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Surfdog provides soundtrack for surfing, action sports

BY GARY TAYLOR

What do you get when you combine surfing, music, environmental activism, and a cool coffee house?

Say hello to Surfdog, a major player in the action sports and recording industries with a decidedly surfing mentality. A quick stroll through the Surfdog compound, located on Coast Highway 101 a quarter mile north of Swami's in Encinitas, reveals surfing posters sharing wall space with platinum records, and hand-carved tikis standing guard over a lush central garden. The aroma of coffee and tea fills the air, along with the whir of smoothie machines from the adjacent Java Hut coffee house.

Seemingly oblivious to this relaxed, quintessential Encinitas atmosphere is Surfdog founder Dave Kaplan, on the phone as usual. Around here it is a running joke that Kaplan was born with a phone in his hand; in a childhood photo he is beaming while talking into a toy receiver.

With his burgeoning Surfdog mini-empire, Kaplan is as happy as he is busy these days. After several years as a

successful entrepreneur in the record industry, managing such acts as UB40, the Smiths and the Brian Setzer Orchestra, Kaplan has found a happy medium between the high stakes world of pop music and his love of surfing and the ocean. Put it this way: locating the compound within walking distance of one of the area's best surfing breaks was not exactly a coincidence. Nor was hiring former Surfrider Foundation executive director Pierce Flynn, highly respected and well connected in the surfing industry, to head up Surfdog Marketing, one of the company's three divisions, the others being Surfdog Records and Surfdog Publishing.

The triumvirate—in addition to Dave Kaplan Management, Inc.—covers the spectrum of music, management and marketing, from discovering talent to booking concerts to providing music for films and action sports events. Since forming in 1992, Surfdog Records has produced over 20 records for a variety of bands including Sprung Monkey, Gary Hoey, Pato Banton, the soundtrack for "Endless Summer II," and the Music for

Our Mother Ocean ("MOM") benefit CD series for the Surfrider Foundation.

Kaplan's journey began on the shores of Mission Beach, where his family would visit each summer to escape the heat of their Arizona home. He graduated from the UCSB business school, gained status as a certified public accountant, and set up permanent residence in San Diego. One day, a college friend called and asked Kaplan—a CPA who also happened to play in rock and roll bands—to join his father's entertainment firm in Los Angeles. The company produced t-shirts for Madonna, Michael Jackson and other top names. "I got to know a lot of agents, lawyers and managers, and had the opportunity to co-manage UB40 in 1986. That's when I really got into the music business," explains Kaplan.

Two years later, his partner left to work for Arista Records and Dave Kaplan Management was formed.

"[As a manager] I started seeing some good up-and-coming bands that didn't even have labels, and thought, why don't I just be the label? It's a lot of hard work. It's one thing to find a band that's become the biggest band in San Diego that is ready for a record deal. It's another thing to find bands before anybody cares. I decided to start my own label in 1991, and one of the first releases we did was the "Endless Summer II" soundtrack."

While it may not conjure up a sense of power and influence

like Warner Brothers or Geffen, the name Surfdog was an easy choice for Kaplan. "I've always loved the ocean, and the stick figure logo is a little scrawny guy like me. It's supposed to evoke a dude that on any given day is wearing long flowery trunks, smiling and looking at the surf. Surfdog is at the core of what I wanted to do. First of all, to have a lifestyle that isn't entrenched in the whole aggro Hollywood scene, this elusive 'flashier and bigger than the next guy.' We're just the opposite. We've built it upon a conscious lifestyle choice of family and ocean and vibe, rather than 'We'll squash you with our power.' But then again, we're extremely serious about our obligations to be the best record company for our artists: we're not here to goof around. We work hard, but it's built around a lifestyle decision. If our phones happen to go dead for a few minutes, you know what? We look at each other and go, 'Swami's! What kind of price can you put on that?'"

Kaplan returned to San

Diego in 1995 after his extended professional "detour," and settled on Encinitas to plant the company roots. Last April, he purchased the property that consisted of the former Naked Bean coffee house and two rear rental units. "It's great for the employees because instead of that crummy little coffee pot in the corner, it's like which one of the 37 different kinds of coffees would you like today, or a smoothie. It had to be a place to accommodate tropical plants and tikis and murals. The day Naked Bean went out of business I made it a point to find out about the property, and one guy beat me to it. Subsequently, I was able to buy the property. Then I thought, what a cool thing for the community, we'll keep the coffee shop, make it more surfy, oceanic, friendly, put on some cool music, have real

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SEASIDE SURFDOGS - Above left, Pierce Flynn, director of Surfdog Marketing and Dave Kaplan, founder of Surfdog, an Encinitas business with a surf mentality that caters to the action sports and recording industries. See Surfwriter, page A-15.

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Surfwriter

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fruit smoothies, get a real heart and soul to the place instead of ripping it up and making it all offices."

Today, the once rundown property behind the coffee house could be mistaken for a mini-Hawaiian estate, with tropical flowers, impeccable lawn, and the ever-present tikis hand-carved and delivered from Florida. Soon, a classic '46 woodie with "Surfdog" license plates will adorn the curb in front of the Java Hut, the result of a

friendly agreement between Kaplan and one of his top clients, Brian Setzer. "Brian and I agreed ages ago that when one of his albums went double platinum, he would supply me with a woodie. Of course this was in 1991 when Brian started a 17-piece big band before anybody was playing horns on the radio. You didn't even hear a trumpet or saxophone, it was all grunge. So we were thinking, yeah right, whatever, I'll get a woodie when we're double platinum. It was actually in my management contract with him."

An even more important

asset to Surfdog is Pierce Flynn, whose presence as director of Surfdog's Marketing division drives the company's synergy between surfing and music. In addition to his leadership position at Surfrider Foundation, Flynn holds a doctorate from UCSD in Ethnomethodology (cultural studies, ethnographic film, and ethnomusicology). After Flynn and Kaplan met at the US Open of Surfing in Huntington Beach in 1994, the two became friends and Flynn subsequently helped produce the three MOM benefit CDs. "I've had my eye on Pierce to

work with us for a long time," explains Kaplan. "We just had to wait for his transition from Surfrider. When the transition was imminent, we immediately hired him." (Flynn continues to serve as SF's National Advisory Board chair and as a member of its Environmental Issues Team.)

"We struck up a friendship and I suggested we do a benefit album for Surfrider," adds Flynn, "and thus began a great working relationship that has been a joy to me. It has actualized my vision to blend popular culture with Surfrider's educational message. We called it 'edutainment.' It changed the face of Surfrider; it raised its profile internationally beyond compare. We now have the endorsement and participation of over 60 major artists, from Pearl Jam to Paul McCartney to

Beck and Jewel through music and public service announcements. It's been extraordinary."

"I wanted to achieve certain things under Surfrider," Flynn continues. "I had been on staff for seven years, and executive director for almost five years. In the non-profit world it's almost like political office, you have a tenure for a number of years. I wanted to wait until we had a strategic plan in place. That was being achieved and I felt it was time to move back into the private sector. I was overjoyed to join Surfdog... the motto on the logo is 'Please Help Preserve Our Oceans.' I feel really lucky to be allowed to actualize my next vision of the international marketing of music and lifestyle around surfing and the environment. And I get to surf Swami's more too!"

Specifically, Flynn's job is to manage the marriage between music and the action/extreme sports industry, music supervision for on-site events, movies, videos, and consulting corporate sponsors on the most appropriate and credible ways to interface with the fast-moving action sports industry. Current clients include the Fox Sports Network, Surflife, Mervyns, and several new surfing and skating videos. Surfdog Records' roster features such bands as the Butthole Surfers, Sprung Monkey, Dan Hicks & His Hot Licks, and Royal Crown Revue. In some cases, such as when Sprung Monkey found a hit with "Get 'Em Outta Here," Surfdog will partner with Disney-owned Hollywood Records to take advantage of the larger label's substantial marketing resources.

"When it gets to a certain point, we do marry ourselves with a built-in partner while remaining 100 percent independently owned and operated," says Kaplan. "This arrangement gives us complete autonomy and allows us to still be fun and risk-taking and a little bit cheeky. We don't have to conform to the executives on the 35th floor. Just doing it because it's fun and looks cool is a valid enough reason to be in business."

And working a block from the beach doesn't hurt either.