

# Corporate 'tie guy' turns into Surfdog

HARRY BROOKS  
FOR THE NORTH COUNTY TIMES

ENCINITAS — Dave Kaplan may have refused to get in harmony with traditional corporate culture, but he has found his own rhythm as owner of the multifaceted music company Surfdog Inc. and the Java Hut coffee bar on Coast Highway 101 in Encinitas.

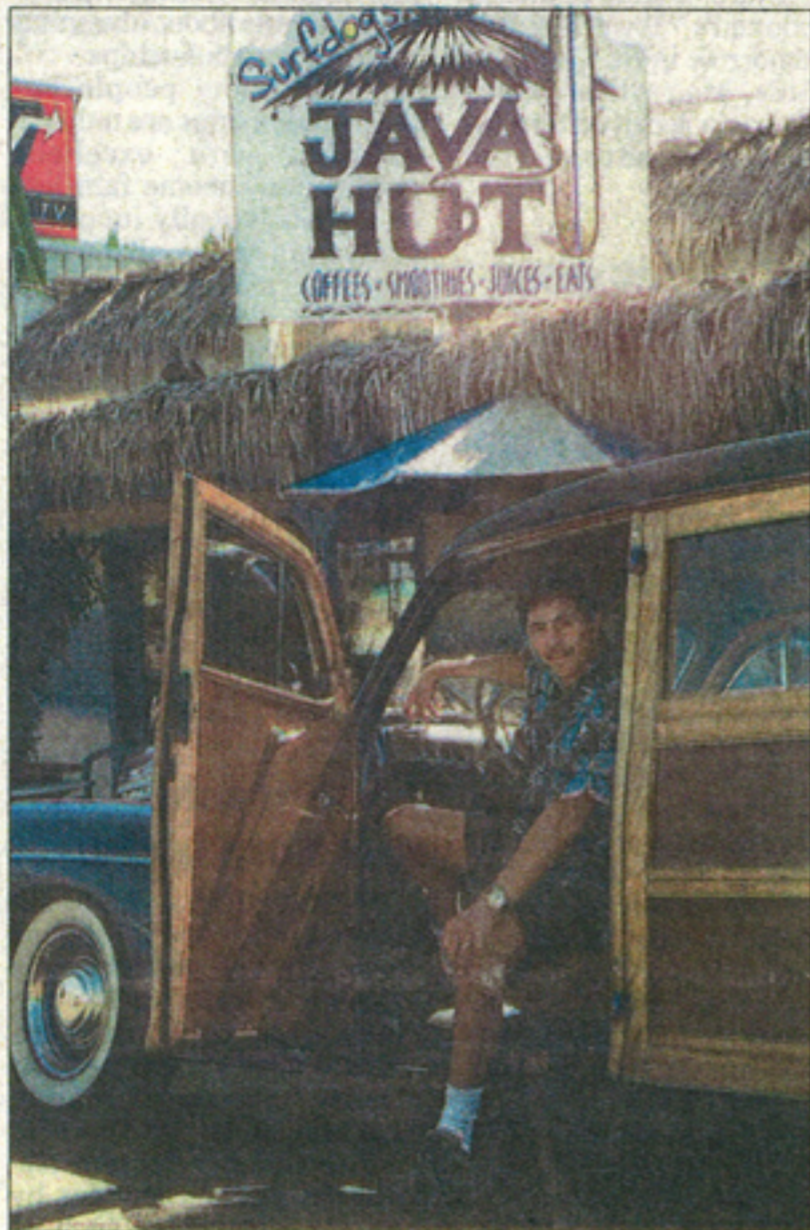
"A board meeting here means a little surf," Kaplan said, referring to one of the high-energy outdoor activities he pursues, along with skateboarding and rock climbing.

Even the term "board room" takes on another meaning at Surfdog Inc. Rather than a corporate meeting place, Surfdog's board room is a walled-off space in a small cottage where surfboards are stored on the company's property.

Kaplan handles his business chores from an adjacent cottage-turned-office at 1126 Coast Highway 101.

Rich tropical landscaping — including

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Java Hut and Surfdog Inc. music company owner Dave Kaplan sits in his 1947 Ford woodie outside his businesses on Coast Highway 101 in Encinitas.

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carved tiki poles and a trickling fountain depicting jumping dolphins — adorns the courtyard in a fenced enclosure that includes the two cottages behind the Java Hut building.

In this exotic setting, Surfdog Inc.'s eight employees work at producing recordings and publishing music, plus managing business interests for the likes of musicians Brian Setzer, Sprung Monkey, Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks and the Butthole Surfers.

The company also performs consulting work on extreme-sports campaigns for such companies as Best Buy and 1-800-Collect.

"Dave is a born leader," said Surfdog Inc.'s general manager Niels Schroeter, who began working for Kaplan 11 years ago when he was managing the rock band UB40.

"From the minute I met him, I could see that. He was 30 at the time, but I thought he'd been in the business 30 years with what he knew and

his ideas," Schroeter said. "We have the palm trees and tikis that give our place a casual feel, but we wouldn't have any of this if we weren't serious about business."

Kaplan felt business was taken too seriously when he worked as an auditor for the accounting firm Ernst & Whinney, now Ernst & Young, in Los Angeles in 1981. Kaplan worked at the firm after earning a bachelor's degree in business economics at UC Santa Barbara.

"I was suit-and-tie accountant guy," said Kaplan, who now comes to work wearing Polynesian-style shirts. He is still a state-authorized certified public accountant. "I was taking runs during my lunch time and was very unorthodox. I'd get a lot of looks from people in the office. I was even reprimanded for being too happy and excited with clients."

Two years later, he decided to join friends in a T-shirt company that contracted for images of rock music stars such as Michael Jackson and Madonna.

In 1985, he met members of the band UB40 and eventually became their manager.

Kaplan took over management of the Brian Setzer Orchestra in 1992 and started Surfdog Inc. the next year.

"Finding new bands is the most exciting thing there is," said Kaplan, sitting under an umbrella at what he calls the company's "conference table" in the lush courtyard.

"We try to find new bands that maybe weren't discovered yet by a major record label and give them their first shot. We try things and decide whether they work or not in minutes instead of quarters," Kaplan said, comparing his current business practices with those he dealt with in the past as an auditor.

He will even pull out his guitar "and break into action" at times to demonstrate suggested changes when producing recordings.

Kaplan stumbled into the gourmet coffeehouse business four years ago while searching for a place that would allow him to move Surfdog Inc. out of his five bedroom home in Encinitas.

The storefront building on the property he acquired had been used for coffee cafes, most notably the former Naked Bean.

"I never wanted to get in the coffee business, but it's going good and I enjoy it," said Kaplan, who remodeled the interior with bamboo thatch and Polynesian-style adornments, and created a new menu of coffees, cold drinks and light foods.

To attract the surfing crowd, he carries the biweekly Wave Fax there and offers surfboard wax at wholesale price, 48 cents a bar.

"This is what we are — ocean loving, soulful people," Kaplan said of himself, his coffee house customers and his employees.

Although Kaplan moved his family six months ago to a 3-acre spread in Elfin Forest — shared by three horses, three dogs, two goats and a pig — he still considers Encinitas his hometown. He said the rural atmosphere is good for his children, ages 4 and 8, and even a recent pig bite that required him to get a tetanus shot hasn't made him regret the move.

Kaplan drives his restored 1947 Ford woodie to work each day.

"I'm still an Encinitas guy at heart," he said. "A beach guy."