



Patrick Hill

IN CONVERSATION
WITH KIRK PUTNAM

On August 4, 2012, I interviewed Kirk Putnam in his garage in West Hills, California. Kirk is deeply involved with a small community of surfers who ride a very unique kind of surfboard, the Displacement Hull. The beginning of this scene started around 1968 in Malibu and continues on to the present. This specific style of surfing and board design has greatly influenced sculptural and stylistic aspects of my work.

Patrick Hill: Hey Kirk.

Kirk Putnam: Hey, what's up?

Patrick Hill: West Hills, is that in the San Fernando Valley?

Kirk Putnam: Yeah, the very west end of the San Fernando Valley. Like on the Western rim, that's why it's called West Hills.

Patrick Hill: Have you always lived here?

Kirk Putnam: No.

Patrick Hill: Where did you grow up?

Kirk Putnam: In Burbank.

Patrick Hill: Oh really?

Kirk Putnam: Yeah, born in Burbank, raised in Burbank until I was about 17 and then I moved to Santa Barbara.

Patrick Hill: Did you surf then and what kind of boards were you riding at the time?

Kirk Putnam: Oh, longboards. Your typical mid-1960's longboards. My brother had a Bing that he won at a surf film at Van Nuys High School. I inherited it when he got drafted and had to go Vietnam. That was my first good longboard.

Patrick Hill: What was it like living in Burbank and trying to surf?

Kirk Putnam: You had to be pretty hardcore. We'd surf after school, before school, cutting school.

Patrick Hill: Where did you go?

Kirk Putnam: Malibu, Rincon, wherever the surf was happening. That's one cool thing about growing up in Burbank. If the surf was good in Huntington or somewhere South we would head down there. If it was good at Malibu we'd go over the hill and surf there. Being by the freeway, back then you could just jump up and go. My parents uh, my dad died when I was 12. That's when I got more serious about surfing. That was kind of my escape to get over it.

Patrick Hill: You were 12 when you started surfing regularly?

Kirk Putnam: Yeah, but I had already been surfing.

I started surfing when I was about 9. Then I got my license. Once you get your license, that's when you get more serious. I was already riding Greg Liddle (Baron of the Displacement Hull) boards by then.

Patrick Hill: When did Greg start surfing?

Kirk Putnam: Oh sheesh, Greg probably started in, like '59 or '60 maybe. He was about 15 or 16. He started really early. Greg was surfing Malibu during the balsa wood era.

Patrick Hill: Where did he grow up?

Kirk Putnam: He's from the Valley, like the Reseda area. He was into it from the get go. He was obviously influenced by Miki Dora (the God of Malibu), oh and Lance Carson. Greg was one of the really hot long-boarders.

Patrick Hill: What led him to start investigating Bob Simmons' (chief inventor of the modern surfboard) concepts?

Kirk Putnam: Just being influenced by Renny Yater (legendary Santa Barbara surfboard shaper).

Patrick Hill: How would you characterize the early Simmons boards?

Kirk Putnam: They were definitely Displacement Hulls. Bob was using mathematics and his aviation background. He was working over at Lockheed. He was a real smart guy. Super eccentric but very, very smart. He was trying to take theories about planing surfaces and stuff and trying to incorporate that into surfboards. Joe Quigg and (Matt) Kevlin were influenced by Simmons too. They kind of branched off on their own and refined the boards even more.

Patrick Hill: Is that what they call the Malibu Board?

Kirk Putnam: Yeah, the Malibu Chip. Renny was riding some of Kelvin's early boards before he started shaping himself.

Patrick Hill: What were Simmons' boards made out of?

Kirk Putnam: Balsa. Solid Balsa.

Patrick Hill: Were the fins glassed on?

Kirk Putnam: Yeah, they had little half moon Simmons fins and were glassed on.

Patrick Hill: Like a twin fin?

Kirk Putnam: Some of them were twin fins, some of them are single fins. There's not as many twin fins as people think. A lot of them were single fins. Quigg and Kevlin were getting boards from Simmons but I couldn't tell you exactly what year. I think around '52 or '53 was

when Quigg and Kevlin got together and started making boards.

Patrick Hill: That's basically all at Malibu?

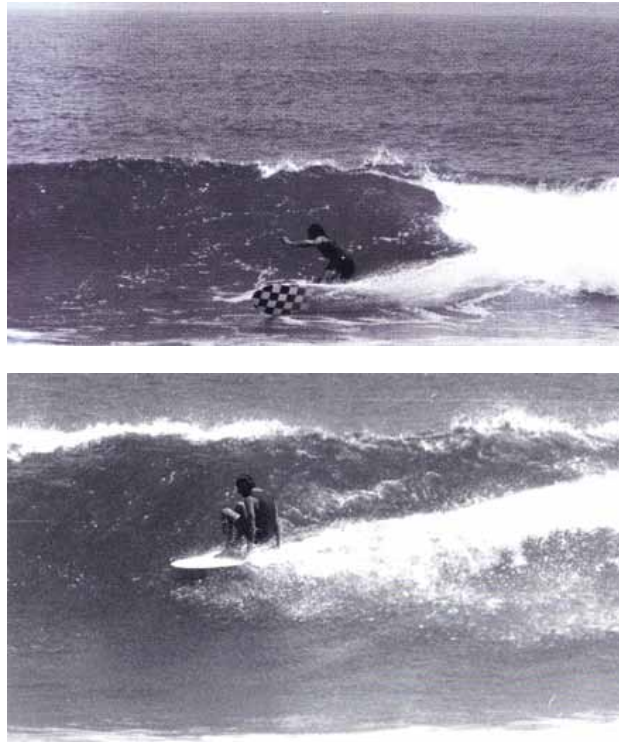
Kirk Putnam: Yeah. Those boards were Hulls. This is when there was no crowd, so you could take this really nice beautiful Hull and just trim all the way across the beach without anybody interfering or anything. They just refined these bitchin' boards. They were actually more refined than the D-fin longboards of later on. Boards got kind of de-sophisticated around the 'Gidger' era because they wanted to make more boards. They made foam molds and the boards kind of got dictated by the molds. The Malibu Chip boards trimmed better and just seemed to go through the water better. Then nose-riding came in. Board design went through a stagnant period until George Greenough and the Australians did the V-bottom. That's when everything started to change. The film, *The Hot Generation* (1967) documents that transition.

Patrick Hill: Who is in that?

Kirk Putnam: Bob McTavish (Australian surfboard shaper) is in that movie. Russell Hughes. A guy named Bobby Brown who was really a good surfer. He was as good as Nat Young and then he got killed in a bar brawl.

Patrick Hill: Let's talk more about George Greenough and his influence?

Kirk Putnam: The board that you see him riding in *Endless Summer* (1966) at Sand Bar is a blue balsa wood board that he shaped in wood shop. Then he made a balsa wood spoon. That really worked. He dished the deck out and it was a kneeboard. George never stood up. I think he had one, a Yater Spoon, and didn't like it. He immediately cut it down or did something with it like make a kneeboard. He made that balsa wood spoon and that was a big jump for him to dish the thing out and make it how he wanted it to ride. It started out as a twin fin and he kept moving the fins in, tuning it and he's like, 'I just need one fin'. The fin ended up being in the middle, which gave him a more neutral board, which is how he wanted it. He liked that board and rode it for years. Then he made a mold of it and that is the beginning of Velo (Greenough's epic flex kneeboard). He made a fiberglass mold and added some foam scraps from longboard blanks and put it together. It kind of twisted a little bit while he made it. He rode it like that and was discouraged with it and just went, 'ahh this doesn't work very well'. Then I don't know what happened. He did



something where the other balsa wood spoon broke so he took the fin out and did some grinding on it and said, 'I'm going to figure out how to make this thing work'. He started messing around with it and sanded it to the right level and just got it to where it was like magic.

Patrick Hill: And so that was the second generation Velo?

Kirk Putnam: It was the first one, he just tuned it. He learned how to load that thing up and as he turned, the board flexed along with the fin and would just take off like a rocket.

Patrick Hill: Where were the fin designs coming from?

Kirk Putnam: Fishing. Seeing tuna. George was a lobster fisherman. He was seeing all this stuff in the water. The fastest fish in the ocean is a Bluefin tuna. He was looking at the foils of their fins and trying to emulate that with fiberglass. That's how it started. The flex of the fin became super important too.

Patrick Hill: How does the flex of the fin influence the board design?

Kirk Putnam: Well, it really works together on a Displacement Hull because of the rounded bottom and the softer rail and the nose and stuff. It sticks in the wave, the rail of the surfboard and the fin kinda work together to drive the surfboard into a deep rail turn. The board sits *in* the water, not on top of it. You step forward to turn instead of off the back of the tail, using the rail and the fin together. Once those things are made properly, the surfboard and the fin, you can build speed upon speed. You can hit your first turn and boom, race it up to the top following the natural curl line of the wave. Once you hit your turn again the fin flexes and projects you even more. It's like you're shifting gears. If a Displacement Hull is made properly it has, like, endless gears. That's what Velo had. As fast as the wave got, George could

almost go that fast.

Patrick Hill: Where do things go from there?

Kirk Putnam: In '66, '67, you start to see the Australians copying his style of fin. George was originally from Santa Barbara and started going down to Australia in '64. Those guys were surfing with George and trying to emulate what he was doing on his kneeboard, but standing up. This is what people refer to as the 'shortboard revolution'. All of a sudden they're like, 'Why do we need this extra foot?' That's when the Plastic Machine came out and the McTavish V-bottom got invented. From there they took a foot off here and a foot off there. It just changed really fast.

Patrick Hill: How short were the boards getting?

Kirk Putnam: We're talking about boards going down to like 8 foot 6 inches, 8 feet. It stayed that way until about 1970. Then boards got really short. At the World Contest in Australia that year things got down to like 5 foot 5 inches. They wanted to get where you weren't even thinking about your surfboard, you were just connected to it. But it kind of went too short because Rolf Aurness went out on a really refined, nice 7 foot 6 inches gun and was surfing a completely different way and just dominated. After that boards started creeping back up and getting more refined.

Patrick Hill: How did this influence the Malibu scene?

Kirk Putnam: When Nat Young came the summer of '68 with his Keyo board he just changed how we thought about riding Malibu. It was such an influence on Greg Liddle that he immediately started making boards like that. That's really the beginning of Greg's Displacement Hulls.

Patrick Hill: Who would you say are the key players in Malibu at that time?

Kirk Putnam: Liddle was surfing Malibu in the

summertime and was a Rincon guy in the wintertime. By now, (Steve) Krajewski is working for Liddle and he's a team rider and the hottest guy. And Greg's good too. And Andy Davis, the glasser. Greg had his own research crew with the guys who were working for him.

Patrick Hill: And what is Steve's name?

Kirk Putnam: His adopted name is Steve Krajewski. His real name is Esteban Bojorquez. That's the name he goes under now.

Patrick Hill: What was he doing for Liddle?

Kirk Putnam: He sanded and foiled fins. They had a shop in Reseda, right next to the gas station on Reseda Boulevard and Ventura Boulevard.

Patrick Hill: When did you start riding Greg's boards?

Kirk Putnam: I was in 9th or 10th grade. Basically, as soon as he started making the boards we wanted.

Patrick Hill: Was it funny that everyone was living in the Valley and surfing Malibu?

Kirk Putnam: Yeah. That's always been there, the Valley cowboys and everything. But really, the best surfers were always, most of the guys, were from the Valley. I know I'm going to get shit for this, as I usually do. But Angie Reno and his brothers? They're from the Valley. Glenn Kennedy is from the Valley. Liddle, Krajewski and Andy Davis and the whole Liddle crew, almost all those guys were from the Valley.

Patrick Hill: In terms of style and philosophy, how do you think Miki Dora influenced Steve and the Liddle crew?

Kirk Putnam: He was just like, the man. He had Malibu in the palm of his hand. I mean, he was an unbelievably good surfer. He's like nobody else. Steve was attracted to Miki's style and he could emulate it. Which is a hard thing to do. Steve really based his style on that and later on, when he got into Hulls, he just went in his own direction.

Patrick Hill: So you were hanging out at Malibu a lot back then?

Kirk Putnam: Yeah. I saw Steve Krajewski when I was in high school. Then I started hanging out with him and others.

Patrick Hill: When was that?

Kirk Putnam: Oh, 1970, '71. Right around then my parents moved to Washington. I didn't want to go so I moved in with a guy out in Reseda who was one of the Liddle crew guys. His parents let me move in with him for a summer.

Patrick Hill: How would you describe surfing Hulls in terms of how it sits in the water and the style it produces?

Kirk Putnam: You're following the natural curl line of the wave. You're not trying to rip the wave apart. The board actually displaces water. Hence the name, Displacement Hull. It's a more flowing style and it's about how the board feels, not how it looks.

Patrick Hill: What is the proper term that Greg coined for his boards?

Kirk Putnam: Oh, yeah, Displacement Hulls. Or Transitional Volume Displacement Hulls. The boards that he makes now are just refined versions of the boards he has been developing for years. Some are a little bit easier to ride and some are more extreme.

Patrick Hill: What other boards are you into now?

Kirk Putnam: I really wanted one of those old V-bottoms. I thought we could make a good one, you know? So, Mark (Andreini) and I made a couple of stringerless 8 footers that were off those old templates but with better rocker and better fins and stuff. We made a couple of really nice ones. That started us off looking back at some of those older boards we had passed over. Then with Brian (Hilbers) and I, it was the same thing. We were looking at those old boards and wanting to bring those boards back. I took some of my most favorite boards from different shapers and went back to Brian and showed him the boards and what I wanted to change and refine.

Patrick Hill: It seems like those designs were just discarded.

Kirk Putnam: Oh, you just wouldn't even believe how fast it went. It was so exciting, I mean, to be surfing at that time. It was insane. I got obsessed with it. That was the beginning of my surfboard obsession. You would walk down the beach in Malibu in 1969 or '68 and your eyes were bugging out of your head, you know? Things changed every month. And there were no computers. Communication was getting a magazine that came out like once a month. You would get it and you'd just be like 'whoa!'. It was really a cool time to grow up.

Patrick Hill: One last question. What was the Liddle League thing about?

Kirk Putnam: That kind of carried over from the long-board days. Like teams and stuff. But there was really no Liddle team. Actually, we made a joke about that. We never called it that. Other people did. When that got put in the *Surfer's Journal*, we weren't real happy about it. But that's just how magazines are. Or people that interview people for magazines. (laughs) I may end up regretting this.

Patrick Hill: Thanks a lot, Kirk.

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Patrick Hill, ESPRIT, 2011 — glass, wood, marble, brass and dye, 121.9 × 71.1 × 22.2 cm • Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, Bortolami, New York, The Approach, London and Galerie Almine Rech, Brussels/Paris

Steve Krajewski, MALIBU, late 1970's • Courtesy Bojorquez Collection

Patrick Hill, MAGNOLIA BLVD., 2006 — wood, glass brass, canvas, dye, oil, syrup, bleach, 123.8 × 81.3 × 213.4 cm • Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, Bortolami, New York, The Approach, London and Galerie Almine Rech, Brussels/Paris

