



The Power of **MOM** Third Surfrider/Surfdog Compilation Keeps Fighting the Good Fight

by Troy Johnson



Gary Hoey, Dick Dale and Dave Kaplan

One day in 1994, after surfing at Cherry Hill in Solana Beach, I noticed large, red welts on my body. My friend laughed and reveled in numerous STD jokes — but called me later to admit that he, too, looked ridden with syphilis. Since we weren't bed mates, we knew something in the San Diego coastal waters had been foul that night.

Since then, I've seen surfing friends of mine — healthy, Darwinian-champion types — get sick with a frequency reserved for uranium miners. I no longer surf on the days after rains, when storm-drain overflows basically turn the San Diego surf zone into a crapper, with olive-hued waves of dung. The last time I surfed after a rain was when, in the midst of flu-like chills, a friend called to report that the pollution in the water had been 40-times greater than the "safe-for-humans" standard the night prior. My outmuscled immune system had gotten its ass kicked again by San Diego's poor sewage infrastructure.

It was a grim realization that our surf-zone shrines were increasingly becoming off-limits due to sewage run-off. Worse, no one seemed to be doing anything about it.

But someone had been doing something about it, for ten years running. In 1984, a group of Malibu surfers got similarly exasperated by their runny noses, ear infections, and frequent chills. Made ambitious by sickness, they formed the Surfrider Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to the small task of saving the world's oceans. It's been a long 15 years for that bunch of Southern California water lovers trying to convince the world that our ocean is in need of a collective nurse.

By the time I got measly from our coastal waters, Surfrider had already won the second largest Clean Water Act lawsuit in U.S. history against two pulp mills in Humboldt County. They won the national Renew America Award in 1992. Their negotiations with the California Coastal Commission and Chevron USA forced the oil giant to adjust its off-shore development plans for a pipeline in El Segundo — the settlement requires Chevron USA to fund an artificial reef for the waves their project would destroy, planned to be inserted at the end of this year. If successful, the reef will serve up waves similar to the model used — a legendary

surf spot known as the Ranch.

Despite these frequent environmental victories and continuing struggles — to the point of coastal sainthood — Surfrider was still looking for the ultimate tool to educate the masses about the oceans' critical condition.

All together class: "Eddie Vedder saved the ocean from scum in 1991..."

Well, not really. "Vedder and others granted the songs to the guys who saved the oceans" might sing-song more accurately. The fact is, putting out a compilation CD for a charitable cause is a game of philanthropic Russian roulette. Having big guns on your side, in the case of Surfrider/Surfdog's *Music for Our Mother Ocean (MOM)* series, was a plus.

"Imagine a couple of guys going around saying, 'Hey! We're doing a benefit!'" jokes *MOM*'s Executive Co-Producer, Dave Kaplan. "We did have a little inside advantage when two early believers stood up and committed contributions. Those two people were Eddie Vedder and Perry Farrell. Anybody with that advantage going in has a much easier time putting together a compilation."

The brainchild of Kaplan and former Surfrider Executive Director (and current board member) Pierce Flynn, the *MOM* series is an "edutainment" success story, born here in San Diego. Kaplan and Flynn became fast friends when the former's label, Surfdog Records, secured the soundtrack rights to *Endless Summer II*.

"Pierce and I became surfing buddies," explains Kaplan. "We were trying to find ways at Surfdog that we could call attention to Surfrider — ways people could join. [*Endless Summer II*] was obviously a big event in the surf industry, and we had the soundtrack to it.

So that spurred us becoming very close buddies and then very close partners in the *MOM* project."

"This is a marriage made in heaven," says Flynn. "This is a label that is soulful, that really cares about the ocean, has credibility both on the musical side and on the surfing side. Surfdog's motto is 'Please Help Preserve Our Oceans.' It was the perfect fit with the Surfrider Foundation. Part of Surfrider's mission, as well as enhancing the ocean and wave environment, is to elevate the image of the surfer. So we decided to partner, and the rest is history."

Created both to raise public awareness of coastal pollution and degradation and to fund Surfrider's environmental efforts, both Kaplan and Flynn were admittedly skeptical about the *MOM* compilation's chances for success.

"To do a compilation album as a benefit for

a non-profit organization is not a very novel idea. It's a very daunting task," says Kaplan. "When we decided we should take the leap and actually do it, there was an article in *Billboard* that listed [20 or so] benefit albums and showed how generally unsuccessful they were. Pierce and I were going, 'Oh my god. Look what we're up against — if we only sell 20,000 of those things, let's consider that a success. Let's make sure it's cool, soulful, credible; that the artists love it; that the industry is proud of it; and, most importantly, it makes that Surfrider logo more classic than it already is.'"

To date, according to Kaplan, both *MOM 1*

and *MOM 2* have sold over 500,000 copies internationally — the equivalent of platinum in compilation terms. While he says securing new artists is never easy, with MTV support (two hour-long specials with hosts Bridgette Fonda and Pamela Lee) and overwhelming generosity from the music industry, the star-fishing required for a successful compilation is getting easier.

The release of the third volume, *MOM 3*, proves this, through its staggering number of musical giants: included are Jane's Addiction, Brian Setzer, Pearl Jam, Butthole Surfers, James Taylor, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Jimmy Buffett, Beastie Boys, Ben Harper, Beck, a collaboration between Snoop Dogg and Rage Against the Machine, and others.

Perhaps *MOM*'s success hinged on Vedder, Farrell, and Pamela Lee. As Sprung Monkey

frontman Steve Summers says, "At first, a lot of the bigger artists were a little apprehensive. But now, people are calling to be on it. People know it's a quality compilation. The cause in itself is just undeniable. We're totally honored to be on it."

Or perhaps sincerity simply breeds good art. "This could not be a more sincere effort. Anybody who knows us," says Kaplan, "knows it's the furthest thing from 'Hey, why don't we slap together a compilation and find a benefit?' It's such a sincere part of my life."

"My wife jokes that 'to make Dave happy, just go pluck him down on the sand and let him sit there for a year looking at the water.' It's a sincere love of both [Pierce and I]. As

"We had an inside advantage when Eddie Vedder and Perry Farrell committed contributions."

executive producers of the project, we try to make that heartfelt approach come across. The packaging is not just some rat-shredding, Spicoli type of vibe. It's very heartfelt on how beautiful the oceans are. We try to make it a pleasing package with some soul to it. There's some sense of spirit and theme."

Either way, the success of the compilation has added clout to all artists involved, including Sprung Monkey. The band initially gained a following in the surf culture when then-unknown surf video guru, Taylor Steele, asked them to donate some tracks for movies he was shooting. Signed with Surfdog Records at the time — which Summers admits was welcomed serendipity — Sprung Monkey was then a natural fit to be enlisted in *MOM 1*'s line-up. Along with Pearl Jam, Perry Farrell, and Brian Setzer, Sprung Monkey has appeared on all three volumes.

"We're down for whatever they want to do," says Summers of the *MOM* project. "For one, it's a good thing. Two, they're just good people. It's conviction. To give of yourself, your life, for something that positive — you reap really no benefits except satisfaction, and I'm into that."

As was the case with *MOM 1*, when Sprung Monkey's "Good Times" became the darling of the compilation, their new rendition of Harry Nilsson's "Coconut" has caught similar radio-station wildfire. "Dave Kaplan suggested the song to us. He gave us that and Steve Miller's 'Joker,'" explains Summers. "From what the original song is to what we came up with, I think we really put the Sprung Monkey touches on it. The producer I was working with ran the gamut of the ideas and all the different things to try."

It was the first time Sprung Monkey had



Pierce Flynn, Dave Kaplan, Gwen Stefani and a friend

played with session players, including the percussionist who played on the original "Lowrider" track.

"It was a whole process of opening yourself up to other people's ideas. And now I have a lot of trust in these people. In the original track, I don't know if [Nilsson] is loaded or not — I'm still trying to figure it out. I think the lime and the coconut has to be some kind of drug reference. [As we did it], the song started out grassy and hippie and it turned into this speedy, weird, hip-hop type thing at the end."

Sprung Monkey has appeared on countless compilations, at times without their knowledge. With respect and even awe, Summers says *MOM* is the biggest one they've been involved with in terms of reputable bands and artistic ambition. "This is bigger than a compilation.

The whole thing as one is a band almost. [We're] all thinking primarily about our oceans. They're trying to write a song reflecting that or a summer-type feel, or just some type of awareness vibe."

"It's a big thing to have our name alongside these other artists that are huge," he says. "James Taylor's on this disk — he was my childhood hero. It's just beyond."

Mommy, Tell Me Again How Music Saved the Oceans...

The oceans are far from salvation, but may be on the way to recovery and protection, thanks in part to Surfrider, Surfdog Records

and the *MOM* series. Both Kaplan and Flynn are overwhelmed. Since money from album sales goes directly to the Surfrider Foundation, they've been able to fund new programs such as "Respect the Beach," a coastal awareness program aimed at schoolchildren.

With profits from the new album, Flynn says Surfrider will focus on its newly completed Five Year Strategic Plan, including a program designed to technologically map all of the nation's endangered coastal spots. With 42 grass-roots chapters in the U.S. and Puerto Rico, and international affiliates in Australia, Brazil, France, and Japan, the money raised will have no shortage of outlets.

"We're really bolstered by it," says Flynn. "The *MOM* albums changed the face of the Surfrider Foundation. [They've] also funded the education of our grass-roots volunteers. One of our best chapters, I'm proud to say, is San Diego. They're very involved, vocal advocates and activists for clean water. It's really promoted a sense of pride, allowed us to train the advocates, and allowed us to have a more important voice when our volunteers speak up on bills in Congress."

"Politicians listen now because they've heard of this project. Surfrider has coupled with Pearl Jam and Paul McCartney as well — they know they're dealing with an army. As a long-time resident of San Diego" says Flynn. "I'm so proud that this has gotten to come out of San Diego."

"*MOM* always does so well here," adds Kaplan, "but as an international release, it's a big record in Australia, Japan, Brazil, France, Germany — and it all comes from our hometown. That's something we're real stoked about. It's a real local pride thing." ♦