

born in fire

A year now after his near drowning and subsequent surf sessions at Skookumchuck, 34-year-old Elijah is president of the WRSA (World River Surfing Association — with a membership of 52), owner of Mos Faded Urban Barbershop, custodian of his two sons and one of the wildest, most intense members of our community you can possibly imagine.

In W. Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*, Maugham says that "people are not only themselves; they are also the region in which they were born, the city apartment or the farm in which they learnt to walk, the games they played as children ... and the God they believed in."

How true for Elijah, who stands like Maugham's character Elliot Templeton, uniquely individual, the human outcome of a past filled with good and evil, where good wins and where evil leaves scars.

The details of Elijah's subtle make-up begin with his blood. Within every vessel of Elijah's body travels the blood of a surfer and an artist, *voila* his great-uncles, famous watermen Mickey and Dempsey Holder.

Dempsey: A pioneer of life-guarding techniques in the '40s and '50s who surfed with Hawaiian board legend Duke Kahanomoku at Cardiff Reef, gave Elijah his gills to brave the heaviest surf.

Internationally famous big-wave shaper and big-wave event director Gary Linden recalls a day surfing with Elijah in '98. "Eli? He's a good friend. We surfed some waves at Todos one day. It was really big, and he charged it, catching one wave that I remember. He took off the north peak back side, so there was a really good view of him coming across the boil."

Mickey: Founder of the Swami Surf Association in Encinitas, Calif., a gnarly merchant marine who mixed constantly with Alan Ginsberg and Jack Keroac, gave Elijah the artist's touch that his barbershop clients have come to know and value.

UO head basketball coach Ernie Kent, who gets his cuts at Mos Faded, says, "An artist? Yeah he's an artist. You watch him work in there; there's a measure of art to what he does."

In addition, both Dempsey and Mickey were anti-establishment, probably where Elijah got his edge of a thousand sharpened diamonds.

Growing up, Elijah wasn't "all love," as his Eugene business partner Jason Thompson says he is these days. Nope, not all love back then, and that's putting it mildly.

Elijah was once as fucked up as you can imagine.

Back in 1969 San Diego, Jeffrey Simmerman, a hardcore surfer and weed-grower, placed some acid on the outstretched tongue of Karen Wyman. She did the same for him. Nine months later, a doctor was needed to cut Elijah from the womb.

An all-American child living in shadows of shattering American dreams, Elijah spun helplessly through a tornado of California years, tossed through a gamut of destructive, hardening experiences.

By the age of 17, Elijah had been kicked out of four high schools, two continuation schools and one outreach school for the worst of the worst. He'd been attacked by his stepfather Victor Maaher, and in defense had beaten him down, was kicked out of the house.



ELIJAH MACK RIVER SURFING THE LOCHSA RIVER. PHOTO BY FULLBRIGHT FINE ART WWW.FULLBRIGHTFINEART.COM

HYDRAULIC MACK

Surfer finds rebirth in roar of river water. BY BEN FOGELSON

thrust in water

Elijah Mack should have died that day.

The day he first surfed the stationary wave at the Skookumchuck rapids near Egmont, Canada. The half-mile of unstoppable hydraulics behind one of the world's most monstrous and deadly tidal features had already claimed many lives and ships, and for Elijah, a surfer all his life, the odds were catching up.

Surfer, thug, artist, father, all parts of Elijah Mack, all drowning in the name of river surfing, under a three-meter tide change of 200-billion-gallon, 30 mile-per-hour freezing Canadian whirlpools roaring through a flat, 80-mile inlet during the fall of 2003. Green mountains loomed between Elijah's sinking body and the sea, 100 miles away. Purple starfish clung to black river rock, and kayakers (having pre-warned Elijah not to tempt the waters), backpaddled frantically in attempts to save his life.

The semi-psychotic strength that had enabled Elijah to survive a horrendous adolescence of drugs, violence, depression and homelessness was only an irony against Skookumchuck's eddy lines. Elijah managed to drag his buoyant, yellow, 6-foot Realm surfboard down with him when the ridiculous currents began to pull, and some time later the board spat upwards, alone, from out of the deep-green stretch of watery

Russian roulette. There it hung in the air, catching the setting sun on its sharp, golden rail, cutting a wedge of moment, a slice of frozen time. Time enough for Elijah to make a miracle.

Somewhere far down-current, deep in the suffocating brine, the grip released its rancorous hold. When Elijah surfaced from his morbid baptismal and struggled to shore, shaken but alive, he was a man born anew. Yet, a wind was blowing; something had changed. His sons Hurricane and Chance flooded his mind. He wanted to call home, but was afraid that something horrific had befallen them.

As he maneuvered through rocks back toward the stunned kayakers, it occurred to him that his tentative life, so nearly taken many times in the past, had been returned to him once again, but at what cost?

It was then, saltwater-drenched, shivering from a sense of something spiritual passing through the terrific landscape, that his cell phone began ringing.

He picked it up and learned that his stepfather, Victor Maaher, the man who had raised him, was dead.

"That was a critical moment," said Elijah, "when I really started to get my life turned around."



ELIJAH REACHING FOR FIVE ON THE WENATCHEE RIVER. PHOTO BY JIM PYTEL