

Photo: © Bob Barbour Collection

Boogie Woodie

After nearly 40 years you can still feel the sun, smell the sea, and hear the reverb of a surf guitar.

By Mike Salisbury

I remember the first one I ever saw. It was a green 1949 Ford wagon, and it sat at a gas station across the street from a Denny's on a hot and treeless corner off Midway Drive in San Diego. Leaning against the fenders were two tanned, shirtless guys with straw-colored hair.

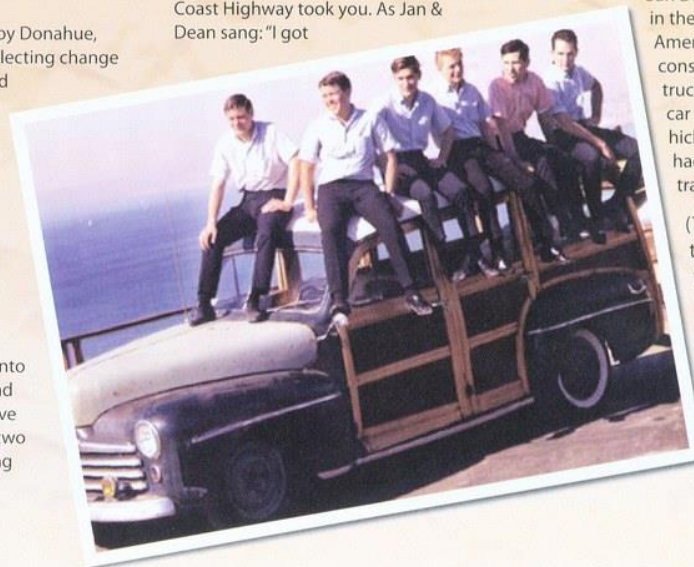
They both looked like Troy Donahue, cocky and laughing and collecting change from two girls in pigtails and bikinis. It was 1964, summer in Southern California. No one had heard of the Beatles yet. Viet Nam was still spelled as two words.

The guys pumped whatever amount of gas that pocket change would buy back in those days. Then, in what seemed like a single, fluid motion, they hopped into the woodie with the girls and headed south on Pacific Drive with the tailgate open and two yellowed surfboards hanging out the back.

For an entire generation, woodies were a symbol of rebellion and fun. They were cheap and like the kids who drove them, they ran on anything. Owning a woodie meant girls and freedom and cool. You turned the key and you were gone, man, anywhere the Pacific Coast Highway took you. As Jan & Dean sang: "I got

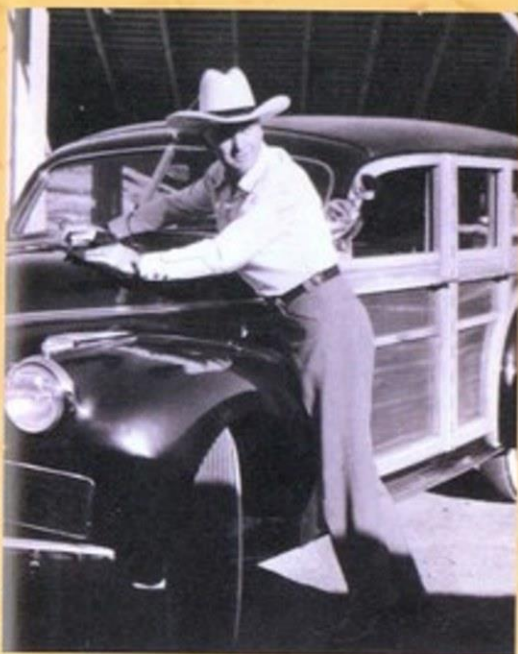
a '34 wagon and I call it a woodie/You know it's not very cherry, it's an oldie but a goody/ Well it ain't got a back seat or a rear window/ But it still gets me where I want to go..."

By the time I had my summer epiphany in San Diego, woodies were already in their second incarnation as an American icon. Furniture makers constructed the first of them on truck frames in the late 1920s. The car replaced the horse-drawn vehicles — jitneys or hacks — that had hauled passengers from train depots to hotels. Wood-



(Top) A local surfer discusses the waves with two friends, from the window of his 193 Model A woody outside the Pleasure Point store in 1965.

(Left) Randy Nauert (above the driver's door) and the popular surf band the Challengers pose for one of their record covers atop Randy's woody.



(Above) 1940s film star, William Boyd, better known as Hopalong Cassidy, with a woodie at his California desert ranch.

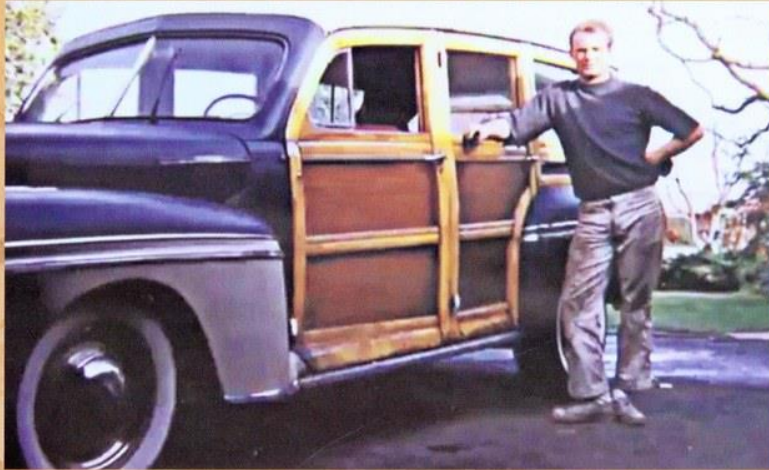
ies were literally “station wagons,” and you’ll see them turn up in old movies from that era. (Was there a Gene Autry or Roy Rogers film that didn’t feature a woodie wagon?)

For roughly the next 20 years, until the 1950s, Ford, Chrysler, Packard, and General Motors turned out family wagons adorned with varnished woodwork and high-gloss lacquer. The woodie was the Baby Boom Generation’s first SUV. With grandiose names like the Estate Wagon, the Sportsman, and the Town and Country, they had a way of spinning a slice of suburbia into a country estate.

But they were expensive to produce — 440 board feet went into making a woodie in the 1940s — and impractical to maintain, and soon they were piling up on used-car lots in Southern California, where surfers bought them cheap and gave them a second life and a new status. Surfers couldn’t afford the ‘50s models, so they generally bought ‘40s wrecks, often for a king’s ransom of up to \$300. Surfer and photographer Tony Friedkin had one. His dad wrote “The Pawnbroker” and co-created the “I Spy” TV series. His mother was a showgirl. He grew up pure Southland.

“Despite sunny weather, woodies required a lot of maintenance,” Friedkin recalled. “Even termites were a problem, so people basically gave them away, which was great for us. The car carried longboards and you could throw a bare mattress in the back and sleep in them on surfari.” Woodies were bedrooms on wheels.

Randy Nauert bought woodies with the



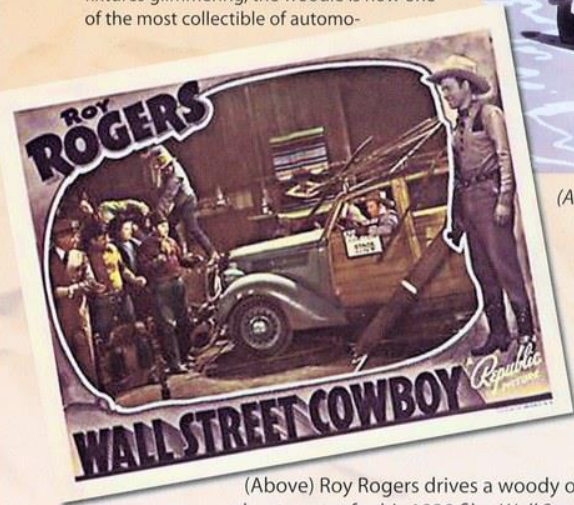
(Above) Local surf legend Doug Haut with his Mercury woody during the 1960s.

money he earned playing bass for a popular surf band, the Challengers. He and his buddies would fill up the gas tank with cleaning solvent and drive down to Dana Point to surf.

"I would park backward at the drive-in and watch the movie with my girlfriend," Nauert said.

Many of those hard-bodied surfers of the 1960s are now the jowly granddads you see at swap meets, longingly eyeing some old '48 and remembering smog-free sunshine, clean water, clear waves, and...what the hell was her name, anyway?

Today, a final renaissance has come to the woody—its third incarnation—and the car has never been more popular. With its Honduran mahogany paneling and pastel paint restored, and its chrome and ivory Bakelite fixtures glimmering, the woody is now one of the most collectible of automo-



(Above) Roy Rogers drives a woody on the one-sheet poster for his 1939 film *Wall Street Cowboy*.

biles. Who would have believed it?

In Santa Cruz, the place to see any style in wood cars is the annual Woodies on the Wharf. It's the biggest woody show in Northern California, with more than 200 entrants from as far as Canada and New York. In Southern California, it's the Wavecrest meeting, held every September at Moonlight Beach near San Diego. Trophies are given for Best 1960 Surfing Woody and Best Hot Rod Woody. There are big-money restorations and Mod As with rotting wood, Buick Estate Wagons with fewer than 50,000 miles on the odometer, and more Town and Country wagons than Pasadena's Rose Parade.

Lovely as it is to look fondly at these ghosts, there's nothing that can duplicate your first time seeing one. Nearly 40 years ago, on the afternoon when I saw that first woody in a San Diego gas station, I was just out of USC for the summer, on my way to my part-time job in a suit and tie. What I watch



(Above) *High Tide*: A hastily parked woody becomes victim to the rising tide

from across the street was a preview of another kind of life, one that was raw and vital, one where a whole world was spread out along the coast waiting to be discovered. It was a moment that changed my life—because that very day, I quit my job and started surfing. And all because of a car. ♣

Mike Salisbury went on to become the second art director of Surfer magazine and one of the most influential designers in the surf culture. Check out his work at www.mikesalisbury.net



Santa Cruz Woodies on the Wharf celebrates twenty years

It's common for a few friends to get together on a Santa Cruz summer afternoon to share a few beers. It's a bit more unusual when those friends all drive woodie station wagons. And when that gathering spawns a small club that changes the face of Santa Cruz, it borders on extraordinary.

Such was the birth of the Santa Cruz Woodies club, which in turn launched one of the West Coast's biggest woodie shows, Woodies on the Wharf. The first event featured more than three dozen vintage (pre-1952) wood-bodied wagons, making it the second-biggest woodie show in the world at the time. Now celebrating its twentieth year, Woodies on the Wharf has become a legendary summer event.

"We are expecting nearly 200 cars, with woodies being driven from Canada and some even shipped from the East Coast," said Roland Baker, an original member and current president of the Santa Cruz Woodie Club.

Past events have included a wide range of cars, from hot rods to classics. Some of the woodies were once a mainstay of old school Hollywood, owned by stars such as Bob Hope or used

to chauffeur Marilyn Monroe around Catalina Island. Many of the cars are outfitted with vintage surfboards, canoes, and vintage teardrop trailers filled with picnic supplies. A few years ago, an 1940s ranch wagon was filled with hay and a western saddle.

"I love the actual show," said Baker, who owns a 1949 Dodge woodie. "It's a great day for the community—and it's free."

Santa Cruzans come out in force for this summer event, so it's a great opportunity to run into friends you haven't seen for a while, stroll the wharf, and enjoy all the cars, raffle prizes, live music, and a wide selection of restaurants.

One of the highlights of the show is the 3:30 p.m. Parade Off the Wharf, when all of the woodies line up and drive from the wharf. This classic car version of models on a runway is a sight not to be missed—but if you do, there's a second chance on Sunday, when the woodies again line up at Ocean Pacific Lodge and cruise up West Cliff Drive to the Santa Cruise Harbor. Santa Cruz Woodies provides free coffee and pastry at the harbor as they say their final alohas for this year.

—Mickey Carroll

If you go

Woodies on the Wharf –

Saturday, June 21; 8 a.m. till 3:30 p.m.

Woodie Cruise – West Cliff drive to the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor, Sunday, June 22; beginning at 10:00 a.m.