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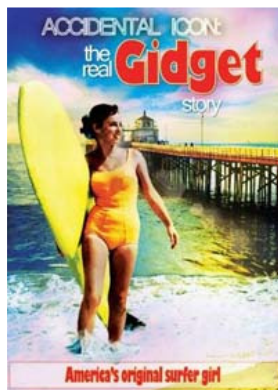


96
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STRANGE THINGS ARE HAPPENING

ACCIDENTAL ICON: THE REAL GIDGET STORY

DVD. Level 33.



Like most British people, I tend to look at surfing with a degree of bewilderment and suspicion. Things might be different if we were in Malibu, but apart from a few desperate wannabes in denial about our weather, beaches and culture, no-one here can see the point, and - a few Beach Boys hits aside - the whole scene has never really caught on, with most people here thinking it is a spectacularly pointless exercise.

So this documentary is a fascinating, if lightweight, glimpse into a different world - a world where the **Gidget** movies and TV shows, the mention of which I can guarantee would leave most people here looking at you blankly, are thoroughly ingrained in the popular culture.

Gidget was a teenage surfer girl who has assorted fluffly adventures in various movies

(and various locations) across a series of films in the early 1960s, before transferring to television - the final (to date!) series appearing in the 1980s. I have to confess I haven't seen a single one of these, but by all accounts, they make the **Beach Party** films of the same era look gritty in comparison. Nevertheless, they were hugely popular at the time, making stars out of Sandra Dee and Sally Field, and probably represent America's last moment of innocence before the chaos and social upheaval of the late Sixties - a time when teenagers were still thoroughly wholesome and respectful of authority, even while living a supposedly 'bohemian' lifestyle.

Gidget was based on a real person - fifteen year old Kathy Kohner had spent the summer hanging with beach bums, learning to surf and absorbing the local culture, being dubbed 'gidget' - ie 'girl midget' by the surfers. When she told her writer father about it, instead of being concerned that his daughter was hanging out with 20-something slackers all day, he turned it into a novel - which then became the film, and on to the stuff of legend. Kohner is interviewed here, alongside a lot of the guys on the scene at that time (if you have a stereotyped image of a surfer, these ageing men won't shatter your illusions), as the documentary flips from the fictional world of the movies and TV show to the true story.

It's entertaining stuff, though at an hour long, it sometimes feels like it's padding things out a bit - the influence that **Gidget** had on female surfers is significant, but here hammered home at length, with what seems to be every woman ever to step foot on a surfboard trotted out to pay homage and try to explain how being able to stand on an overblown ironing board for a few seconds in the water is an empowering feminist experience. On the other hand, the movies and TV shows are rather rushed through - a cartoon series and assorted TV movies are only mentioned in passing, and there's little examination of where this character fitted in to society as society changed. I would've liked to see some discussion of how 1972 TV movie **Gidget Gets Married** either addressed or - more likely - ignored the social changes of that turbulent era.

But then, I'm probably missing the point. This is very much for the fans, and mostly the story of the teenage girl who inspired the whole franchise. As a look at a part of pop culture than is fairly alien to me, I found it enjoyable, and even if it didn't convince me that either the films or the activity had any real value, I feel better informed about both now - and that's all you can really ask from any documentary film.

DAVID FLINT

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