

Biggest Little Surf Film

by Dan Frazier

Though the Guinness Book of World Records has not yet verified the fact, *Journey to the Impact Zone* may well hold the record for "Most Widely Seen Theatrical Release of a Super 8 Feature Film." Between August 1988 and April 1989, the film screened 150 times at theaters, college auditoriums, nightclubs and bars from coast to coast — with a few screenings in Hawaii as well. In total, more than 11,000 people paid to see the film.

Of course, these figures are unimpressive when compared to those of an average 35mm theatrical release. However, they are staggering when one considers that *Journey to the Impact Zone* was shot using the tiniest of formats: Super 8. Surprisingly, the film was not blown up to 16mm or 35mm for screening. Instead, a Super 8 print was projected. What's more, no one ever suspected they were watching a Super 8 movie.

What kind of crazed filmmaker would throw his life savings into the production and promotion of a plotless film about surfing? Meet Jeff Neu: fearless surfer, respected cinematographer and shrewd businessman.

Neu was born in Canada, and his family moved to Los Angeles when he was four. He bought his first surfboard and learned to surf at 14. By the time he had graduated from high school, he was seeking out the bigger waves in San Clemente. Neu finally moved to the scenic Southern California town, worked nights, surfed days, and became interested in photography. Thanks to a sister who worked for an airline, Neu was able to fly for free to some of the best waves in the world.

Bitten by the filmmaking bug, he took film and television classes at a local college and continued to work nights at a grocery store. He also invested in a Beaulieu Super 8 movie camera. A \$500.00 custom underwater housing enabled him to take the camera out to the action. Unlike most Super 8 cameras, the Beaulieu allowed Neu to change lenses and frame rates. The most

dramatic results were achieved shooting at 80 frames per second, slowing the action to about 1/3 its normal rate.

Neu eventually bought a second Beaulieu to use when his first camera was in the shop. Though the Beaulieu is generally considered to be rugged and dependable, any camera is susceptible to damage when subjected to the fierce turbulence of breaking waves. Even on the beach, the camera is exposed to blowing sand and corrosive salt spray.

As his obsession with surf cinematography continued to grow, Neu spliced his best shots together to form a 40 minute film. Encouraged by the enthusiastic response he got from his friends, Neu decided to quit his 13 year job at the grocery store in order to make a feature length surf movie with the \$55,000 he had saved. "I didn't want to work for Safeway for the rest of my life," he says.

With a little more help from his contact in the airline industry, Neu flew to such far away places as Hawaii, France, Indonesia, Mexico, and Australia to collect footage for *Journey to the Impact Zone*. By the time he finished shooting, he had more than 30 hours of footage, including shots of surfing champions like Matt Archbold, Martin Potter, and Tom Curren in action.

Almost the entire film was shot with Kodachrome 40, which is famous for its fine grain and saturated colors. Though Kodachrome 40 is very slow (recommended ASA is 25 when used in daylight with an 85 wratten filter), Neu had plenty of light because he was shooting outdoors throughout the film. Neu reports that he bought 1100 rolls of Kodachrome 40 from K-Mart at a cost of only \$5.57 per two-and-a-half minute roll.

Neu's greatest expense arose during post-production. First he spent several days transferring his footage to videotape via a state of the art Rank Cintel Flying Spot Scanner. Two months were spent in an off-line edit bay cutting the footage down to 95 minutes. It was during the editing that Neu added a soundtrack of driving surf music donated by local bands looking for their big break.

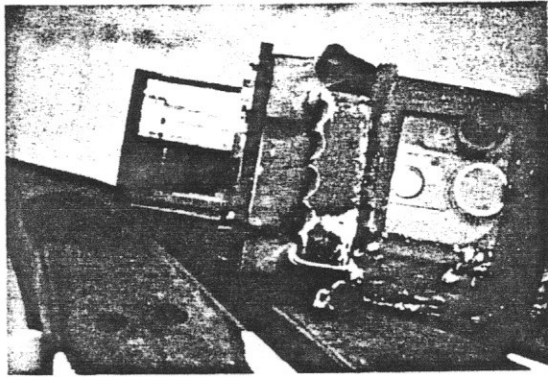


Brian Bleak
poised with
600mm ED lens
on Beaulieu

Once Neu finished editing *Journey to the Impact Zone*, he began to conform his film footage to the edited video. Working without edge numbers or time code, the task kept him busy for weeks.

The first theatrical screening of the film was in August of 1988 at the 550 seat Miramar theater in San Clemente. With the super bright Elmo GS1200 Xenon projector, the print looked fabulous, even enlarged 1166 times to fill the 20 foot wide screen. After a series of sell-out screenings to cheering San Clemente residents, Neu began to arrange screenings in other coastal communities. His method of promotion was simple: he hung posters and left flyers at stores that sold surf related merchandise. In exchange, Neu plugged the merchants before the screenings and staged giveaways at the theaters. Neu's promotional tactics worked so well that he soon found himself touring the nation in his VW Bus, showing the film not only in theaters, but on college campuses, in community centers, and even in nightclubs and bars. In the course of nine months, he screened the film 150 times, including 12 showings in Hawaii alone. The biggest turn-out was a crowd of 700 in Santa Barbara.

Following the tour, Neu began to contact video stores in an effort to get VHS duplicates of his film onto store shelves. At this point, sales of the videotape was merely icing on the cake. In the last two-and-a-half months, Neu has sold more than 500 copies of *Journey to*



Jeff Neu's custom underwater housing for a Beaulieu.

the *Impact Zone* at a wholesale price of \$29.95. Suggested retail is \$59.95. Neu has used the money from *Impact Zone* to make a new Super 8 feature called *San Clemente Locals*.

Though Neu's beach-centered career may tempt you to buy a surfboard and paddle out to sea with your camera safely sealed in plexiglass, keep in mind that the life of a surf cinematographer is not just one fun day in the sun after another. Tricks of the trade abound. For example, an Alka-Seltzer tablet in the housing serves as a warning sign for leaks. Skin oil smeared on the front glass helps keep water droplets from splashing up and distorting the image.

But there are greater dangers. There is a surprising amount of stress and a great deal of danger in the profession. Neu claims that "being a professional water cinematographer is about as dangerous as being a professional stuntman."

Jeff Neu is not the only filmmaker working to quench the demand for thrilling surf footage. Brian Bleak (pronounced Blake) also makes his living by chasing the world's hottest surfers as they travel the globe in search of the world's hottest waves. Like Neu, Bleak prefers to use Super 8 to capture the surf action. However, Bleak has no plans to screen his footage in theaters.

If you've seen any of Bleak's footage, you've seen it on a television. It's been used in commercials to sell everything from Surfer Magazine to Suntory Beer. His footage has also appeared in a Huey Lewis music video and is seen every week on ESPN'S Emmy award winning *Surfer Magazine Show*, and is frequently sold through stock footage suppliers in New York and Los Angeles. Bleak is careful not to mention which stock footage houses are selling his

shots, fearing that some of his best customers might change their buying habits should they learn they've been paying top dollar for Super 8 footage. A 15 second surf shot can make as much as \$10,000. Brian Bleak has also written, shot, and edited six surf films in the last five years, four of them feature length.

Bleak, who is now 29, grew up in Los Angeles. He made his first backyard Super 8 film when he was ten years old. He says the sun was his "almighty arc light." Bleak's interest in filmmaking was replaced during his teen years by other interests, including surfing. Unlike Jeff Neu, Bleak never aimed to become a professional surfer. It was a documentary about the making of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* that inspired Bleak to apply for admission to the University of Southern California Cinema/Television program.

Bleak celebrated his graduation from USC by taking his surf board and his first cheap Super 8 camera to South Africa for two months. During this trip, Bleak realized that during his senior year, he had been called upon increasingly to serve as the boom operator or sound mixer on commercial projects. Though he was learning a lot about filmmaking by working as a sound man, he really did not enjoy the work. Bleak realized that he might be able to turn his love for surfing and his newly acquired filmmaking skills into an enjoyable career. When he returned to Los Angeles, he cut together his first short surf film from the footage he shot on the shores of South Africa. He titled the film *The Color of Surfing* and sold it to a Los Angeles cable channel for use as filler between feature films. Bleak's next film was a one hour documentary about the history of surfing called *This is Surfing*. He sold VHS copies of the film by advertising in surfing magazines.

In 1986, Bleak met Herbie Fletcher, a former surf champion. In 1977, Fletcher had invented Astrodeck, a traction system that has revolutionized surfing. Today, twelve of the world's sixteen top surfers use Astrodeck to keep their feet firmly on their boards. Fletcher was struggling to get a surf film finished called *Wave Warriors* when Bleak met him. The film, which spotlighted surf pros using Astrodeck, was having post-production problems. Fletcher's editor was not a surfer and could not tell a good surf move from a bad one. To make matters

worse, Fletcher was not familiar with the post-production technology required to finish the film he had financed. Hearing the knock of opportunity, Bleak showed Fletcher his surf films and offered to solve the post-production nightmares. Fletcher hired Bleak without hesitation.

Bleak has found that hand cleaning his footage before transferring to one inch videotape consistently results in the cleanest images. He edits on a simple 3/4" off-line convergence system to keep costs down. Additional color correction is done at Pacific Ocean Post in Santa Monica when the digital on-line master is assembled.

Though Bleak's skill as a surf cinematographer helped open the door to a fulfilling career, he believes that his ability to edit videotape — a skill acquired at USC — has also been vital to his career. "If I didn't know how to edit videotape, I might be working at McDonald's," observes Bleak.

Bleak's skill as a video editor and his expertise in the area of surf cinematography has made him head of production at Astroboys Productions in San Clemente. Astroboys, a division of Fletcher's Astrodeck, has released four sequels to *Wave Warriors* during the last three years, and is in pre-production right now for *Wave Warriors VI*, which Bleak will again write, shoot, and edit.

Like Jeff Neu's films, Bleak's *Wave Warriors* films are often compared to music videos. Bleak notes that the style of surf films has changed radically over the years. "In the sixties, surf films usually told a story: Bob wakes up and the sun is shining. He grabs his surfboard and hitchhikes to the beach where the waves are gnarly and the girls all love him. Today," says Bleak, "the kids are growing up with MTV. They aren't interested in stories anymore."

Because music is such an integral part of today's surf films, Bleak must choose very carefully. When on the beach, he sometimes asks surfers what kind of music they enjoy, and he then tries to use that music in the soundtrack of his films.

With Bleak's background as a sound engineer, it's no surprise that each *Wave Warriors* film is released in Hi-Fi stereo, with much of the audio coming directly from digital recordings. Though the soundtrack of a *Wave Warriors* film is 90% music, the films also include seg-

ments in which champion surfers discuss different aspects of surfing. These breaks in the action not only give the viewer a chance to catch their breath, but provide various surf-wear manufacturers with an opportunity to show the heroes of surfing wearing their clothing. Though Astrodeck continues to be the leading sponsor for the *Wave Warriors* films, several other companies are now funding the films in exchange for placement of their products in the films.

Bleak estimates the cost of an average *Wave Warriors* film at \$50,000. While the various sponsors contribute more than enough to finance the films, additional profits are realized through the sale of videotape copies of the film to surfers around the world.

Shooting the films in Super 8 also helps increase profitability. "The cost of filmstock and processing when working with Super 8 is roughly a third the cost of working in 16mm," reports Bleak. He estimates he shot about 80 hours of Super 8 film last year, and that shooting with Super 8 rather than 16mm resulted in a savings of \$70,000.

Using Super 8 film has other advantages. "With Super 8, I can set up, pop the cartridge in the camera, and be rolling in less than two minutes," says Bleak. "With 16mm, it takes a lot longer, especially if you have to thread the camera up with film." Because Super 8 equipment is so light, Bleak can easily carry all his equipment by himself. "For me, moving to a location farther down the beach to get a better angle on the action is pretty easy. The guys shooting 16mm don't like to drag their equipment very far."

While many surf cinematographers like to take their cameras out to where the action is, Bleak prefers to shoot from shore. He relies heavily on a Nikon 180mm ED lens. When the surfers are unusually far away, a Nikon 600mm ED lens goes on the Beaulieu. Keep in mind that with a Super 8 camera, the effect of a lens with a given focal length is about the same as that of a lens with a focal length 2.5 times greater fitted to a 16mm camera, or a lens with a focal length 6.25 times greater fitted to a 35mm camera. In other words, to get the same magnification that Bleak gets with his 600mm lens, a cinematographer working with 35mm would need a 3750mm lens!

Though his success as a surf cinematographer can be attributed in part to his choice of equipment, Bleak believes his biggest advantage is his love of surfing. "Being a surfer myself, I can anticipate what a surfer is going to do next. Sometimes, when I'm following a surfer with my lens, it's like I'm out there on the surfboard myself," he says.

Working in Super 8 does present some challenges. For one thing, because Kodachrome 40, the finest grain color filmstock available to the super 8 filmmaker, has such narrow exposure latitude, Bleak has been forced to pay close attention to his exposures. He uses a Sekonic spot meter to assist him in selecting the optimum F stop.

Super 8 film labs pose another hurdle. Though same day processing of black and white film has been available for some time, Bleak reports that he often waits up to a week to get his processed color film back from the lab. "Fortunately," says Bleak, "this situation seems to be improving. I think the labs are finally waking up to the fact that Super 8 is a professional format. We really need professional services. We can't wait a week to see the dailies. It's exciting to see that Kodalux has made a deal with Super 8 Sound over in Burbank — I can start getting my Kodachrome back overnight."

For Bleak, the processing situation is not the only thing that is changing. He observes that the whole world is changing. He is especially concerned about the environment. The pollution of beaches and oceans does not go unnoticed by surfers. Astroboys Productions recently donated \$5000 to assist East coast surfers in cleaning up their beaches. Bleak plans to present the environmental concerns of the world's top surfers in the interview segments of the next *Wave Warriors* film. Bleak has strong feelings of his own on the environmental issue: "The environment is not just a problem for the politicians and big business. It's everybody's problem. We all have to deal with it." Surprisingly, Exxon has not yet offered to sponsor the film. ▲