
Patrick Hill

IN CONVERSATION
WITH KIRK PUTNAM

On August 4, 2012, I interviewed Kirk Putnam in his garage in West Hills, California. Kirk is deeply involved with a small community of surfers who ride a very unique kind of surfboard, the Displacement Hall. The beginning of this scene started around 1965 in Malibu and continues on to the present. This specific style of surfing and board design has greatly influenced sculptural and stylistic aspects of my work.

Patrick Hill: Hey Kirk.
Kirk Putnam: Hey, what’s up?
Patrick Hill: West Hills, is that in the San Fernando Valley?
Kirk Putnam: Yeah, the very west end of the San Fernando Valley, like on the Western rim, that’s why it’s called West Hills.
Patrick Hill: Have you always lived here?
Kirk Putnam: No.
Patrick Hill: Where did you grow up?
Kirk Putnam: In Burbank.
Patrick Hill: Oh, really?
Kirk Putnam: Yeah, born in Burbank, raised in Burbank until I was about 17 and then I moved to Santa Barbara.
Patrick Hill: Did you surf then and what kind of boards were you riding at the time?
Kirk Putnam: Oh, longboards. Your typical mid-1960’s longboards. My brother had a Bing that he won at a surf film at Van Nuys High School. I inherited it when he got drafted and had to go Vietnam. That was my first good longboard.
Patrick Hill: What was it like living in Burbank and trying to surf?
Kirk Putnam: You had to be pretty hard core. We’d surf after school, before school, cutting school.
Patrick Hill: Where did you go?
Kirk Putnam: Malibu, Rincon, wherever the surf was happening. That’s one cool thing about growing up in Burbank. If the surf was good in Huntington or somewhere South we would head down there. If it was good at Malibu we’d go over the hill and surf there. Being by the freeway, back then you could just jump up and go. My parents, my dad died when I was 12. That’s when I got more serious about surfing. That was kind of my escape to get over it.
Patrick Hill: You were 12 when you started surfing regularly?
Kirk Putnam: Yeah, but I had already been surfing.

I started surfing when I was about 9. Then I got my license. Once you get your license, that’s when you get more serious. I was already riding Greg Liddle (Baron of the Displacement Hall) boards by then.

Patrick Hill: When did Greg start surfing?
Kirk Putnam: Oh, youngish. Greg probably started in, like ‘59 or ‘60 maybe. He was about 15 or 16. He started really early. Greg was surfing Malibu during the balboa woods.

Patrick Hill: Where did you grow up?
Kirk Putnam: He’s from the Valley, like the Reseda area. He was into it from the get go. He was obviously influenced by Miki Dora (the God of Malibu), oh and Lance Carsey. Greg was one of the really hot longboarders.

Patrick Hill: What led him to start investigating Bob Simmons’ (chief inventor of the modern surfboard) concepts?
Kirk Putnam: Just being influenced by Sunny Yater (legendary Santa Barbara surfboard shaper).

Patrick Hill: How would you characterize the early Simmons boards?
Kirk Putnam: They were definitely Displacement Halls. Bob was using mathematics and his aviation background. He was working over at Lockheed. He was a real smart guy. Super eccentric but very, very smart. He was trying to take theories about planing surfaces and stuff and try to incorporate that into surfboards. Joe Quigg and (Man) Keelin were influenced by Simmons too. They kind of branched off on their own and refined the boards even more.

Patrick Hill: Is that what they call the Malibu Board?
Kirk Putnam: Yeah, the Malibu Chip. Sunny was riding some of Kelvin’s early boards before he started shaping himself.

Patrick Hill: What were Simmons’ boards made out of?
Kirk Putnam: Epsic, Solida, Balsa.

Patrick Hill: Were the fins glassed on?
Kirk Putnam: Yeah, they had little half moon Simmons fins and were glassed on.

Patrick Hill: Like a twin fin?
Kirk Putnam: Some of them were twin fins, some of them are single fins. There’s not as many twin fins as people think. A lot of them were single fins. Quigg and Keelin were getting boards from Simmons but I couldn’t tell you exactly what year. I think around ’52 or ’53 was when Quigg and Keelin got together and started making boards.

Patrick Hill: That’s basically all at Malibu?
Kirk Putnam: Yeah. Those boards were Halls. This is when there was no crowd, so you could take this really nice beautiful Hall and just trim all the way across the beach without anybody interfering or anything. They just refined those kitchin’ boards. They were actually more refined than the D-fin longboards of later on. Boards got kind of de-sophisticated around the ‘Gidget’ era because they wanted to make more boards. They made foam molds and the boards kind of got dictated by the molds. The Malibu Chip boards streamlined better and just seemed to go through the water better. Then nose-riding came in. Board design went through a stagnant period until George Greenough and the Australians did the V-bottom. That’s when everything started to change. The film, The Hot Generation (1967) documents that transition.

Patrick Hill: Who is that?
Kirk Putnam: Bob McTavish (Australian surfboard shaper) is that movie. Russell Hughes. A guy named Bobby Brown who was really a good surfer. He was as good as Nar Young and then he got killed in a bar brawl.

Patrick Hill: Let’s talk more about George Greenough and his influence?
Kirk Putnam: The board that you see him riding in Endless Summer (1966) at Zuma Bar is a blue balsa wood board that he shaped in wood shop. Then he made a balsa wood board. That really worked. He dished the duck out and it was a kneeborder. George never stood up. I think he had one, a Yater Spoon, and didn’t like it. He immediately cut it down or did something with it so that it looked like a kneeborder. He made that balsa wood board and that was a big jump for him to drop the thing out and make it how he wanted it to ride. It started out as a twin fin and he kept moving the fins in, tuning it and he’s like, ‘I just need one fin.’ The fin ended up being in the middle, which gave him a more neutral board, which is how he wanted it. He liked that board and rode it for years. Then he made a mold of it and that is the beginning of Vela (Greenough’s epic kneeborder). He made a fiberglass mold and added some foam scraps from longboard blanks and put it together. It kind of twisted a little bit while he made it. He rode it like that and was discouraged with it and just went, ‘ahh this doesn’t work very well’. Then I don’t know what happened. He did

Putnam was in conversation with Patrick Hill, discussing the design of his surfboards. Hill commented on the importance of the fin design and its influence on the board's performance. Putnam explained the design of his Displacement Hull surfboard and its features, such as the use of aluminium for the rails and the nose and tail. He also discussed the implications of this design on surfing techniques and the overall surfing experience.

Patrick Hill: Where were the fin designs coming from?
Kirk Putnam: In the late 70s, there was a revolution in surfboard design. The fin designs were evolving, and the general consensus was that the longboard was better for surfing. This led to the development of the shortboard, which included fins that allowed for greater maneuverability and speed. Putnam noted that his design was influenced by this revolution.

Patrick Hill: How did the flex of the fin influence the board design?
Kirk Putnam: The flexibility of the fin is crucial in determining the board's performance. A flexible fin allows for greater maneuverability and control, while a stiff fin provides more stability and control. Putnam explained that his design incorporated these principles to create a board that was both flexible and stable.

Patrick Hill: What was the influence of Malibu in the design of the board?
Kirk Putnam: Malibu was a significant influence on the design of the board. Putnam noted that the smooth and consistent waves at Malibu provided a unique surfing experience that influenced the design of his boards. He also discussed the use of technologies such as carbon fiber and glass fiber to enhance the board's performance.

Patrick Hill: Who would you say are the key players in Malibu at that time?
Kirk Putnam: The key players in Malibu at that time were Steve Liddle and Greg Noll. Putnam noted that their influence on surfboard design and surfing techniques was significant.

In summary, Putnam's interview with Patrick Hill provided insight into the history of surfboard design and the role of influential surfers in shaping the sport. The conversation highlighted the importance of flexibility and design in creating a successful surfboard.

**Patrick Hill:** So you were hanging out at Malibu a lot back then?

**Kirk Putnam:** Yeah, I saw Steve Krajewski when I was in high school. Then I started hanging out with him and others.

**Patrick Hill:** When was that?

**Kirk Putnam:** Oh, 1970, ’71. Right around then my parents moved to Washington. I didn’t want to go so I moved in with a guy out in Reseda who was one of the Liddle crew guys. His parents let me move in with him for a summer.

**Patrick Hill:** How would you describe surfing halls in terms of how it is in the water and the style it produces?

**Kirk Putnam:** You’re following the natural curl line of the wave. You’re not trying to rip the wave apart. The board actually displaces water. Hence the name, Displacement Hull. It’s a more flowing style and it’s about how the board feels, not how it looks.

**Patrick Hill:** What is the proper term that Greg coined for his boards?

**Kirk Putnam:** Oh, yeah, Displacement Hulls. Or Transnational Displacement Hulls. The boards that he makes now are just refined versions of the boards he has been developing for years. Some are a little bit easier to ride and some are more extreme.

**Patrick Hill:** What other boards are you into now?

**Kirk Putnam:** I really wanted one of those old V-hulls. I thought we could make a good one, you know? So, Mark (Andreini) and I made a couple of stringless 8-footers that were off those old templates but with better rocker and better fins and stuff. We made a couple of really nice ones. That started us off looking back at some of those older boards we had passed over. Then with Brian (Hilbers) and I, it was the same thing. We were looking at those old boards and wanting to bring those boards back. I took some of my favorite boards from different shapers and went back to Brian and showed him the boards and what I wanted to change and refine.

**Patrick Hill:** It seems like those designs were just discarded.

**Kirk Putnam:** Oh, you just couldn’t even believe how fast it went. It was so exciting, I mean, to be surfing at that time. It was insane. I got obsessed with it. That was the beginning of my surfboard obsession. You would walk down the beach in Malibu in 1969 or ’70 and your eyes were bugging out of your head, you know? Things changed every month. And there were no computers. Communication was getting a magazine that came out like once a month. You would get it and you’d just be like ‘whoa!’ It was really a cool time to grow up.

**Patrick Hill:** One last question. What was the Liddle League thing about?

**Kirk Putnam:** That kind of carried over from the long-board days. Like teams and stuff. But there was really no Liddle League team. Actually, we made a joke about that. We never called it that. Other people did. When that got put in the *Surfer’s Journal*, we weren’t real happy about it. But that just how magazines are. Or people that interview people for magazines (laughs) I may end up regretting this.

**Patrick Hill:** Thanks a lot, Kirk.


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**Patrick Hill,** SURFIST 2011 – glass, wood, rubber, laminate 12.3 x 71 x 22.2 cm • Courtesy of David Renshaw's Galleria, Los Angeles, New York, The Approach, London and Galerie Abwesende Rock, Brussels/Paris

Steve Keene/VOLK, 1966 – Gormley Bronze Collection

**Patrick Hill,** EGIZIOVA, 2016 – wood, glass, bronze, 26.5 x 13.3 x 15.2 cm • Courtesy of David Renshaw’s Galleria, Los Angeles, New York, The Approach, London and Galerie Abwesende Rock, Brussels/Paris