A man wearing glasses and a light blue button-down shirt is shown in profile, working on a large, curved wooden surfboard. He is using a tool to smooth the edge of the board. The background shows a workshop with various tools and materials.

MASTER-BUILDER

ONE WHO IS SKILLED IN THE ART OF BUILDING.
OXFORD UNIVERSAL DICTIONARY

GHOST-SHAPER

ONE WHO SHAPES BOARDS FOR OTHER SHAPERS.
ANON.

GENIUS

EXTRAORDINARY CAPACITY FOR IMAGINATIVE
CREATION, ORIGINAL INVENTION, OR DISCOVERY.
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SHAPERS PROFILE
INTERVIEW
WITH CRAFTSMAN
JIM PHILLIPS

Story and Photos By James Gibbs

Jim Phillips' boards are in many places, but most of these boards will not have his name on them. In the rarified world of surfboard shaping there are the shapers who craft their own boards and then there are the ghost shapers. Jim "the Genius" Phillips is both.

Some may be surprised to discover that not all surfboards are actually built by one shaper. Here's what happens: Shaper A has too many boards to shape so he has someone else shape the ones he can't get to. The ghost shaper shapes the board to the specifics of the original shaper. Then there is the issue of design problems: Shaper B can't figure out how to shape the board to the customer's wishes or demands. Enter the ghost shaper who solves the design problem, shapes the board, and returns the board to the original shaper. The original shaper then signs the board and presents the finished product to the customer. The ghost shaper gets paid. The name shaper gets paid. The customer gets the board. Everyone is happy, all except Mrs. Phillips, but that's another story.

Besides shaping boards for quite a few big name shaping entities, Jim also works with individual surfers who want a particular type of board. But whether he's taking on the role of ghost shaper, shaping for a champion surfer like Dale Dobson, working with the young surfer-shaper, Robbie Kegel, or shaping for some ordinary surfer who just wants a board made, the procedures are the same: namely quality, quality, and more quality. It's the unparalleled craftsmanship that separates Jim's boards from other shapers'. There are no tricks or short cuts. Jim does all the shaping himself, from start to finish.

I was recently able to view a series of "Hot Curl" balsa wood boards which are some of the most beautiful boards I've ever seen. These are exact replicas of boards from the "Hot Curl" period. The boards all have multi-colored strips of balsa with a small amount of cedar. Jim also makes custom fiberglass and wooden tailblocks, as well as custom stringer configurations. All are perfect in their symmetry and design. As Jim has said before, "A job worth doing is a job worth doing well."

The man works like a well-crafted Swiss watch, beginning with a clean deck, followed by clean flowing lines throughout. He always has a plan before he shapes. He stares long and hard at each shape, calculating and figuring what the finished shape will be. He then moves quickly and smoothly through each phase of the shaping process, following the same moves for every board. Repetition leads to perfection: there are no flaws in Jim's boards. All lines are true; all rockers are one long, continuous curve. Jim understands how and why boards work on waves. Unlike many shapers who speak in monosyllables or as if English is a second language for them, Jim will very patiently listen to a customer's request and then clearly articulate whether the proposed board design will work or not. Jim's boards come out just like he says they will—fast and smooth.

There are no bumps or wiggles in the outline of his boards.

Enter Jim's shaping bay and your first thought might be that the shop looks randomly organized, but upon closer inspection you come to realize that all the tools and templates are where they should be. Bandsaws, jointers, various hand tools, and electric planers share space with foam, epoxy blanks, and



planks of wood. There are various rocker templates to cover any type of board rocker. You might see twelve foot strips of balsa next to some rough cuts of Agave wood, all waiting for Jim to shape them into something elegant. Wood, foam, epoxy—it doesn't matter. Jim will carefully build a well-crafted board for any and for all, irrespective of whose name ultimately appears on it.

When and where were you born?

I was born in Columbus, Ohio on May 22, 1946.

Who were some of your childhood surfing influences?

It was a few years before I started to see the Hawaiian surfers that were recognized as the accomplished watermen that they were. The talent of the time was Fred Hemmings, Jeff Hackman, Buddy Boy, Ivan Vanetta, and many of my high school pals who were much better surfers than me.

What beaches did you surf as a child?

I first started surfing at Waikiki, then branched out to Barbers Point on the South west shore. In a little more than a year, I had graduated to the West shore, riding Mailii, Makaha, and Yokohama. Later, I would start taking secret trips to the North where I surfed Haleiwa, Chun's, Laniakea, Gas Chambers, and finally taking on Sunset and Pipeline. I was forbidden by my father to surf the North Shore.

Who taught you how to build things?

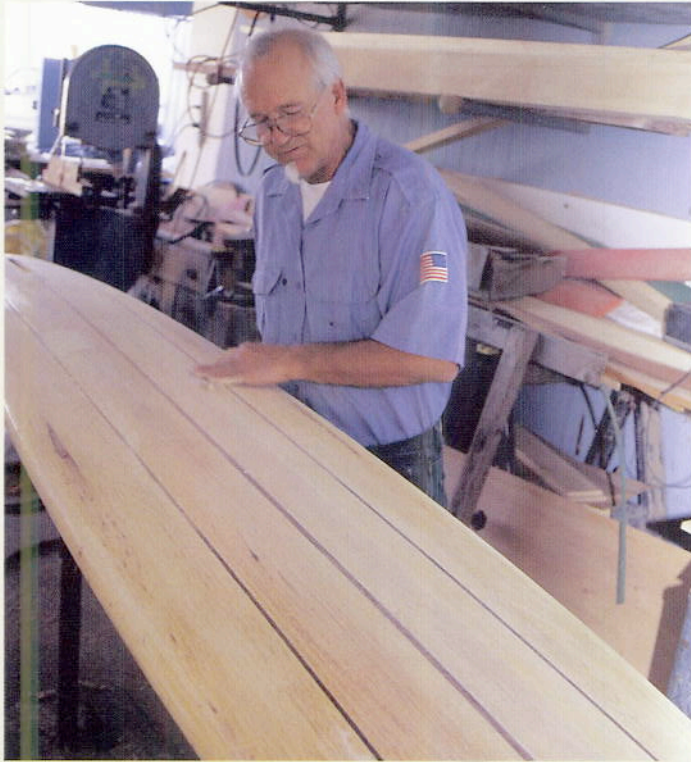
My father, the son of the man who invented the pattern lathe and built the Grumman-Wright F-6E HellCat, the most feared WWII Naval fighter aircraft by the Japanese is who first taught me the importance of craftsmanship

Did your dad surf?

My father surfed only a small amount at Barbers Point along with my mother too, but she wasn't a good swimmer and had a real fear for the sea.

Did you watch anyone shape during your childhood?

Being privy to seeing the sanctum sanctorum of board building was strictly taboo. I never got any farther than the front



counter of any surfboard factories in Hawaii.

Did you really use a cheese grater to shape your first board(s)?

My first board was a surfboard kit, a blank that only needed a light sanding, then glassing. When I graduated to shaping blanks, I had no power planer, only a block plane and my mother's four-sided cheese grater. It worked unreal!

Which shapers influenced your shaping when you first started out?

The first shapers that I knew of in Hawaii were Dick Brewer, Sparky, George Downing, John Kelly, and Wally Frosieth. But most of my influences came from the other surfers at my high school who built boards too. There was quite the competition among us to outdo the other.

What did the master shaper, Tinker, teach you?

My first real tutor for shaping was Tinker, owner of Challenger Surfboards with Bill Bahne. Tinker's Christian name is Carl Virgil West. They had dissolved the partnership and Tinker had come to the East Coast. He saw the potential in the eastern side of the business. I was competing in New Jersey contests and shaping for a local shop. He sent one of his team riders over to talk to me about working for Challenger. The shop I was working for had hit snags on zoning legalities and had to find a new place to shape and glass. I went to meet with Tinker and he said for me to pick out a blank I liked. It was a triple baby t-band. He told me to shape myself a new board from it. I had barely laid the planer on it when he asked me what the fuck I was doing. He tore apart everything I thought I knew about shaping surfboards. I had the wide point in the wrong place, my rails were uneven, the shape had a twist, bumps, teaks, gouges, scratches. I was a kook, by a pro shaper's standards. I spent the next two years under his tutelage, his watchful eyes on me, guiding me on how to become an experienced surfboard designer and shaper. Tinker could use the planer like a surgical tool, tak-

ing off mountains of foam or barely touching the blank. He wouldn't put it down until the shape was finished. Then all there was to do was fine sand the shape. He was the professor of shaping and I got my PhD from him.

Could you talk about going up and down the east coast, shaping for surf shops?

I got to the East Coast at the end of September 1964. My board arrived about a month later. In October, on a very warm, sunny weekend, my dad drove me down to Bethany Beach for my first Atlantic surf. I lasted about five minutes; the water was soooooo cold compared to Hawaii. I got a job through the winter doing finish carpentry, roofing, and siding. When spring arrived I had a ready-made job with Hobie in Ocean City, MD. They had resin, foam, and glass. I was the ding repair guy, but I would always shape any blanks that I could find. Every beach that had a surf shop was a potential new client for my fledgling skills. I would fix their dings, shape if there was foam, and move along to the next beach town. My mom and dad had to go back to Delaware for the preparation for the move to the Cape. I stayed behind, working my way along the coast to the South. I was a regional correspondent with Surfing East magazine, and one day while calling in, I was told that a shop in Long Island, NY needed a shaper. I packed up all my stuff in my trusty Rambler station wagon and beat it out to Long Island. I was not a shaper by any means, but could surf well and people liked to ride my boards. I got the job and had as much foam as I could mow, and with each shape, got a little better.

Where was your first shaping room?

My first real shaping room was at Micris Surfboards in NY.

Where were you shaping in your 20's?

In my early 20's I was working for Challenger Surfboards, Bahne Surfboards, and Channin/Diffenderfer.

Where were you shaping in your 30's?

By my 30's I was self-employed in Florida.

And your 40's and 50's?

During my 40's I was in my building that I had purchased in Cocoa, FL. By the time I had turned 50, I was back in California, shaping for myself and Channin Surfboards again.

So how many boards have you shaped?

In my 44 years of shaping, I have done about 40,000 boards.

List the shapers you have worked for.

The manufacturers I have worked for include Dick Catri, Donnie Mulhern (MTB) Quiet Flight, Ocean Avenue, Natural Art, Bahne, Channin, Eberly, Brewer, Diffenderfer, Linden, Takayama, Greg Noll, Velzy, Jacobs, Phil Edwards, Al Merrick, Gordon & Smith, Hobie, Surfboards Hawaii, Hansen, Doug Haut, Laird Hamilton, Wayne Lynch, Dewey Weber, Nectar, and Billy Hamilton. I'm sure there are those I've missed, but there are the real board builders.

How long have you had your own label?

Since 1968.

Explain how you became involved with epoxy boards.

I started building styro and epoxy boards in Florida in the

mid 80's. It was still a very difficult procedure at the time and did only limited production. Since then, Greg Loehr has had steady improvement in his resins and recently become involved in the process with the introduction of Dan Foam individually molded Styrofoam blanks. The strength and lightness are a must for serious performance surfboards.

Name some of your team riders.

I don't have a pro or official team, but those who swear by my boards for a guaranteed contest win or not being let down when it counts are Mario Frade, former East Coast champion, Craig Carroll, East Coast champ, surf school owner, Peter Pan, surf shop owner, champion surfer, Wally Smith, HellMan Charger, Dale Dobson, Robbie Kegel, Kyle McClennan, Noah Freeland. These are the guys who pay for boards, so they demand something for the money.

Which contemporary shapers do you respect?

I respect all shapers who try to do as good a job as humanly possible, never neglecting to give 100% to the job and being able to live with chins held high, knowing they do the right thing. Greg Noll, Pat Curren, Dale Velzy, Terry Martin, and Timmy Patterson are shapers that I respect.

Explain your involvement and thoughts on computer-generated blanks.

Before there was a computer shaping machine, Velzy, Greg Noll, Weber all had profile machines, a primitive, bastard step-child of the modern shaping machine. Bill Bahne had a really efficient one at the Del Mar factory and was the founder of KKL, one of the best computer cutting shaping machine companies today. The software has vastly improved over the last 10 years. The early computer shapes have longitudinally placed cutter passes where they exited the rail at the nose and tail. The cutter flutes made a scallop pattern like a ruffle potato chip. This caused the shape to have to be tuned up with the electric hand planer. The newer software had a tool path that followed the outline of the shape, resulting in no flute marks on the outline. This was a quantum leap in consistency of the finished shape and cut down on shaping time by half. Now a shaper could get the results that he had been looking for. There is nothing better than having a proven shape that can be recreated time and time again. The shaping machine is here to stay and soul has nothing to do with it.

What has been one of the highlights or honors of your surfing career?

One of the greatest high points for me was in 1998 when I was inducted into the East Coast Surf Legends Hall of Fame. It was very bittersweet for me. I had lost my father earlier that year and had always wanted him to be able to see something this grand for me. He was there, in my heart.

Which East Coast surfers have stood out?

Since surfing first got off the ground on the East Coast, there were stand-out surfers. One of the original champions, Gary Propper, was just amazing on how fast he turned in such little waves and could nose ride until the cows came home. Claude Coggen, Fletcher Sharp, Flea Shaw, Mike Tabeling, Bruce Valuzzi... these guys were the groundbreakers, each generation after that raised the bar, top 16 surfers, next world champions.

Which West Coast surfers have stood out?

California always had great surfers. Corky Carroll never surfed the contest breaks when it was clean conditions. He waited until it was onshore and low tide. His thoughts were, anybody can look good in off-shore, clean waves, but the finals are always held in junk afternoon waves. I took Margo Godfrey to the Santa Cruz Smirnoff Pro in 1969. She surfed better than most of the men. Mike Hynson, Mr. Slicked back, so stylish for his time. Billy Hamilton, power, style, grace. Dale Dobson, the guy doesn't know which way to stand, natural goofy foot, but surfs switch stance better than most can ride on their best day. Michele Junod, product of straight over bay, Santa Monica, still ripping today.

Which surfers from Hawaii have stood out?

Hawaii, birthplace of surfing... Where to start? Duke, Rabbit, Jock Sutherland, Jerry Lopez, Barry Kaniapuni, Buffalo, Rusty and Brian Kealana, Bird Mehelona, Donald Takayama... so many great Hawaiian surfers.

What is the hardest thing to understand about shaping?

When shaping, it's visualizing what you want from the beginning, then being able to extract it from the blank, all the while keeping in mind what the customer wants.

What is your philosophy regarding shaping?

My philosophy on shaping is keeping it true. Don't go over-



board on unfounded theories and don't shove your ideas down the customer's throat.

What is an ideal client?

To me the ideal client is one who isn't trying to get a board for nothing. After all, I have been doing this for my whole life and I put my all into every board.

What can a potential client do to make your job easier?

The factory is not the boy's club. We don't have time clocks, but how about I drop by your job for three or four hours and just hang out with you for the afternoon. I'll always answer your questions and be glad to show you what you want, but don't be a time bandit.

What are the key design elements that you take into consideration when building a board?

Where will it be surfed? What is the experience of the rider, and what specific shape are they looking for?

Could you describe how you create multi-stringer boards?

Shaping multi-stringer boards is a real challenge for MOST shapers, myself included. But it is one of my favorite boards to shape. The stringers act like a wire frame image and actually let you see the curves better. When I lay out a blank for multi sticks, I snap chalk lines where I want them to be. Then cut with the band saw and joint the edges. With a fence of the bandsaw, the stringer material is split into the thickness that is desired, then run through the thickness planer to finish the dimension. After that, the stringers are painted with resin and clamped into the blank.

Could you explain how and why you do tailblocks?

Tail and nose blocks are two purpose, decorative beauty and strength. I prefer fiberglass blocks, no soaking up water. They are installed after the shape is complete, saw off the tail to the width of the block and install with a small amount of 5 minute epoxy. When set up, mask off the tail around the block with several layers of tape to protect the foam from the grinder. Sand until the block is down to the level of the tape.

Could you elaborate on why you use the website Swaylocks?

When I first found the Swaylocks web site, it was still in its early phase and for about two years, it was my private website. I had become king of the site. It was a real jumping-off place for me to become greater known. I made some enemies along the way. People don't like to hear that they are full of shit, and you are telling them and the world so.

Do computer-generated surfboards have any effect on your business?

The computer-aided designed surfboard only makes my job easier. It is more expensive to built machine-made cut boards, but I can do 5 shapes in the time it takes to do 2-3 by hand. Besides that, the best shapers are not 18 year old kids, fresh out of high school, come to the factory to look around. The best shapers are knocking on heaven's door. Why should we have to beat ourselves to death to do the work that we can do with a machine's help?

Would you explain your involvement in the "Hot Curl" project?

My involvement with this hot curl project is through a very old friend of mine, he is a cinematographer who is making a documentary on surfing's transformation from ancient boards to the development of the "modern surfboard designs." The boards of old, not being readily available to use in large Hawaiian surf, are mainly in museums or closely guarded private collections. This is where I come into the picture. Although having never shaped these boards in the past, I have through Pat Curren, Dale Velzy, and Greg Noll, seen firsthand what the great masters of the era were building and as carefully as possible, am trying to recreate the boards that took us to today. This is just too great of an undertaking for these aging gentlemen to jump into and expect the boards in less than a year. My skills and stamina were just what this momentous project needed, knowing that it could be put in my hands with all the confidence that it would be done correctly. My goal with these boards is to have them be indistinguishable from the surviving ones of the past.


Did you make boards for Laird Hamilton to ride or to sell as a line of surfboards?

The boards I did for Laird were for the Jaws movie. I built the balsa blanks to his specs, delivered them to KKL and they were then cut on a Dick Brewer program. I did three boards for Laird, two 7'2" and a 6'10.

Do you have any funny stories to tell about shaping?

O.K., here are a few Dale Dobson stories. Dale had Donald Takayama shape him a board, and when it was done, Dale asked if Donald could make it a little thicker. Donald reached down to the floor and scooped up the foam dust and tossed it back onto the finished shape. Dale had me shape him a Surfboards Hawaii. He came in raving about how great the board rode. The next day he said he didn't like it at high tide, because it rode better at low tide. When asked what the problem was, he said it didn't float as well when there was more water under it!

Where do you see surfboard design going in the future?

At this time I don't see any radical design changes in surfboards. The last big change was the thruster, now it has been refined. Rockers went to the extreme, boards went super narrow. The materials are where the next real breakthrough will be seen. I don't know if it will be epoxy, but it will be a change in how boards are built. Stronger, lighter, longer-lasting boards, staying in better condition. 



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