

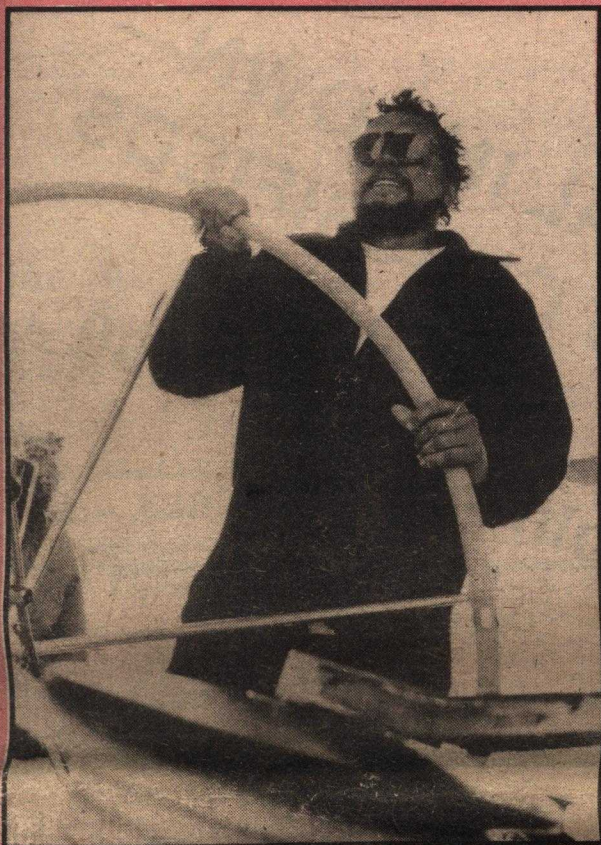
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S.C. vibe fuels Transpac win

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Bill Lee's Merlin touch



by Dan Coyro

YOU can't miss her, there isn't another boat in the Santa Cruz Yacht Harbor that even resembles her. Find the tallest mast in the harbor and follow it down to its sleek, white hull that looks more like a dart than the racing yacht she is. That's the Merlin, all right—winner of last month's prestigious Transpac race to Hawaii, and captained by local yacht builder Bill Lee, who also designed and built her. And any sailor worth his salt (excuse the pun) will tell you it came as no surprise when Lee and seven other Santa Cruz sailors won the 2,225-mile race from Los Angeles to Honolulu.

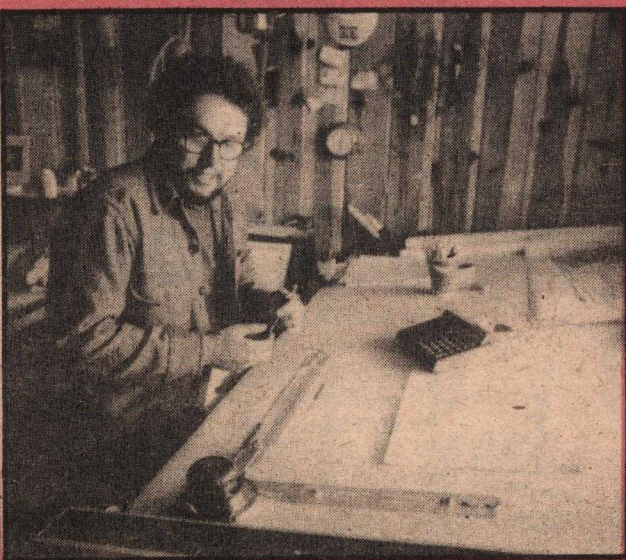
The 67-foot Merlin set a record of 8 days, 11 hours, 1 minute, 46 seconds—beating the old record by 22 hours. It was a dramatic finish with second place going to Drifter, only 17 minutes behind. Drifter, by the way, was built according to blueprints drawn by Lee which basically followed Merlin's design.

Merlin's victory was certainly no surprise to Lee, either. "We knew we were going to win all along," Lee said matter-of-factly. Lee's confidence is not at all unfounded, and based on a rather impressive record as a boat designer. While this was the first time Lee sailed one of his boats in the Transpac race, Lee designed and built the boat Chutzpah, which won the Transpac in 1973 and 1975. Considered by many stodgier yachtsmen of the establishment to be a maverick among boat designers, Lee's designs prompted Transpac Handicap officials to assess heavy penalties against the lighter boats (Lee is the chief practitioner of what has come to be called the

ULDB, ultra-light-displacement boat) for the 1973 Transpac race, saying Lee's designs gave an unfair advantage to the boat's owners—particularly in downwind conditions. Even with the penalties Lee's design won that year.

Although Lee's designs are now accepted by the establishment, he still reflects upon boat designing and racing with an attitude that says fun is the bottom line, instead of winning is everything. According to his friends, the 35-year-old Lee believes "if you aren't having fun while doing it, you might as well not be doing it." For instance, Lee put a steering wheel on the Merlin instead of a tiller because more people can sail her with a wheel. And, as unusual as it may sound, the boat was laid out for parties, too.

There's one story going around about Lee, the Merlin, and his winning the Transpac which might shed some light on the taciturn designer. "There's a big party for each boat in the Transpac



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race when it crosses the finish line," Lee said. "A couple of years ago, I was on a boat that finished 11th, so there were 10 parties I didn't get to go to. So the story is that this year, I designed and built a winning boat so I could go to all the parties!"

Parties aside, the Merlin was in fact built to win the Transpac, said Bob Larson, Lee's friend, crew member, and coordinator of the Merlin project, a two-year effort by a handful of people.

The Merlin project, said Larson, was born over a couple of beers and soon grew into a tightly-run building schedule, a full time job even though Lee's boat building business (he and his work crew have five boats going at any one time) went on as usual. The Merlin was completed a couple of months before the race, and although the boat was hardly in water long enough to get wet, the bible of the sailing world, Sail magazine, did a seven-page spread on Merlin and its owner, calling it the odds on favorite to win the Transpac.

Lee, who graduated from Cal Poly at San Luis Obispo in '65 with a mechanical engineering degree and has been a resident here for the last 10 years (his shop is located at the end of Hilltop Street in Soquel), said there are several namesakes for his boat, Merlin. "Merlin was a 5th century fellow referred to as a magician," Lee said, "but actually he was more of an engineer. Merlin was also the name of the Rolls Royce engine built for the P-51 fighter in World War II," he added. "And as it turns out," Lee said with a wry smile, "Merlin is the name of a bird—a fierce little hawk that lives up in the cold latitudes. So you can take your pick from any of those three."

An additional part of the Merlin project was to go with an all local crew, according to Larson. "All sorts of people wanted to give us good deals on equipment for the Merlin," said Larson, "and in return, they wanted to be part of the crew. But part of the plan was to use local people so we turned them down. And we might have been a little light on crew with only eight (most of the other 65 entries had 10 or more crew members), but that was part of the Santa Cruz trip and ULDB thinking...like 'Ah, we don't need all this food, we can do it without that, and we can do it with only eight crew members.'"

"And another thing," said Larson. "There were women involved with the Merlin project from start to finish—there was the possibility that we might use a woman as part of the crew, but in the end we wound up with the eight men. At the end of the race, we even challenged some of the other boats to a race with an all woman crew, but nobody took the challenge—they know Santa

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Cruz women are some of the best sailors around." Larson said the Merlin's trip was fueled by what he called the "Santa Cruz vibe. A lot of Santa Cruz energy was happening. You could feel it way out there in the middle of the ocean...that Santa Cruz vibe going, 'awright, awright,'" added Larson with a clenched fist. Larson said after the first day, they never saw another boat until the last day of the race when they spotted Drifter right off beam.

"We were both running down to an imaginary jibe point—they from the South, and us from the North (Merlin chose a course which was much farther north than the competition) which would set us up for the finish of the race." The rest is history. Merlin won by 17 minutes, a slim margin for an eight-day race.

With Merlin's modern design, and her big win, you'd think Lee would be guarded with the blueprints to her design. But no, Lee says he'll build anyone a duplicate that will be ready in 10 months...along with a \$250,000 price tag.

Can the Merlin be beaten? "Oh sure," said Lee, "there is always room for improvements, that's how progress is made—and there's always the build-a-better-mousetrap-theory." If Merlin does lose in the next Transpac, you can bet Bill Lee won't shed any tears or lose any sleep—he set his goal, achieved it, and for the time being it's all downwind sailing. •