the '70s, too. Fortunately for me, no one was there with a film crew preserving my indolence for posterity.

After 90 minutes of slogging through their quasi-lingual surfer patois ("You come off a heavy grind and all your bros are hootin'!") I felt like I was in sixth grade again and had just struggled through the first 30 pages of "Huck Finn."

The fact that the movie's image was already cropped boxy for television broadcast was telling. I'm sure it'll be on PBS in time for their next pledge drive. Better fire up your checkbook, Sean!

The only thing I really liked about the movie was the soundtrack. Trailer-park rock doesn't get any more authentic than this, with era stalwarts Ted Nugent, Alice Cooper, Blue Oyster Cult, T-Rex, and the Stooges contributing some of their finest contemporaneous work.

Bottom line: This movie wants to validate skateboarding as a culture. The problem is, the argument it makes for a "skateboarding culture" is buttressed by nothing outside of the participants' own assertions of its validity.

Maybe there is a broader validation out there for 'boarders somewhere, but this film doesn't deliver it.