

THIS ICONIC SINGER/
SONGWRITER AND PRO
SURFER TALKS ABOUT
BEING A FAMILY KIND
OF ROCK STAR, SAYS
MIDDLE AMERICANS
CAN BE SURFERS AND
TELLS US WHY HE MAY
NEVER SHAVE AGAIN.

BY TERENCE LOOSE

Twenty years ago, around the time OC native Donavon Frankenreiter began his career as a professional musician and surfer, a guy like him would not have fit into the pages of *Coast*. Back then, surfers were seen as bums and synthesized pop passed for music.

Now, however, that everyone from the classroom to the boardroom surfs, Frankenreiter's breezy acoustic tunes feature in movies like *Snakes on a Plane* and in soccer mom SUVs alike. There's even a chance you're wearing one of Frankenreiter's signature shirts, or pairs of shoes or sunglasses from one of his sponsors: Billabong, Sanuk and Von Zipper.

Yes, the world is a different place. Especially if you're Frankenreiter, who's been on a very fun and funky journey over the past two decades. It started six short years after learning to surf at age 10 in San Clemente. At 16, he was traveling the world as a pro surfer, back when pro surfing meant fast food and cheap hotels. But apparently, Frankenreiter decided that he needed a career that was even tougher to succeed in than pro athlete in a fringe sport. So he became a musician at a time when the music industry crashed.

Apparently, no one told Frankenreiter, because with his signature mix of a beachy, folksy vibe, fun-spirited attitude and rich, poetic vocals, he signed with Jack Johnson's Brushfire Records and put out his first self-titled album in 2004. Since then, he's become a hit singer/songwriter, a truly unique personality and a family man with two young sons. It's been a long and winding journey that's culminated in his latest, and fifth, album, *Start Livin'*. His success has had him – and his

DONAVON FRANKENREITER





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family – touring through Europe, the East Coast and finally to the West Coast. In fact, he'll wrap the year up with a two-night New Year's Eve bash at San Juan Capistrano's Coach House, December 30-31.

We caught up with Frankenreiter between gigs to ask about family life on the road, why you don't have to live at the beach to surf and even a little bit about fashion.

WHAT DID YOUR PARENTS THINK OF YOUR CHOICE OF PROFESSIONAL SURFER AND MUSICIAN?

My dad never surfed and nobody in my family ever played music, so when I told them that this is what I wanted to do, they looked at me like I was an alien.

BUT THEY STILL LET YOU TRAVEL THE WORLD AS A PRO SURFER AT AGE 16?

My mom says that she figured there was nothing they could do because I was so obsessed with surfing. So they decided to just see where it would lead. In a nutshell, they were the most supportive parents ever.

THAT WASN'T THE NORM IN THE '80S.

No. Back then, parents thought all surfers were druggies. Jeff Spicoli was the spokesperson for every surfer. So in my town, Mission Viejo, you either played football, baseball or were some kind of academic scholar. In fact, I was one of the only surfers out of Mission Viejo, so when I said I wanted to be pro, no one gave me a chance. Except my parents.

AND THE MUSIC THING?

Well, they still wonder how I'm doing it.

WHEN DID YOUR PASSION FOR MUSIC START?

I picked up my first guitar at age 16 on a surf trip and fell in love with playing the guitar as much as I did riding waves. I traveled so much as a pro and I brought my guitar with me everywhere. People would teach me chords or songs.

Basically, everything I've done musically, I've done through surfing. Surfing came first.

HOW HELPFUL WAS JACK JOHNSON TO YOUR CAREER?

I met Jack when I was 16 and he was 14, but that was long before anything happened musically. Later, when he started his own label, he signed me and co-wrote songs with me. Then he took me on the road for two years, so that started my whole career. It was the first time in my life that I thought "Hey, I should give this music thing some serious thought." If it wasn't for him, I'd be traveling a totally different path.

WHY MUSIC INSTEAD OF CONTEST SURFING?

I did join the professional tour when I turned pro, because that's all that mattered. You had to be a number and it was all about winning contests. But a lot of things started changing. Surf companies started marketing differently. For instance, my sponsor wanted me to miss an event to do a magazine trip to Iceland. So I was in that first generation of surfers who could be professional surfers but not have to follow a contest circuit. I mean, I was getting more publicity than guys who were winning contests by just going on trips and documenting it.

AND YOU LIKED IT BETTER THAN COMPETING?

I saw it as the surfer's dream, traveling the world and trying to find that unriden wave. I fell in love with that because I hated the pressure of having to win, being a number. Feeling like if I don't win I'm a failure. Today, surfing's become so much broader than just contests and the tour. I don't call it free surfing or soul surfing; everybody does that. But I think there is another side to promoting these products than just being on the tour.

DO YOU THINK IT'S A BONA FIDE LIFESTYLE?

Surfing is a lifestyle. And you don't have to live at the beach. I know people who live

in landlocked areas, from Germany to middle America, who I still consider surfers. Whenever they get a chance they get on a plane and go somewhere to surf. So I think once you've surfed and lived that beach culture lifestyle, it becomes more than just a sport, it becomes a lifestyle.

YOU SEEM TO HAVE MORE INPUT ON YOUR SIGNATURE CLOTHING, SHOE AND SUNGLASS LINES THAN MOST SURFERS. WHAT DO YOU ENJOY ABOUT THE FASHION DESIGN PROCESS?

I like the fact that it's real. I have a longstanding relationship with Billabong, Sanuk and Von Zipper. As far as the designs, I mentioned to Billabong that I wanted to put out a line and they embraced that. Now we put a new one out every other season. I go in and help out with design and I integrate the design into my music and my life. So what I'm doing with these companies is real; they don't come to me with a shoe that I'd never wear and ask me to put my name on it. They know I'm not the kind of guy to just grab some quick money and be onto another sponsor a year later. I've been with these companies forever and they're like family to me.

WHY WAS THE '70S SUCH A BIG INFLUENCE IN YOUR SURFING, MUSIC AND FASHION?

Well, I don't know if it was the '70s, I just fell in love with guitar slingers. The old school like Jimmy Page, Jimi Hendrix, Robert Plant, The Beatles. I just loved that era. And early on I was traveling around a lot for surfing and I just started trying to find ways to ride waves differently with different boards. But it was a time when everyone rode high performance boards and nothing else.

DID PEOPLE ACCEPT IT?

No. People thought I was an idiot. Now, people are riding everything and much more into trying new things.

WHICH MIGHT BE A GOOD THING CONSIDERING THE ECLECTIC ASSORTMENT OF INSTRUMENTS ON YOUR NEW ALBUM, START LIVIN'. THERE'S EVERYTHING FROM HAND-CLAPPING AND BANGING ON BOWLS TO ZIPPO LIGHTERS AND BEANS AND SALT IN A CAN. WHAT DROVE YOUR NON-TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO THE ALBUM?

I hadn't planned on that. I went into the studio with my friend of 10 years, Matt Grundy. He had a bunch of banjos and ukuleles and other crazy things, so we got into the practice of me playing my acoustic guitar while he would pick up any instrument he thought might work well with the song. We built the live tracks, and then built on top of them with other instruments. It was really fun and went amazingly well. Seven days later, the record was done.

WHAT'S THE THEME OF START LIVIN'?

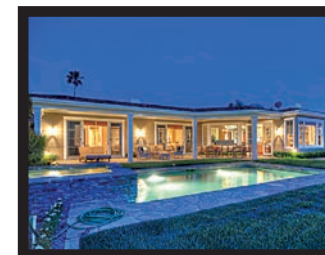
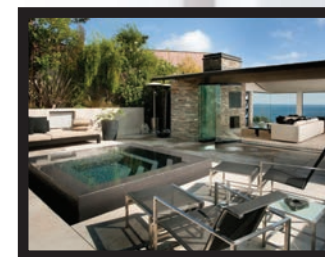
The theme is: Enjoy the moment you're in as much as you can. It comes from all the traveling I've

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Donovan Frankenreiter

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done and the waves I've surfed and the music I've played. Because in surfing things happen so quick, sometimes in just seconds. I've come to really love those seconds. They can change your whole world. I hear people talk about where they want to be in two years, or wishing something in the past had happened differently. I try to really enjoy what I have and make every moment live up to its potential. That's the theme of Start Livin'.

HOW IS BALANCING FAMILY LIFE WITH LIFE ON THE ROAD?

It's not easy, man. I've never met a musician with kids who's said, "Oh, I've got it wired, this is easy." I mean, it's crazy. I try to bring my family with me. And on one hand, I can't imagine any better experience than having them on the road with me to experience what I'm doing, but after watching daddy play 15 shows in a row, I'm sure they're thinking, "Ok, I saw it, I want to go home and see my friends now." So it's a balance.

HOW DOES YOUR WIFE HANDLE IT?

It's not easy living out of a suitcase. And I'm sure it's hard for her being on a tour bus with nine guys talking about guy stuff. Then there are the late nights. It's sort of like living a dream that's also a traveling circus. But at the end of the day, all the good outweighs the bad.

WHERE DID YOU PICK UP YOUR SENSE OF STYLE?

I think that came because of music. To me, music and fashion go hand in hand. Look at any band. I also started thinking about the fact that that's what I'm endorsing – fashion. That's what the companies are selling.

DURING YOUR CAREER, SURFING BLEW UP WITH MORE MONEY IN THE SPORT THAN EVER BEFORE WHILE THE MUSIC INDUSTRY GOT CRUSHED BECAUSE OF DIGITAL DOWNLOADS AND MUSIC PIRATING. SO HOW DID YOU MAKE IT AS A MUSICIAN?

That's why I go on the road eight months out of the year – because I don't sell any records. Nobody does. So I have to tour and play live concerts, because that's the only way I can make money. What's happened has been seriously detrimental to the record industry. It's sort of gone back to how it was in the '60s, when it was all about singles and 45s. Now, it's about singles and digital downloads.

SO HOW DO YOU SURVIVE?

It's like anything, times are changing and you have to adapt. Use the new technology to your advantage. YouTube, Facebook, iTunes, digital downloads. You've got to make it work for you. It used to be that a band could survive by selling their CDs at their shows. Now, you can't even give 'em away for free. It used to be the record companies would sign five bands and hope three would hit. They'd give every band \$500,000 in tour support and three would crush it. Now that's gone. It's brutal.

DID YOUR CONNECTION TO SURFING HELP?

Definitely. Working with Jack and having a built-in fan base in the surf world helped. I don't think people realize how broad the surfing lifestyle is. It's everywhere. I tell my promoters, "Just put me by the beach and I'll draw a crowd." They don't believe me, but it always works. And I like the idea of taking my music back to its roots.

YOUR MOUSTACHE HAS TAKEN ON A CELEBRITY OF ITS OWN. BUT DO YOU EVER JUST WANT TO SHAVE IT OFF?

Sometimes. I shaved one time on New Year's Eve and my wife and kids freaked out. They didn't recognize me. It's become its own being. In fact, Sanuk has made fake moustaches that I give away at my shows. So I guess I'm stuck with it... unless I shave it and use one of the fake ones. You know, that could just work.

■ **TUNE IN** :: Find out more info about Donovan Frankenreiter's albums or upcoming shows online.
:: donavonf.com