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Rodrigo AND THE Art of Fun

By David Holmes

"The *casita* was my biggest creative project; 8'x 16' when I started, it grew over the years. My favorite comment about the dwelling was from a professional builder: 'Sitting in it is like wearing a favorite pair of broken-in Levis.' That's a food scrap altar I made for the coyotes and ravens. These photos are emotional—a reminder of ten years of solitude. The roads came, and you know the rest of the story...."

"*Palo adán* on your left! *Bíznaga* straight ahead!"

I'm on a desert walkabout with Rodney "Rodrigo" McCoubrey; it's well past a December sunset, we're navigating by starlight,

and Rodrigo is calling back the identities of vague dangerous silhouettes in an effort to avoid bloodshed. We had left his hand-built *casita* overlooking what was once a remote little point in Baja that afternoon, packing a pair of spuds, a baggie of wild Baja onions, a couple of *cervezas* (mine), sodas (his), and a few matches. On our way up into the inland hills, we were treated to the sight of a robust local coyote, lit to a magnificent gold as the sun neared the horizon. In a small clearing, we layered a few dried *maguéy* leaves into a small cooking fire and fixed our gaze

out to the west in hopes of catching what would be my first green flash. Just as the last of the sun dipped into the Pacific, we were presented with a brief, intense emerald spark; the gift made my day.

The real reason for our trek was, of course, the achievement of fun, which is (or should be) the natural pursuit of every surfer. Fun and surf so completely define the life of Rodrigo that he spent ten years building, decorating (not by any means conventionally), and seasonally occupying said beachhouse, just to set himself up for more fun that the rest of us are generally allowed. Picture yourself dropping into a perfect wave, then pulling out ten years later, I know guys who don't even surf that were jealous of Rodrigo's setup.

Rodney's *camino* to Baja began in 1954 in the East L.A. suburb of Whittier and continued to nearby Santa Fe Springs, where he became fluent in the brand of street Spanish known as "Pocho"; his devastating impersonation of a cholo schoolboy is guaranteed entertainment around a campfire. Introduction to a life in saltwater came via costal fishing forays with his pop, "Bad Bob" McCoubrey; from there, he was locked in.

Some of the most dedicated surfers I have known have been those that had to get to the beach from farthest inland, and Rodrigo is at the top of that list. Since his arrival in North



DENNIS JUNOR

DONNA HUTCHINS



JUNIOR

San Diego County in the early '70s, it's a rare day that ends without a go-out, no matter how crappy it may have looked from the Beacon's parking lot. Somehow, fun will be had, and the absence of quality waves (which *anybody* can surf) is handled with the same dedicated quest for amusement as are those mornings when the long left walls are peeling up the beach off of Rodrigo's favorite reef.

As usual, local surfing begets global surfing, especially after *The Endless Summer* burned into our brains; at the age of 19, Rodrigo took off in his '56 Ford sedan delivery on the first of a couple of seminal adventures through Mexico and Central America. Since then, he has dipped his goofy feet into the waters of prime fun zones in South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and Indonesia, but the desert points of Baja have a combination of attractions that, for us, eclipses them all. The recreational potential has, of course, been excessively well documented, along with the physical beauty of the place. For an imaginative character like Rodrigo, however, Baja provides much more than surf and scenery.

Education

A practitioner of holistic massage therapy since 1982, Rodrigo is very interested in the healing properties of desert flora such as *gobernadora* (creosote), white sage, and desert lavender; he incorporates these into balms and lotions as part of his approach to his practice. The nectar of the mature *maguáy* flower may not be curative, but I'll never forget its sweet, earthy taste—a nice perk for the desert pharmacologist. Not coincidentally, Rodrigo's vast medical supply depot was adjacent to that beautiful little right point.

Building materials

The Baja house was a masterpiece of rock, mud, used lumber, scavenged doors and windows, cactus, skeletons, driftwood, and bits of shipwrecks; the whole thing was probably worth under 200 bucks. Never one to settle for a non-whimsical environment, Rodrigo festooned his nest with an assortment of bones, shells, fire-blackened toys, and rusted car parts gleaned from collecting trips through various local trash heaps and junk piles.

"A man and his tools: out in the elements, elbow-deep in creativity."



Sanctuary

Rodrigo is nowhere near what you would call “stressed out,” but we can all use some mental floss now and then, and Baja still reveals pockets of glorious solitude to those in need. Grab some soon before it runs out.

Constant Entertainment

Baja immerses a willing observer in a virtual universe of sensory amusements: Tides and swell rise and fall; winds blow; dunes migrate; morning and evening sunlight take turns illuminating the land and seascapes; flowers bloom; coyotes greet the full moon; pinpoints of light streak across the night sky; dolphins play; whales breach; seal lions stare back, curious; pelicans, terns, oyster catchers, gulls, frigate birds, egrets, osprey, herons, willits, grebes, shrikes, plovers, and surf scoters somehow sense the rhythmic and tonal nuances of whatever music we’re appreciating that day, and choreograph their moves accordingly. Ever spend an hour-and-a-half doing nothing but watching shorebirds to a soundtrack of vintage Esquivel? Or take a pre-dawn stroll

“Over the years I learned to stick my butt into some extremely challenging and wondrous backside walls.”



“My 1959 F100 panel truck, complete with Rod Sorenson quiver, sunscreen, shampoo, and the all-protective Virgin of Guadalupe and Milagros to assist us on our travels. The plaid curtains are a McCoubrey clan tradition.”



PHOTOS COURTESY RODRIGO

"An altar dedicated to the victims of the San Diego fires (left). Materials came from John Revel, a disaster cleanup worker. The fish spring from recycled sources, mostly found trash. 'The Initiate' (the head on the right) was a collaborative piece with my daughter. It won first in 2005 at the Del Mar Envirofaire." Fresh vato pizza (above) from Rigo's handbuilt woodfire oven.

to a small estuary to catch a resident peregrine's strafing runs through a flock of migrant ducks? Ever look around after sunset and ask yourself where that day went? TV? We don't need no stinkin' TV!

Romance

Opportunity does not knock often in the outback, but it found Rodrigo some years ago, and he too eagerly succumbed to the call. The marriage was, to say the least, ill-fated, but it came equipped with a cool five-year-old stepson, John Marlowe (high on the very short list of little kids I ever actually liked), and soon produced the lovely Canela Rose McCoubrey. Now 18 and 12, Johnny and Canela are starting to show some remarkable musical talent and have been collaborating on a CD of mostly original compositions, proudly produced by Rodrigo himself. This sage reaffirms one of the most basic lessons of desert life: Sometimes the spiniest cactus yields the sweetest fruit.

Unlimited Art Supplies

Rodrigo was already an accomplished ceramic artist when he began his stint in Baja, and he dug a functional kiln/pizza oven into the hill behind the house using *maguëy* leaves to low-fire some pieces fashioned from the local red adobe, but the main ingredient in his art since then has been trash.

In remote, harsh environments, things and materials are not discarded until they have served in at least two or three new and practical adaptations, each one a bit further removed from the original function. Broken leaf springs are worked into knives or ab irons, a scrap of shoe leather silences a rattling

brake caliper, Tecate cans and burned-out spark plugs become fishing gear, junk tires morph into fine planters, fences, and sturdy soles on uncountable pairs of Mexico's classic footwear—the *huarache*. As a neighboring *ranchero* put it: "*Que lo hacen allá, lo perfeccionamos aquí*" (what they make up there, we perfect down here)—basic recycling, distilled to its most elemental level.

Eventually, the last shred of utility is exhausted and the newly minted junk is consigned to the forces of nature for seasoning. Blowing sand, corrosive salt, passing time, and the full spectrum of solar radiation conspire to sculpt and polish the discards into configurations that are often hard to classify as anything man-made. Thus transformed, they speak to Rodrigo.

In their new incarnations, these finely weathered objects now speak to us; the language is one that is universally understood: pure, goofball fun! At first encounter the mind may register the abstract contours of birds and fish (it helps to find an eye first), then the essence of Rodrigo's art collides with the brain's concept of what birds and fish usually look like. Fins, beaks, scales, wings, teeth, feathers, and assorted random appendages are now represented by an array of junk tied together by Rodrigo's surreal use of colors and textures (naturally, he scrounges surplus and leftover paint for the projects). At this point, the brain's rational options are bypassed and you just can't help but laugh out loud at these apparitions. Sure, it's just junk, but the imagination it takes to visualize what it could be is, like all real talent, completely beyond most of us—I couldn't create stuff like this in a hundred years!

So, what began as creative entertainment between surf sessions has evolved into a viable and productive "career" (there



ought to be a word that doesn't sound so much like "work") as a legitimate (another overly official word) folk artist. Along with the wacko wildlife pieces, Rodrigo also produces a variety of classic altars, mirrors, crosses, candleholders, and whatever else happens to emerge as trash becomes treasure.

A beneficial side effect to all this is that Rodrigo has become recognized as somewhat of a poster boy for creative recycling and has won awards for his work at numerous local art shows, including the Del Mar Fair. One look inside his home/studio in Encinitas tells you that he is thoroughly committed to a lifestyle of what I would call "minimal consumerism." You'd have to put some real effort into spotting anything in there that was actually purchased new (okay, maybe the computer or DVD setup, but with all Rodrigo's contacts, they were probably scammed too). This is not to say that Rodrigo lives a life of deprivation and sacrifice—he just doesn't need as much crap as most people. Instead, he surrounds himself with a riot of color and amusement that perfectly reflects his philosophy: "Find the fun in everything." The recycling angle meshes perfectly with this; after all, it's not like you could create this stuff out of anything *but* junk!

Epilogue

The Baja house is no more...let's just say its time had come. The beautiful waves still arrive on schedule, but so does the next generation of Baja adventurers, most of whom will never experience the absolute joy of exploration and discovery that has been virtually eliminated, at first by the geometric progression of word-of-mouth, and more recently by the "progress" of

technology. The name and location of Rodrigo's exquisite little paradise is now discussed openly between sets at dozens of West Coast breaks, but fighting the onslaught or giving up the quest are not among our options. Rather, we hold on to what is sacred and channel our energy into finding whatever fun might be awaiting us a few more kilometers down the dirt road.

Artistically, Rodrigo's next level will be transforming business and residential spaces into grin-inducing recycled environments for those who need their R.D.A. of imagination and color. So if your crib or barn could use a really junky upgrade, contact Rodrigo at <rodrigosrecycledart.com>. ✨



DONNA HUTCHINS

"Upon exiting a very late surf session, I was as surprised as a little kid to find that Ed and Dona Hutchins had lit my *casita* with chili pepper lights and a generator."