

“A Day Will Come That Is Like No Other...

...and nothing that happens after, will ever be the same”

Written by Andy Owen



“Like a ground swell that improves with time and distance, Big Wednesday has aged like vintage wine - and is now considered a classic.” Ben Marcos, Surf Writer

Big Wednesday is a very special movie to me.

One of my top five of all time.

It was written by John Milius and Dennis Aaberg and directed by Milius himself in 1978.

The film is about surfing and friendship in times of war – and stars Jan-Michael Vincent, William Katt and Gary Busey, as three young friends in California, whose passion in life is surfing.

Matt Johnson – played by Vincent - is the greatest surfer of his generation, but also a self-destructive type with a devil-may-care attitude.

Jack Barlow on the other hand, is solid, calm and responsible; Leroy Smith is highly unpredictable and off-the-wall. His nickname is "The Masochist".

Their surfing lives are traced from the summer of 1962 where they enjoy to the full, a life of beaches, girls, cars and waves, with a soundtrack of The Beach Boys and Jan & Dean.

But as we all found out ourselves in our own lives as we grew up, idyllic lifestyles don't last. The real world forces its way in.

The film shows how these three guys eventually have to make the difficult transition to adulthood and face a changing world that is disturbing, dangerous and complex.

A world where simple solutions don't work anymore.

I know exactly why this film took me off at the knees when I first saw it on TV in the 80's.

It was the camaraderie of the three guys. It was growing up in the sixties.

It was the surfing culture – and the passion they had.



"Catch a wave and you're sitting on top of the world..."

I have never surfed. The waves weren't high enough in the English Midlands.

And the ocean has always frightened me. Still does...

But, when I was the same age as Matt, Leroy and Jack, I had buddies.

Real close friends.

And we did outrageous things and hoped we'd never grow up.

We fell in and out of love every week. Life was simple and idyllic.

Although I was from a completely different background, culture and lifestyle – and luckily, with no war on my radar - I connected to the guys instantly, when I saw the film.

Their episodic friendship in the film was chronicled by various time periods, all related to significant surfing moments.

The *South Swell* in the summer of 1962, the *West Swell* in 1965 - and the *North Swell* in the summer of 1968.

In the film you are introduced to a man known only as Bear, an almost mystical character who makes the guys' surfboards, while philosophising endlessly about the nature of surfing.



Bear tells the boys that '*The Great Swell*' is coming.

He tells them:

"A day will come that is like no other. And nothing that happens after, will ever be the same..."

To the boys, this is Nirvana.

They want to be there when it comes, they want to surf the 'greatest, cleanest, most transcendent wave that has ever been.'

They know it will be the ultimate experience. What they don't realise, is it will be the end of their story.

"When is it coming, Bear?" They asked.

Bear has no answer. He just smiles. He just knows it *will...*



But they will have to wait another 6 years...

The Vietnam War draft in 1965 captures them all, but Matt and Leroy escape it, by faking insanity, homosexuality - and a wide variety of medical conditions.

Jack is drafted, as are many of their friends. One of their closest is killed in the war.

Their time of innocence is shattered and gone forever – and for the next few years, their three lives go in very different directions.

But the '*Great Swell*' is coming. And it is close. Bear feels it. The word is put out there.

On Big Wednesday, Matt, Leroy and Jack reunite...

The script of Big Wednesday was written by Milius and his friend and fellow surfer, journalist Denny Aaberg.



They used to surf with a group of friends at Malibu in the 60's.

Malibu is referred to as 'The Point' in the film.

The idea for the film started as a novel written by Milius and Aaberg and was initially published in 1978 by Bantam Books.

"The novel is a story about old Malibu, its waves, its local characters and what it was like to surf there in the 50's and 60's." explains Aaberg.

All the main characters in the film, were inspired by real people and a lot of the main sequences in the film, were based on the filmmakers' own real-life experiences.

"It was a special time," said Aaberg of the 1960's.

"Surfing was a brand-new sport with its own aristocracy. It took us a year to write the book, as we wanted it to be authentic, as we are both real surfers."

Milius added, *"A lot of things in the film happened to me,"* *A lot of the characters are me and in another sense none of them are me. It took an awful long time to write the script. It is so very personal.*

It's about growing up and relationships - and the surf is the exotic background. We all knew it was special, we knew it wouldn't last. And we knew how good we had it.

Surfing is a strange thing. A lot of people never leave it. You always feel you owe it something. It was a central experience in our lives. It's all changed now."

Surf historian Matt Warshaw refers to the time as the golden era of surfing in the region, a time when he says, *"just about everything that was progressive (in surfing) was taking place on that one beautiful beach. Without a crowd."*

Warner Brothers gave Milius an \$11 million budget for the film, which was filmed in a whole variety of locations - El Paso, Texas, Hollister Ranch near Santa Barbara, Surfrider Beach in Malibu, Ventura, California and La Libertad, El Salvador

The finale was filmed at Sunset Beach in Pupukea, Hawaii.

Although two of the lead actors - Jan-Michael Vincent and William Katt - had been surfing since childhood, Milius brought in an all-star cast of surfing talent to serve as stunt doubles, including World Champ Peter Townend, Ian Cairns, Billy Hamilton, Jay Riddle and Jackie Dunn.

Gary Busey had to learn to surf for the role and after just a few months, ended up joining his co-stars in the line up at Sunset for the final scene.

There, he sought advice from Gerry Lopez, brought in for the action-filled climax to play himself, who told Busey in the event of a wipeout, to go like "*a dishrag in a dryer.*"



Gerry Lopez

There is a very interesting side story to the film, which is worth a mention.

Milius was big buddies with fellow directors, Steven Spielberg and George Lucas. At dinner one night, before the movies they were working on were released - they struck a deal on a handshake.



They all agreed to trade percentage profit points on box office takings for '*Big Wednesday*', '*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*' and '*Star Wars*'.

At that time, the talk in Hollywood, was that Big Wednesday was going to be a box-office smash. So, Spielberg and Lucas thought they'd really pulled off a great deal.

But it didn't turn out that way...

Big Wednesday initially made \$4.5 million; Close Encounters of the Third Kind and Star Wars, made \$600 million each.

In fact, Lucas even asked for his credit back from John Milius, but the request was turned down. With a smile, I'm sure...

Big Wednesday premiered in wide release in the United States on May 26th, 1978. The picture was also screened at various film festivals, including the Davao City Film Festival, Philippines; the Turin Film Festival, Italy; and a number of others.

But, despite heavy promotional activity, it was a box office flop.

The only consolation for Milius, was, that his dinner date deal with Spielberg and Lucas, would see him earn him millions of dollars.

Milius said later, that the film was *"sort of a numb spot in my life. It was a very personal film and it really tore me up when it was attacked in such a way that no one saw it."*

But, as they often do over time, things changed ...

When the film was released on home video in the early 80's, it quickly began to acquire a cult following - and this adulation grew *massively* over the next few years.

By 1998, following a 20th anniversary showing at the Newport Film Festival, the turnaround in opinion appeared to be complete.

The LA Times said it was *"one of the very few films to really capture the surfing life."*

Surfer Magazine bestowed what may be the ultimate compliment, declaring simply, *"Big Wednesday makes you proud to be a surfer."*

And many stars and top surfers piled in:

"It pretty much captures why people come to Los Angeles in the first place. It's the edge of the continent and the rest of the world begins just a few hundred yards offshore." **Tom Hanks**

"John had done his most personal screenplay, in my opinion. When I read Big Wednesday, I certainly thought it was his American Graffiti."
Steven Spielberg

"John Milius was a surfer. He did hang out with a surfer crowd. He was going to try to represent that crowd the way he remembered it and the way he saw it, as opposed to the beach party movie versions of it."
Quentin Tarantino

"The actual board I built to ride for the movie...is the very last Lightning Bolt in my personal collection. It has had a great life and pedigree to prove it. Just watch the end sequence of Big Wednesday!" **Gerry Lopez, Legendary Surfer**

"The story of Big Wednesday is real, written by real surfers. The main characters are based on actual personalities from the sixties. They are universal characters who could be anywhere in the world, any town, in any period of time."
Peter Townsend, World Champion Surfer

The thoughts of John Milius, captured from a 1976 interview, sums the film up perfectly:

"It's a surfing HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY."

"The loss of an aristocracy, the end of an era, the passing of a more innocent time to a more corrupt and complex one. All growing up is the passing of innocence."

"It's based on the lives of three friends ten years ago. It's about their friendship, and the value of friendship. I don't think that kids today have the same kind of values that these people had then."

"I don't see movies being made about that kind of thing. This movie is about friendship: surfing is just the background. It's about love of a place, love of a time, love of your human contacts, and the loss of those things."

"It's the most personal film I'll probably ever make - and I figured I ought to do it now, before I get too far away from it. At least half the people who participated in it, are dead now."

Big Wednesday is now regarded as the greatest surf movie of all time.

And I discovered that personally, one very windy Sunday morning on a beautiful Cornish beach, a couple of years ago.

It was about 7am, dawn was just breaking and my wife and I pulled up in a car park at the back of Gwithian Beach at Hayle to give the dogs their Sunday run on the sand, in this stunning location.

There were only two other vehicles in the car park and about 8 young people were getting their surfing gear on. I made a casual comment to a few of them as we got the dogs out.

"Who is Matt Johnson then", I said. "And who is the Masochist?"

They all stopped getting suited up and looked up at me. They all stopped talking. For an instant I thought I had said the wrong thing.

Then one of them said, *"What do you know about Matt Johnson?"*

Ten minutes later, after I told them what **Big Wednesday** meant to me – and they all told me how much it meant to them, we were bonded.

They didn't know the story about Milius being a surfer, or the profit deal with Spielberg and Lucas.

Many handshakes later, they went to enjoy the Cornish surf and we walked along the beach. As we walked back to the car half an hour later, I got a few waves.

They, of course, got a lot more...

Big Wednesday is so real to me. It's a film about a very particular time and place.

I don't think any film has ever captured what life was like in California in the 60's, as well as this one does. If there is one, I haven't seen it.

It is a window into the genesis of the surfing culture. I adore it and watch it at least twice a year.

The film ends emotionally.

The three friends - one-time surfing Gods who ruled the Californian beaches - were outperformed by shortboarder Gerry Lopez (playing himself) and a new generation of surfers at The Point.

Matt reflected with his buddies under a boarded-up archway with crumbling concrete steps, *"Lopez, he's as good as they always said he was."*

Leroy added solemnly, *"So were we."*

Matt added: *"We drew the line, huh?"*

After a few quick hugs and a promise to *'keep in touch'*, Matt was left to take one last look toward the surf.

The end credits play over a view of the sun setting into the ocean.

The dream was over.

