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REVOLUTION PIONEERS

We interviewed the influential Los Angeles art collective CALIFORNIA LOCOS as they prepare for their 2016 bicoastal summer events. These events are sponsored by JUICE MAGAZINE and DUSTERS CALIFORNIA and include new artworks from each artist, the international launch of the LOCOS skateboard line by DUSTERS, a preview screening of the film "CRAZY WORLD AIN'T IT – The Life and Times of John Van Hamersveld," and live music by Los Savages featuring Ian Espinoza, Dave Tourje, Gary Wong and Norton Wisdom.

Every revolution has a beginning, and the paths that lead to it are often indescribable. However, the origins of the alternative culture in California have been widely documented. They go back to the 50s, when the youngsters broke out of the conservative moral of their parents and were carried along with the sensorial and creative pleasures that became popular with the *beat* scene. It was in that experimental environment from the West Coast where Chaz Bojorquez became the godfather of graffiti; Norton Wisdom became a pioneer in live paintings; Gary Wong rose as an underground legend in several (specially in blues); Dave Tourje consolidated himself as a visual artist rooted in punk; and John Van Hamersveld succeeded in the design world applied to the surf and rock cultures. They all changed their environment thanks to their boundless creativity, but they never imagined that their works would have international repercussion as the alternative scene became mainstream and the big brands got seduced by the transgression of the "outsiders". It is obvious that fashion trends go in cycles, and currently the concept of alternative scene has been redefined. However, these five characters are still ready for action with works that swim against the current. They have recently founded a collective named "California Locos", in order to reclaim their status after such long careers. We had the chance to interview Chaz, Norton, Gary, Dave and John together to learn more about their fascinating story and be able to immerse ourselves in the core of a scene that changed everything from the beach and the pavement. The rest are only anecdotes dragged by the waves. The LOCOS present two bicoastal events, one opening in Venice Beach on June 25th, and one in Virginia Beach on August 13th.



Dave Tourje

How did you all five start working as a collective and what was the aim behind this amazing project called "California Locos"? Did you all know each other before?

(Dave): Over the years, we all crossed paths loosely in the Los Angeles counterculture scenes, beginning with surf and skate, punk rock, art, etc. But it all did not crystallize as a movement until 2011 when, during my show in Beverly Hills called "L.A. Aboriginal", I was asked to create a panel discussion. I automatically invited these artists/friends of mine due to our harmony of aesthetic realities, diverse as they are. It was here that the "California Locos" was born as a unified communication, which has been going and expanding ever since. The actual birth of it comes long before, because each one of us shares an experience, a different slice of Los Angeles subcultural reality. Though "multi culture" has been alive and well in LA for a long time, it is now, more and more, occurring in this world at large. Perhaps that's why the "California Locos" has such a broad connection. It is more about "everyone" than it is about "us". The logo combines the word "California" done by John Van Hamersveld and "Locos" by Chaz, which expresses the amalgam best. Our notion is not that we are "crazy" as insane, but that we are crazy about our art, life and creativity.

One of the first things that everybody thinks when talking about California is surfing. How would you describe the influence of this beach culture in your life and your art?

(John): The cities of LA County are divided up into 55 cities that all think differently about each other. I surfed the South Bay, Huntington Beach, Malibu, La Jolla, and Santa Barbara. Each had different kids with different ideas about surfing in the Southern California landscape. I'd surf with them, but I also skied with Dewey Webber the surfer in the local mountains and Mammoth Mountain. When I left Palos Verdes at 19 years old in 1961 for Art School in downtown LA, that was the end of surf culture for me, though the "Endless Summer" poster went to NYC in 1966 and it was a hit to non-surfer and sold out all over the world as the image of Southern California. So the poster became a cultural sign ironically, while I was working in Hollywood, which was international and different from Southern California. The whole world is influenced by Southern California, but NYC hates California and the media make us out to be a Disney like cartoon of ourselves in a stupid sporting life. In 1980 I returned from Hollywood to Malibu and started surfing again. Out of that return of the ocean society I designed a surf lifestyle image of Malibu as place in surf culture made a campaign for Jimmy'Z, and restarted the Endless Summer image with Bruce Brown. I dropped out again in 1991, ending surfing because of the crowds and polluted ocean. Surfing had become a fashion statement, not surfing.



Norton Wisdom

Nowadays graffiti is a very popular art form that we can find in museums and galleries. How was it back in the 70's in LA and what did you enjoy the most about it in order to devote your life to it?

(Chaz): There was graffiti in Los Angeles since the 50's. Our graffiti history started with the race riots between the Mexican-American youth and the Anglo U.S. Navy sailors during WWII. Inside the Latino neighbourhoods, the young men united and slowly formed the gangs to protect the community from outsiders. Out of this social environment the gangs developed their own forms of speech and dress styles. They started to claim the streets as their own by painting their names on the walls with a bucket of paint and a brush. In the 1950's the first spray can was sold to the public and the graffiti on the walls got bigger and more stylized letters. That was the time as a child I first saw graffiti and loved looking at it. I practiced on paper for years and painted my first street tag in 1969. I would paint in the L.A. riverbed where the concrete walls would go for miles. Creating art and painting graffiti was the most exciting art form I could do as a young man. Graffiti was always a personal journey, I was not looking for fame or chasing the dollar, it was my own challenge to follow the path and let graffiti art/life take me.

Norton, you have been collaborating with musical ensembles for live art painting performances since 1979. How would you describe the connection between music and art?

(Norton): The membranes between different disciplines like painting and music is very porous if the artist has something to say, like the beauty and freedom of the human race. But if the artist has nothing to say, the wall separating these different disciplines is solid and harmony is never obtained. Since the late 70's, I have never met a musician of any stature who has not considered my painting an intricate part of the performance, and that the performance would be incomplete without it. When Panic started performing in the punk clubs in the early 80's it was never considered an oddity. A band with a painter was just noted as right. The punk scene went around the normal avenues of public exposure. The gatekeepers like museum curators and music promoters became irrelevant. They are no more than puppets for the market and political forces. Nowadays they are back in control and have their hand on the faucet again.



John Van Hamersveld

Gary, even though you grew up in South Central LA and not in Mississippi, can you explain how you became involved in the blues music scene and how was it back then?

(Gary): The Eastside neighbourhood was alive and rich with its mix of cultural and musical influences. Upon entering high school, my upwardly mobile parents had moved us to "The Westside", which stretched to La Cienega Boulevard on the western border. Mostly middle class working families inhabited this diametric opposite from "The Eastside", but there was a big difference, a shocking difference. The racial divide had shifted; I had never been in the company of so many White and Jewish people, I had to learn the difference, it took a year. In the late 50's to the early 60's, and catering to a new middle class, The Westside saw a burgeoning of clubs and bars that presented live music, mostly jazz, the smaller clubs had organ combos. Many a high school night was spent in these venues witnessing some of the giants of jazz playing the hippest music in the world. John Coltrane, Art Blakley and The Jazz Messengers, Charlie Mingus played The It Club, Cannonball Adderley at The Metro, Miles Davis Quintet at The Adams West with Ike and Tina Turner Review, James Brown, Little Milton, B.B. King, Jimmy Reed, Big Mama Thornton, Lowell Fulson to name a few that were there back in the day. A big part of that education was understanding that Jazz, an original American art form, came from the Blues with its roots deep in American history. In '64 I found myself in jail after being involved in a civil disobedience. At that time I carried a Bb Hohner Marine Band in my back pocket. For some reason I kept that harp even through arrest and booking. After being shuffled around from joint to joint, I landed in a dormitory next to a Black Man who also had a Bb Marine Band, What are the odds? Having carried that harp in my back pocket for months, and blown away by the fact that here was a complete stranger with the same harp, I had to ask, "Where is the Blues?", He looked at me and simply said, "Between the 2nd and the 3rd holes". WHAT!? 2nd. and 3rd. hole? The next day I was shipped out to another facility and never saw that Cat again, but I did get my 1st. blues harp lesson. I played and played until I found it, The Blue Note. This was the kick start to my adventure into the Blues World, one that I'm still involved in and have commanded a modicum of respect amongst my peers.



Gary Wong

Dave, you were raised in Northeast L.A. during the 70's and got involved in the punk scene. What do you remember about those days when music had a stronger meaning?

(Dave): The LA Punk Scene of the late '70s and early '80s was extremely eclectic. It was not just "Punk Rock", though it all seemed to be under that heading. That scene was so alive and to this day, propels and inspires so much. It included the "multi cultural" idea, with bands like X, Los Plugz, Top Jimmy and the Rhythm Pigs, Black Flag, etc., all meeting on common ground. I worked for Bill Mentzer, who started Hully Gully Studios, and I helped build the studios around 1980, near NELA and the LA River. This studio had all the bands rehearsing there of consequence in the scene. Like the scene itself, it burned hot, then flamed out after several years, but it could never be forgotten. The Dissidents formed around '83, and we pushed the eclectic envelope as far as we could, fusing Punk, Funk, Metal, Avant-Garde Jazz, Reggae, etc. We also flamed out, but left an imprint on later bands.

John, how would you describe the civil rights movement influence in the 60's and 70's from a surfer's point of view?

(John): I grew up in a predominately living in a white community with my German, Dutch, Jewish, English family, but I was a white boys in the 50's as the surfer from Palos Verdes. El Segundo High School had one black boy and one Asian girl. Race had nothing to do with color, in fact I was so white that my buddies would call me the reflector in the summer light of the day. I remember being at Boomer's surf spot in La Jolla and there was one Black Bodysurfers talking with us, it was different. At 19 I moved to art school in the city and in the classroom were international students. Last when I enrolled a Chouinard Art Institute I was nearer to the downtown area that was very multinational. During the later 60's and 70's, I ate in Little Tokyo mostly ever night. But on the other hand I rented my Kingsley Studio that came with a Japanese gardener. In the 90's I met Chris Blackwell from Jamaica of Island Record who bought into the Fatburger Restaurant Chain. He had set up a black Entrepreneur relation with fund, I would design the Fatburger look and work closely with two black executive for five years of which I learned a lot from as to how the world work if you were black. So all was not just about hamburgers, it was about selling hamburgers to everyone made by blacks. The chain today has store in Dubai, Beijing, South Africa, to name 137 of them. Working in Hollywood you learned that everyone watches films, so communication today is the worldwide and we have Google in our pocket.



Chaz Bojorquez

Chaz, can you explain us how was the awesome California Locos first exhibit in LA and what kind of works you showed there? Are there any plans to travel outside the US?

(Chaz): The California Locos group has been in the making for the last 50 years and some of us have exhibited together for 35 years. We each represent an expression of the living California lifestyle and bring a rich art history. At our first L.A. show we brought that long history to exhibit. We let the viewer experience each one of us, but they become aware of the cross breeding and deep expression of our devotion. Through skate, punk, surf, music, performance and graffiti we exhibit a contemporary and mature experience, our success story comes from our past accomplishments and milestones. As elder ambassadors of our art we have taken leadership for the California Locos movement with a message and voice and feel that it has a universal appreciation throughout the world. But could only have been invented in Southern California, a unique privilege.

Norton, as an artist involved in the music scene, when do you think "alternative culture" became mainstream? Maybe it was in the mid 80's with the sudden success of MTV?

(Norton): One of the great avenues for getting the punk alternative energy out to the public was the New Wave Theater. New Wave Theater was a crazy "free for all" cable show in Los Angeles with Peter Ivors as host. The best camera, lighting, and sound people in the industry devoted their skills free to producing the program about the underground creative scene in the mid 80's. The big money power brokers who wanted to regain control of the message crushed this and MTV was the hammer. They put millions into video of the big bands who had nothing to do or say about real world. MTV redirected the message into a more politically controlled managed message. Leaving musicians and artist to again move underground into the alternative world, which is still strong and alive and free from the market place. Here you have people who have something to say, no matter what the median is or how its combined will be heard...



Chaz Bojorquez

Gary, how do you remember your experience at the Chouinard Art School in Los Angeles?

(Gary): All the best art students from all over the U.S. and the world were there, most in the applied arts: animation, design, fashion, ceramics, photography and illustration. Fine art: painting, drawing, printmaking and sculpture, was where in my 3rd. year I decided to focus my concentration. There, students could move freely between disciplines and open dialogues were encouraged. Creativity was a highly prized commodity, making something out of nothing a necessity. All the instructors in the advanced studios were active in their discipline lending a contemporary dialogue to the study. The value on my time at this school is immeasurable, as it has had a lasting effect. I do not practice politics. I deal with things that move me and things that compel me to tell a visual story by combining seemingly disparate images of these things and making them interesting visually. The payoff for my endeavour is how others interpret and express what they experience, politically or otherwise. By and large I paint for myself, Art for Art's sake but I've learned that as an Artist an audience is a necessary adjunct.