



Photo Caption: John Van Hamersveld fronts his DWP Design.

Photo provided by Alida Post.

John Van Hamersveld Anticipates Another “Endless Summer.”

By Duane Plank

John Van Hamersveld may not be an El Segundo resident, but the Rancho Palos Verdes local and renowned graphic artist and illustrator has established a large footprint in the South Bay and across the pop culture canyon for more than 60 years. “El Segundo is where my career started, as a surfer and an artist,” Van Hamersveld has said.

An El Segundo High School graduate, class of 1959, ESHS Hall-of-Fame inductee in 2017, the acclaimed graphic artist is also the designer of the colorful imprimaturs that grace the façade of a Department of Water of Power tower in El Segundo. You can view the tower as you travel East on Grand Avenue after making a turn from Vista Del Mar or while traipsing to or from the beach as we fast-forward to the summer of 2021.

Hopefully, as the pandemic continues to abate, this will be the new Endless Summer for fortunate beach residents like us.

Suzanne Fuentes, the long-time member of the El Segundo City Council, helped facilitate Van Hamersveld's induction into the ESHS Hall-of-Fame and his selection to design the DWP tank mural. The tank mural unveiling took place in April of 2018, after what Fuentes described as a "warp-speed" design and installation process, and was attended not only by local residents but also a veritable "Who's Who" of surfing.

Fuentes said that Van Hamersveld's artwork "provides a beautiful entrance to El Segundo. Seeing John Van Hamersveld's vibrant art installation," Fuentes said, "always makes me smile!"

Van Hamersveld marveled at his induction into the ESHS Hall-Fame, mentioning that when he saw his portrait gracing a school campus wall, he could not help but think that selected Hall-of-Famers usually were athletes, like baseballers the Brett Brothers or Scott McGregor, or maybe scientists (must admit those inductees' names were unfamiliar to me), not graphic artists.

Van Hamersveld also happens to be the talented man who designed the splashy poster for the still iconic 60's surf film, the Endless Summer. And, oh, by the way, he is credited with designing album covers, more than 300, for a few bands that you may have heard of, while he worked for Capitol Records in the mid-ish sixties as head of design/art director.

How did Van Hamersveld score the gig at Capitol Records? He said that at the time, his Endless Summer poster, which is featured in the Smithsonian, was "selling like hotcakes" in college campus bookstores and the like, and that he was invited to meet with a bigwig at Capitol Records. Van Hamersveld took his poster to the meeting, and the record executive made the (incorrect) assumption that Van Hamersveld also designed album covers.

Not quite, but Van Hamersveld said that he “didn’t say a word” to correct the exec’s false assumption and gladly accepted his nearly immediate job offer. This led to Van Hamersveld designing a boatload of more than 300 splashy, and oft-times, psychedelic album covers, including artwork and or promotional posters for the vinyl efforts of the Beatles, Rolling Stones, KISS, Grateful Dead, Blondie, the Beach Boys, Jimi Hendrix, and Jefferson Airplane. And he also (presumably) received a paycheck for his artistic work that graced publications like Esquire, Billboard, and the rock bible, Rolling Stone.

Van Hamersveld related that he was selected to design the artwork for the cover of the Beatles Magical Mystery Tour album. He said that the accompanying MMT film bombed, but that the album was not so shockingly, phenomenally successful. “That was my success there,” he reminisced.

Van Hamersveld said that the “most unique” cover that he designed was for the Rolling Stones “Exile on Main Street” album, adding that his renderings that graced the old vinyl records allowed him to be “paid really well.”

After finishing his tenure at Capitol Records, Van Hamersveld took advantage of burgeoning entrepreneurial opportunities that were blossoming some 50 years ago. Large record stores were starting to make their imprints in suburban concrete jungles, and, as luck would have it, flashy vinyl record jacket covers were a great way for stores to catch the eye (and open the wallets) of music aficionados.

On a personal aside, it is great to see the comeback in the interest of vintage vinyl albums. I only wish that I hadn’t offloaded almost all of my 60’s+ plus collection of records when my record player died about a dozen or so years ago. Instead, it seems that I am only left with the records (RUSH, David Sanborn, Ted Nugent) that no one wanted at the time, even if they were offered up for free.

Van Hamersveld started working to promote the artistry of album covers, leveraging the increasing media opportunities that were available during that timeframe. Down the road, he would take a teaching job at the same CalArts Institute where he had studied in the early '60s. Revisiting his old school, Van Hamersveld said, allowed him to network with a new era of creative minds and transition seamlessly into the new art scene.

Van Hamersveld, who will be turning 80 in September, continued plying his trade and was commissioned to design the official poster and 360-foot mural that promoted the 1984 Summer Olympics, which took place in Los Angeles. Among other creative endeavors, he has also designed the logo and a few of the buildings for the Fatburger chain, noting that he was again “well paid” designing the Fatburger trademark and multiple brick-and-mortar buildings for the successful hamburger chain.

Back to the beginnings of a creative genius, Van Hamersveld was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland. His father was an aeronautical engineer, part of a team that was asked to relocate to California. After spending a year in Westchester, the family moved in 1951 to Lunada Bay. Because there was no high school, at the time, located anywhere near his home, and Redondo Beach Unified High School was booked to the gills, Van Hamersveld ended up making the commute to attend ESHS, which allowed him to become familiar with the gnarly waves that grace our portion of the Pacific Ocean.

Post-graduation, and as a part of the early 60's South Bay surfing scene (Van Hamersfeld credits local surfing legends Dave Velzy and Hap Jacobs as two of his heroes), he ended up designing a surfing magazine that caught the eye of a publishing rival. Van Hamersveld was coerced to come and work for the rival, and it was around this time that he met filmmaker Bruce Brown, the man behind the “Endless Summer” documentary. Van Hamersveld created the documentary's promotional poster, and, as they say, the rest is history.

Van Hamersveld's embracement of the burgeoning California surf culture, and his graphic design talents, led him to be inducted into the Huntington Beach Surfing Wall of Fame in 2014, which just happened to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the release of the Endless Summer movie.

Van Hamersveld's creative talents and impact not only on pop culture, but on the artistic world were detailed in a renowned 11-minute short film, "Crazy World, Ain't It," the title of which is a Van Hamersveld catch phrase. The film visits with artists and scholars, who refer to Van Hamersveld as "a man of a different mind" and laud him as an artist who takes risks, not worrying about a possible rejection of his creative endeavors. It is worth spending a few minutes of your time to view.

At one point, the avid surfer Van Hamersveld said that he has not surfed in three decades. He said that it was in the early '90s that he started to hear about the rampant pollution that was fouling the oceans, and he decided that he would rather keep his surfboard, and himself, out of the still somewhat blue water.

When asked what hobbies he currently embraces, Van Hamersveld offered that he was too busy working and creating to invest too much time in other pursuits. So, as you near your 80th birthday, he was asked any thoughts of slowing down, of retiring?

"No reason to," he said. "I am too busy, working like a madman, trying to get it all done," though he did somewhat recant the madman's choice of words in a later interview. "Each day is an invention," he said. "You wake up, and there is something to do. You create something, and someone likes it, and you make more of (it). It is the process that I go through every day."

Van Hamersveld's Endless Summer has, fortuitously, lasted for more than fifty years. Shaka, brah!•

