

Homeless, Elijah crashed with some of the best surfers in the socio-economically impoverished city of Oceanside. Many kids back then aspired to emulate the “straight A” appearance of surf greats like Tom Curren and Mike Parsons, but Elijah couldn’t have taken a more different path.

Wendy Linden, Gary Linden’s wife, remembers Elijah flailing in youth. “Tattoo-man!” She recalls. “Elijah’s one of the grommets who grew up on Linden surfboards, struggling to find a niche in life. When he went up to Oregon he was asking a lot of questions. Eli had artistic talent that wouldn’t be visible just surfing. I wouldn’t have ever thought of hair for him, though! He’s found his place. He’s just a real good kid who really struggled.”

By 19, Elijah had more than 30 tattoos and had spent numerous nights in jail for fights, disorderly conduct and public intoxication. Instead of hanging out with clean-cut surfer types, his friends were gang members and punks. He began fighting fires during the summers, and winters he drank, got tattoos and surfed.

During a short stint in Hawaii, Elijah found himself unexpectedly welcome in the habitually territorial, athletic subculture of Hawaiian big-wave surfing. The spirits of Elijah’s great-uncles must have been invoked; one night at a dinner Elijah sat between Hawaiian surf legends Buffalo Keaulana and Dane Kealoha. “Surfing Rocky Point,” said Elijah, “Johnny Boy Gomes gave me like five waves in a row. That guy’s known the world over for not giving *anyone* waves.”

*My seven year old son, Chance, has ridden three river waves in two different states. He’s the youngest river surfer on the planet.*

— ELIJAH MACK

“And then I left,” said Elijah, a foggy distance in his eyes.

On return, one night before shipping out to his first season as a smoke jumper, Elijah gave himself a compound fracture in a San Francisco bar fight. His injury began his darkest years, though somehow in the those depths he managed to find fleeting spots of brightness: Elijah would sire two sons and complete beauty school, but at the same time if you were a drug dealer in Oceanside between 1993 and 1996, and four armed men smashed your door, stealing everything you had and telling you to leave town fast, and if somehow your frightened eyes strayed higher than the wrong side of a gun barrel pointed in your face, you might have seen the eyes of Elijah Mack staring at you from within a ski mask. In the end, Elijah had what he called a “misunderstanding” with hardcore gang members, and he fled with his wife, Brooklyn, to her family in Arizona, where for 90 days he never strayed beyond arm’s reach of a pistol.

*GQ* magazine recently published a profile of Elijah and his Eugene barbershop. When asked if Elijah worried that someone from his past might see the article and try to come find him, Elijah said, “Well, it certainly crossed my mind that someone might see that. But publicity for Mos Faded and the WRSA is a

big part of what I’m doing now. If I were afraid of publicity, my work wouldn’t be going anywhere. Plus, I don’t think most of the dudes I knew back then pick up *GQ*.”

In Arizona, Elijah met his first mentors in the hair industry: Ali, Tyrone and Courtney, who worked at a barbershop called Nappy By Nature. He began to learn his trade. When Brooklyn left him one day, Elijah went over the edge. “I lost my mind and drove to San Francisco.” He said. “I planned to kill myself by drinking and working as a motor messenger, hoping to get crushed by a city bus.”

Strangely enough, bad news provided a catalyst for Elijah’s development into a human being. On Sept. 21, 2001, Elijah’s cousin Troy McClure died, and Elijah went to his funeral in Mt. Shasta, Calif. “My mind was spun,” he said. “I got into a massive physical confrontation with my stepfather at the funeral. I took off in a 1987 beat up Ford pickup with only \$127 to my name, no license and no insurance, and ended up in a homeless shelter in Eugene.”

“That was the last time I saw my stepdad,” says Elijah. “We had *many* good times,



ELIJAH WITH HIS SONS CHANCE (LEFT) AND HURRICANE. PHOTO BY DAVE SOMMERVILLE

despite all the shit that went down. I know he loved me, and I know he took the bullet for me at Skookumchuck. It was his way of being there.”

The next day, Elijah got up from his cot at the shelter and went looking for work. Rodney Witherspoon was cutting hair in Eugene’s N-DA-KUT Hair Salon when Elijah walked in, clean and dressed in the suit he’d worn to the funeral. “My fades are *immaculate*,” said Elijah, looking Witherspoon in the eye, winning himself a job.

A month later Elijah was staring at a wall in his rented micro-apartment dreaming of owning his own barbershop, when a memory came over him: Walking his dog along a riverside in Chico, Elijah was looking out at a smooth, stationary wave rippling in the river and thought maybe, just maybe he could stand up and surf it. Seized in a fit of action, Elijah jumped off the floor, grabbed his board and ran out the door. The World River Surfing Association was born.

## the mission

When you witness Elijah’s athletic prowess on a river full of raging water, you know you’re seeing something special. People shake their heads. “That guy’s going to *blow up*,” said one *EW* photographer, watching Elijah surf a river. It was almost as if you could hear a wick sizzling away ...

It’s a warm summer day, three years after Elijah surfed his first river wave, and the president of the WRSA is standing at the edge of the water, looking at Pipeline ... in Idaho. Named after the famous Hawaiian surf break, Pipeline’s also a popular kayaking wave on the Lochsa River. “It’s the most incredible shade of blue and green I’ve ever seen,” says Elijah, who through his avid dedication to the sport remembers details from every wave he’s surfed. “You can see right down to the bottom. Even though it’s June, the water is still in the low 50s from snow runoff. Pipe’s powerful, and good for big cutbacks. Because it has an irregular surge that runs though the wave, it’s easy to get caught and ripped out the back. Next year I’m taking a board with straps so that I can use the surge to project aeriels. I know that one day straps

waves to promote the sport. Not to mention forming an organization. River surfing is the new frontier sport, like surfing was in the ’60s. You can still buy a surf vacation and get incredible waves, but the safari-type *exploration* doesn’t exist in the surfing world anymore. I’m 20 years ahead of my time.”

Dave Grove, a former Eugenean who just broke the world record for highest waterfall-drop in a kayak (about 120 feet), says, “What Elijah’s doing is like the next thing. People used to wind surf, and now they’re kite boarding. It’s natural progression; he’s taking it to the next level. There’s a whole section of the industry that’s not being tapped or touched. He’s getting people to pay attention to the water and rivers around them. How important is that? There’s hundreds of thousands of people with creeks in their back yards.”

“What I find difficult about promotion,” says Elijah, “is that river surfing hasn’t been embraced by the surfing or kayaking industries. Kayakers know about the waves but don’t care about board-surfing them and surfers don’t know a thing about it. No industry surrounds it, but I’m punching a hole in that. In the end, river surfing has more appeal than either of its two bigger sisters. In surfing, no one’s creating more breaks. Think about it: The ocean’s the skin of an apple. It’s good, but there’s *way* more on the inside than outside. There are people surfing a Snake River wave called Lunch Counter, outside Jackson Hole, Wyo., who have never even seen the ocean. *Never*. Do you know how many rivers

*My three-year old son Hurricane is the only kid in the world who screams out ‘surfing!’ when we drive by a river.*

— ELIJAH MACK

there are in the world, how many undiscovered spots a person could surf?”

Though the heads of surf industry may not have yet embraced the sport, some of the biggies are at least starting to listen: Gary Linden, of Linden Surfboards, says “That’s where the growth is;” Bill Sharp of the big-wave film and event, *The Billabong Odyssey*, says “I like the sound of it. It’s right up my alley” and *Surfer* Magazine recently took Elijah and some professional surfers to Skookumchuck to document a session.

“I feel it’s important to point out,” says Elijah, “that I’ve done more for river surfing than any of these guys who get paid the big bucks. If I had even a *quarter* of the resources some of these people have, who knows what I could do? How far I could push the sport? I don’t want to give the impression that they (*Surfer*) took me. I took *their* asses.”

Though Elijah maintains the big river-waves are out there, “I haven’t seen anything,” said Bill Sharp in a recent e-mail to Elijah, “that shows a wave bigger than 4 or 5 feet on the face. If you can show me ANY evidence of a 12 to 15 foot barrel I’ll be there in a matter of minutes and will buy property.”

Well, Elijah, the wick’s almost burned through. Hold tight to that video camera and get ready for an explosion.