

Master Of The *Merlin*

By Eric Hoffman



Bob Barbour

Merlin and Drifter churn along in excess of twenty knots.

■ Designer, builder of revolutionary sailboats; winner of many of sailing's most coveted races; designer, builder, skipper of *Merlin*, the current Transpac record holder (Los Angeles to Honolulu, 2,225 miles). All these distinctions belong to Bill Lee of Santa Cruz.

To some he's an irreverent maverick, but to an increasing number of yachtsmen he is a brilliant pragmatist who has changed the design and art of sailing.

Bill Lee hardly projects the blue-blazer image associated with the upper echelons of yachting. From the bottom up: faded red tennis shoes, socks settled atop shoes, shorts cut below the knees, a bright Hawaiian shirt, sailor's cap, sunglasses, and sparse, somewhat neglected beard.

He started sailing at thirteen, after his family moved from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho to Newport Beach. In the beginning it was cruising lagoons and backwaters in an eight-foot dinghy. As a high school student, "I did what was asked because my family expected it. I wasn't into sports much. I spent my spare time tinkering with projects rather than watching tv." After high school Bill earned a mechanical engineering degree from Cal Poly and found himself in the defense industry, where he worked on stress and trim features of personnel carriers and things of a similar nature.

After a few years he decided on a change. At twenty-six he took a job with Sylvania, one of the few industries in Santa Cruz County. But more importantly, he started spending a lot of time at the Santa Cruz Yacht Harbor crewing on different kinds of boats.

In 1970 the 505 World Championships were held in Santa Cruz. A 505 is an extremely fast, small, monohulled sailboat that requires an acrobatic crew to keep it upright. A 505 sailor stands on the hull precariously suspended over the water on a trapeze as the boat teeters on the brink, literally skipping from wave to wave. Bill wanted to build a sea-going ocean-racer version of the 505.

Bill explained he had to make a fixed keel version to come up with a realistic ocean racer. Hanging from trapezes and constantly scrambling to balance a boat just wouldn't cut it on a big ocean racer.

His first boat, *Magic*, ran away from everything it raced in Monterey Bay that year. With success came attention from other yachtsmen. Soon, Bill Lee Yachts was founded in the rolling hills of nearby Soquel and it wasn't long until the Santa Cruz 27 began to populate the harbor.

By 1973, Bill had designed a string of impressive ocean racers climaxing with *Chutzpah*, which won the Transpac that year and, to prove it was no fluke, again in 1975.

With success came controversy. His boats belong to a new class known as Ultra Light Displacement Boats (ULDBs). They are designed with maximum speed in mind and do not conform to traditional

distortions below the water lines. The design is not unlike a surfboard with ballast, i.e., a minimum draft hull with a thin, heavily ballasted keel. Of course, it takes sophisticated engineering to bring about a seaworthy package.

Committees that oversee yacht racing became worried about Bill's light designs making a mockery of traditional boats. Heavy handicaps were assigned to ULDBs. Handicaps are an attempt to reduce a sailboat race to the skill of the crews and not the advantage of the boat. Theoretically, a heavily handicapped boat could finish considerably before a slower boat — but lose because of the formula set up by the handicappers.

But Bill Lee is unperturbed by controversy and handicaps. "To me fast is fun. I'd rather get there first and relax. I enjoy sailing fast more than receiving a trophy."

His philosophy certainly has converts, judging by the numerous Santa Cruz 27's which, despite their handicaps, usually finish first in time and standing in their class.

Some critics of ULDBs question the seaworthiness of light boats, but Bill's record in heavy weather has done much to dispel fears. In a 1977 single-handed Farallones race, Bill beat all comers to the Farallones and back to San Francisco in six hours and three minutes. The 1980 winner took more than nine hours. Bill made good time while negotiating heavy seas and strong winds for most of the fifty-five-mile race. He skippered his sixty-seven-foot *Merlin* through weather that forced many traditionally designed boats out of the race.

Bill likes to go fast, but he's no daredevil. "In the Farallones race I played it safe by reefing quite a bit. I set up the boat conservatively before I left the dock and didn't expect to change anything during the race. I let the boat steer itself on the way out and surfed back (*Merlin* under ideal conditions will surf at over twenty knots).

Bill questions the safety of single-handed races. "Sure it's a thrill to race alone, but if something goes wrong you have no help. In the Atlantic last year some (skippers) were lost during a single-hander. Now that's not fun. There's a safety problem."

To the more traditional yachtsmen who see irreverence in Bill Lee's idea of yacht design, Bill reacts kindly and seems to say such talk is irrelevant. "Fast is fun. My boats cost less to build per running foot, which makes them more economical. Fewer materials means lower costs and a fast design means performance. Some people like Winnebagos and others like Porsches. It's just smart to design a boat that gives a person more performance and more boat at a lower cost."

Bill's emphasis on having fun while sailing fast is not forsaken regardless of the circumstances. Where many racing crews are all male, highly disciplined, uniformly dressed teams, Bill is known for casualness. His crews often work spontaneously. Someone works the

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jib, someone else readies the spinnaker. Instead of following orders, a casual consensus is reached as events unfold. On one 1,200 mile race from San Diego to near Manzanillo, Mexico, two women were members of the crew of eight. Bill: "They didn't come because they were women. They came because they were capable sailors." After a short pause Bill added, "A guy did all the cooking during the race." *Merlin* won.

Events leading to the 1977 Transpac are still subject to lively discussion in Bill's home port of Santa Cruz. His boats had won Transpac, but he'd never skippered a winner. In 1976, Bill began building his now famous *Merlin*, a sixty-seven-foot sloop with a narrow twelve-foot beam, and 1,850 square feet of sail. As Bill and his workers readied their masterpiece, a spoiler appeared. The heavy handicap was a foregone conclusion; the spoiler came in the form of Harry Moloscho, a Southern California yachtsman.

Moloscho visited Lee's shop and asked Bill to build him a sloop like *Merlin*. Bill didn't have the time or the manpower. Moloscho looked the plans over, viewed the hull of the *Merlin* and went back to Los Angeles to work on a racer of his own. He came up with *Drifter*, a sixty-nine-foot sloop that some say is a copy of *Merlin*. *Drifter* is two feet longer, two feet wider, and has two feet more mast. Bill explains, "The interesting thing about Harry is he wanted a *Merlin* type boat before she'd been in the water and tested." Bill explains, "Once you have the winning design, the bigger the boat the faster you go."

Apparently, Moloscho was relying on the slightly larger size to ensure a victory in the 2,225-mile race. The advantage of a slightly bigger boat would add up over a long haul. Bill does not share the indignation of some of his fans towards Moloscho. "He just wanted a better mousetrap. It's the nature of man to want a better mousetrap. There are some differences between *Drifter* and *Merlin*. I got some of my ideas for *Merlin* standing on the sloop *Ragtime* in Mexico."

The 1977 Transpac was one of the most exciting in history. The news media reported the race as a constant battle with no boat having a clear lead. Bill explains it differently, "After Catalina Island it's rare to see another boat, whether you are among the leaders or bringing up the rear. There is usually about seven miles of visibility. The newspapers write their stories from the positions boats radio in daily. The problem is, half the time boats don't know where they are because of inaccuracies in calculating positions."

Bill's strategy: "You always take helmsmen on an ocean race. I took eight helmsmen. That way someone who knows what he's doing will be in charge regardless of the shift or time of day or night. During a race we have four rules: sleep, eat, sail, and don't fall off the boat."

After days of not sighting another boat, *Merlin* spotted *Drifter* 150 miles out of Honolulu. Just eighty-eight miles out of Honolulu an airplane reported both yachts were even. Two beautiful fast yachts racing across the Pacific for more than 2,000 miles — neck and neck. Bill explains with a solemn glow from within, "When we saw *Drifter* things got tense. There was tremendous cooperation on board. Some of the crew had helped build *Merlin*. It was for all the marbles. There was plenty of wind. It was exciting."

Merlin beat *Drifter* by seventeen and a half minutes and shattered the Transpac record set by *Windward Passage* in 1971 by more than twenty-two hours. *Merlin*'s record of eight days, eleven hours and one minute was truly an incredible accomplishment.

For the 1979 Transpac (the race is held every other year) *Merlin* was rented to a group of victory-minded yachtsmen. In a race run in lighter air, *Drifter* won in a relatively slow time of thirteen days. *Merlin* will reign as the fastest sailboat to have crossed the Pacific to Honolulu, at least until 1981.

What's next for this brilliant boat designer who, by ignoring convention, has brought a new dimension to sailing? Bill Lee: "Whatever is next will have to be fun or else it's not worth doing." □