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By Mike Jennings All photos by Duncan Macfarlane



“If you had decided to do nothing, do you think anyone would have noticed that something wrong happened?”

“Nah, I don’t reckon,” answers Otis Carey from the passenger seat, eyes on the long and winding road before us. The blues of the evening sky are turning black as we drive into the night. We’re on the Pacific Highway, late on a Sunday after a weekend spent surfing and hanging with his family in his hometown of Coffs Harbour.

“Did you feel a responsibility to make a stand?”

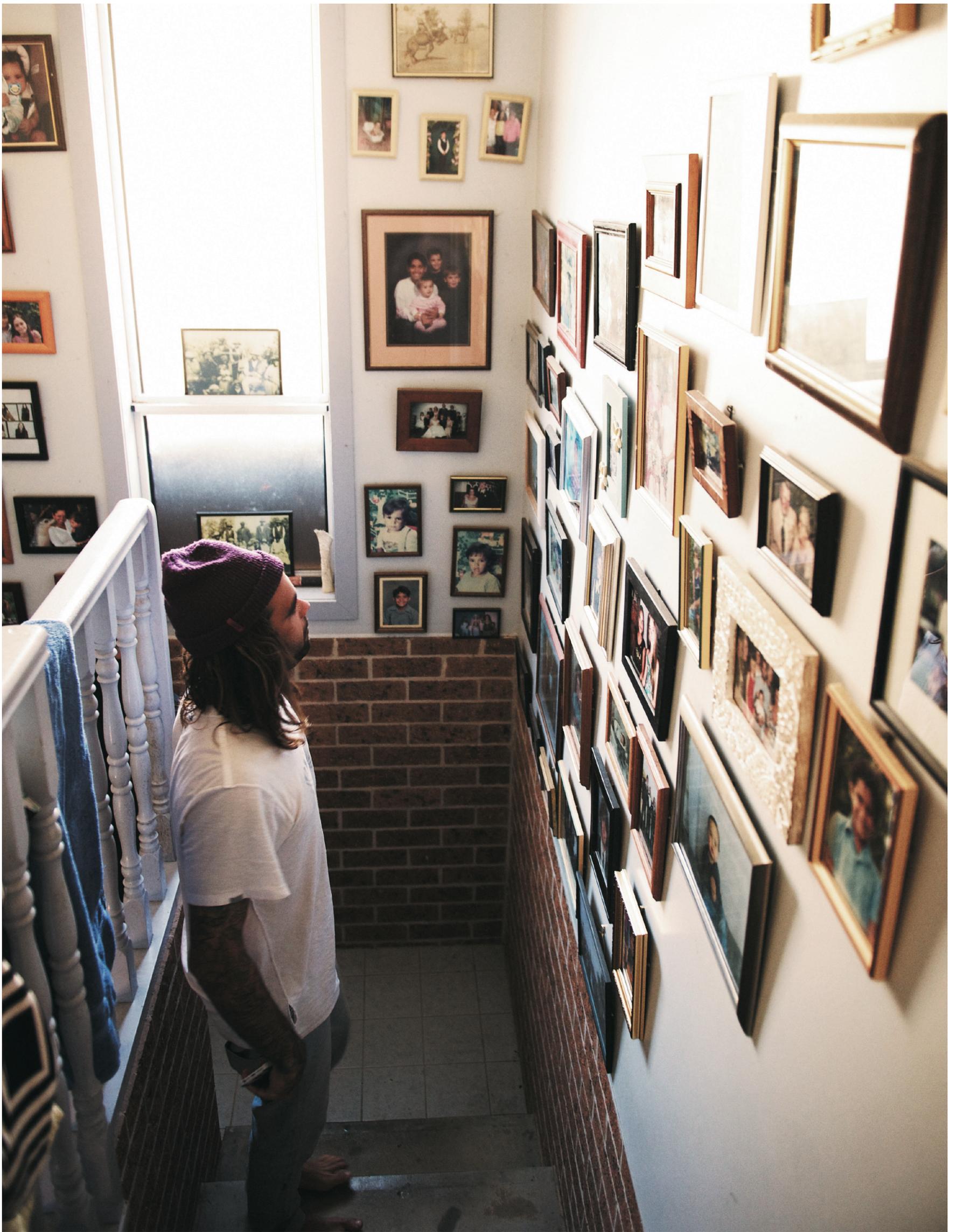
“One hundred percent,” answers Otis again. **“I knew from the start that once the media got onto it that it wasn’t going to be easy. It’s really not easy to be in the spotlight for something like that.”** He speaks quietly. Just barely audible over the drone of the Subaru mowing highway into the night. We’ve got a long drive ahead of us, and a lot to talk about.

Otis Carey, the 25-year-old Indigenous Australian freesurfer originally from Coffs, now living in Narrabeen, has been in the middle of a total media shit-storm. He’s been yelled at from a car. Vaguely threatened by journalists and less vaguely by anonymous strangers on the Internet. His name and story has reached major online media all over the world. *The Washington Times, The Guardian, Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph, BuzzFeed, and The Huffington Post* to name a small few. The collective word count of all those publications’ articles pale in insignificance when compared to the comment or forum section of surf magazine websites, Twitter feeds and Facebook discussions. The Otis Carey story rivals only Kelly Slater’s departure from Quiksilver as the biggest of the year and it seems everyone in the world of surfing has an opinion about this quiet dude from Coffs. And many have expressed it. They’ve questioned his motives. They’ve questioned his hurt. But the man most affected, the man in the middle of the tirade, has never said a word. No statement. No social media post. Nothing.

Otis slob air in the land of the Gumbaynggirr. Previous spread: A man who knows what he stands for.
Following spread: There’s nothing like pocket slots at home to revitalise the soul.







THERE WAS AN INTENSE REACTION FROM THE SURF COMMUNITY, SWINGING THE NARRATIVE FROM AN ABORIGINAL SURFER ALLEGEDLY RACIALLY VILIFIED IN A NATIONAL MAGAZINE, TO AN ONLINE ARGUMENT ABOUT OPPORTUNISM.

It began in February, when the March issue of *Surfing Life*, a prominent and long-running Australian surf magazine based on the Gold Coast, hit the stands with an article titled *Poetry Night With Mermaid Killer*. The article, written by Bali based American surf-writer Nathan Myers, featured Otis Carey and fellow Aussie freesurfer Eli Steele's trip to America for the film collaboration *Se7en Signs*, of which Nathan Myers is a producer. The story included a physical description of Otis juxtaposed the voice Myers heard down the Skype call for their interview. A description that was deeply offensive and allegedly racially insensitive.

While Otis and his family were hurt by the description, the story went unnoticed from public attention for a month until Sydney tabloid *The Daily Telegraph* headlined to its audience of a reported four million that Otis was hurt by a racial description in *Surfing Life*. The article reported of rumours that Otis was in talks with AFL star and Australian of The Year Adam Goodes and that Otis's family would not be making a comment. However, the article, and *Surfing Life's* statement of apology two days later, triggered a news cycle in mainstream media the world over.

Thursday morning in July, a skinny road snakes inland from Narrabeen, past a pub, down a valley before winding up a tree-lined cliff top to Otis's home. He's gathering together an assortment of boards, clothes, wetsuits for a weekend visit to Coffs Harbour. It's early and it's cold. The sort of morning you can see people's breath as it leaves their mouths. The humble little abode that serves him and his wife Renee well has an orange glow bouncing off the warm wooden interior, and on a morning like this it's hard to leave. None of this feels like Narrabeen. It feels removed, a cottage on the South Coast.

"We just needed to get away from the crap, the city, get a bit of fresh air. It's crazy what moving into a different environment can do for you," says Otis.

Framed art tiles the walls and in the middle of the lounge are canvases and easels with some of Otis's unfinished paintings. There's the slacker art he's been developing over the last few years signed with the year and his insignia "Otis Scary Carey". Alongside those are some newer, larger pieces of contemporary Indigenous art – bold patterns in bright greens and oranges and pinks. "I call them snake tracks," he says. "But they kind of look like brains."

Otis picks up three strange looking boards with colourful sprays that are mish mashed around the front door of his house, slings a bag over his other shoulder and walks up the outer stairs. The way he dresses, the way he paints his boards, the way he surfs. It's a brazen punk vibe that flows from one form of his life to the other. Patched up denim jackets over heavily tattooed skin – erratic reckless surfing, explosive airs, and gritty turns.

He only got back from America a couple of days ago, where he signed with a new sunglasses sponsor. Before that he had just gotten back from Victoria, where he won the Australian Indigenous Surfing Titles at Bells. Today he's heading home to Coffs, where his full story begins, before newspapers and Internet comment boards and phonecalls from TV stations. Before everything else, Coffs was and still is home.

He isn't entirely sure if it's true, but Otis was put in the ocean there on the day he was born, most certainly he was in the ocean before he could crawl. His parents always had the kids down the beach and with times surfing there is no first memory.

He grew up to be a talented surfer of the area, though not a world beater. "I don't remember winning any comps or anything. Maybe like boardriders and stuff," he says.

At 17 or 18 he had a minor sponsorship with Mambo, but as his teens moved closer to his 20s he lived intermittently between Coffs Harbour and Sydney, before moving permanently in to the city's inner suburbs where surfing wasn't a priority. For a year he lived in Alexandria and just happened to find work in a warehouse for surf brand Insight while occasionally modeling for their lookbooks. He moved to Bondi with his then girlfriend and future mother of his son Beige, and started surfing regularly again. "It was a different feeling," he says, and in one session he shared a line-up with the Insight team manager who didn't know that Otis even surfed, let alone shredded. "He was like, 'Holy shit, do you want to ride for Insight?' And I said, 'Yeah for sure.'"

He was on the team. Misfit surfboards and a couple of apparel sponsors followed and Otis was all of a sudden on the surf media radar. At 21, his surf career was getting a late start. One shoot at Bronte with *Surfing World* photographer Jon Frank landed him the cover of *Surfer's Journal* in America. Fast forward a year or two later and he was working on his own profile film, *Kill The Matador*, and regularly being featured in Australia's four major magazines as well as numerous titles overseas.

"I wouldn't call myself a pro surfer though," he says. "To me a pro surfer is on tour. I'm just having fun. I still do a bit of real work, I'll go and do shitty jobs, clean out the cutting bays where all the surfboard foam gets cut, it's not the best job but it's what you do to keep reality there."

At the top of the stairs on the icy street he hugs his wife Renee goodbye and jumps in the car. There's a good swell running, and he's keen to get some waves on the way home. We hit the road.

"The community in Coffs is really tight and really close," he says. "It's always been. It's such a small place, which is good."

The Carey photo wall in the house Otis grew up in.



Otis back at the family crib with his mum Julie. Inset: Slot machines.

I ask if he felt prejudice growing up and he replies, “You felt out of place. There weren’t really any other Aboriginal kids at school, sometimes you felt like you didn’t belong.”

Education about our Indigenous culture and history in Australian schools is something Otis laments as a reason for our lack of understanding and sensitivity towards Indigenous issues.

“They really didn’t go out of their way to teach it properly,” he says. “We would get taken out of class to do activities with Aboriginal kids. There’d be about five of us doing Koori paintings, but it was awkward. It was like, ‘Why wouldn’t you do this with the other kids as well? They should be included too.’ It made you feel even more out of place. It’s so frustrating. If school curriculums taught from a young age what’s right and what’s wrong with how to approach the culture here, that would help a lot.”

Otis, his brothers and sister were regularly subject to racist taunts growing up, in some cases even from friends. He remembers being racially abused from as young as five years old.

“There were heaps of racist jokes and stuff and you’d think, ‘That’s not funny.’ It comes down to being uneducated about sensitivity towards people who have culture in them.”

At midnight, after two surfs and a hang with friends in Newcastle, we cruise past the McDonalds and Gloria Jeans and service stations that mark the highway entrance to a coastal town, we roll through the guts of Coffs and just slightly out again and in a valley below a plantation of banana trees we park in front of the Carey home.

Otis tiptoes through the darkness, the layout second nature. The place is home to Otis’s father Rod, his mother Julie and Otis’s three and a half year old son Beige when he comes to stay from his mother’s in Nambucca. His brother and his brother’s fiancé live downstairs while they look for a new home of their own. It’s the home Otis grew up in. “We’ve been there for probably

about 20 years,” he says. “The first few years of my life we lived in like a self-sufficient shack in the bush, and then when my brother Jarb was born, we moved into Coffs.”

Photos are everywhere. The fridge, the wall. Along the TV cabinet stand framed shots and trophies. A heavy green glass plate, stands on its side and in gold writing spells out “2014 Australian Indigenous Champion”.

Down the stairwell is a wall with countless framed shots that track the growing up of Otis, his two brothers and his sister. Family portraits, birthdays, school photos, and the odd shot of Otis surfing too. Two photos in 1930s looking black and white show a band of Kooris posing with their instruments.

“That’s my Pop,” says Otis.

“Looks like a jug band.”

“Yeah. Bush band,” he says.

Otis has always had a strong connection to his Indigenous culture. His upbringing brimmed with a healthy pride in his heritage. On his mother’s side, his pop is from the Bundjalung people whose nation spans from Yamba north to Tweed Heads and the Gold Coast. Again on his mother’s side, his nan is from the Gumbaynggirr people – whose country spans from Nambucca River to as far north as Grafton and have lived there for thousands of years. Gumbaynggirr is what Otis calls his country, and the beaches that stretch across the Gumbaynggirr and Bundjalung nations is an extraordinary stretch of coast that for surf-breaks could rival any other in the world.

“Both tribes were ocean people,” says Otis. “We would always get told stories about them when we were growing up. Even today, when we’re hanging out at my aunties’ they’ll tell us stories and things that you share between families like old traditional ways. I’m still learning about my own culture, so in a way I’m still learning about myself.”



“I WAS JUST STARTING TO FEEL A BIT BETTER, THEN I STARTED GETTING MESSAGES ON FACEBOOK FROM PEOPLE TELLING ME I’M A DROPKICK AND TO GO KILL MYSELF.”

“Dad saw it first,” tells Otis, Sunday night on the Pacific Highway. “He called me and said, ‘Hey, have you seen that *Surfing Life* article?’

I was like, ‘Nah, is it out?’

He’s like, ‘Yep it’s out. You should have a look but don’t buy it. You’re not going to like the article.’

So I read it at the newsagency... and... I just stood there for 15 minutes. I was in shock for a whole day. And then it sunk in. It was so upsetting. I didn’t leave the house for eight days.”

Otis explains why it hurt so much.

“For one, the dreamtime says we’re from the earth. We weren’t created from cavemen. We don’t believe that, we have our dreamtime. It’s so simple, and yet we have people that don’t get why it’s offensive. All these things add up, y’know? Kids will read stuff like that and think it’s okay to call me that, and not just me but other Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal people are a really sensitive people.”

The Carey family were hurt. The praise for Otis’s surfing in the same article was irrelevant. They were dealing with it privately until *The Daily Telegraph* broke the story.

“We didn’t want to go to the media at all. We wanted to deal with it behind closed doors,” says Otis.

While Otis, his family and his legal team were working out their course of action, the story was racing away without them.

In April Otis’s legal team, headed up by Simon Maxwell, from Sanford Legal, with notable defamation barristers Clive Evatt and Roger Rasmussen, got in contact with Morrison Media – the publishers of *Surfing Life* – and informed them that they would be taking legal action.

“To stick up for my culture and not just for my culture but to stick up for myself and my family,” were Otis’s reasons to make a stand. There was no dollar value attached to the case or discussed by anyone involved.

On April 14, 2014 an open letter to Otis written by Nate Myers was published on surf writing community website, *The Inertia*, that stated Otis was suing *Surfing Life*, and Nathan Myers for AU\$200,000. It broke the news to the surfing public that lawyers would be involved.

“Before I say anything, I will once again say I am sorry,” started Myers’s letter before going on to criticize Otis’s decision of taking legal action, and weighed the repercussions of doing so at Otis’s feet.

“You realize the amount associated with this lawsuit will put *Surfing Life* magazine out of business. A 30-year-old labor of pure surfing stoke, shut down because you refuse to forgive a mistake.” he wrote, before again suggesting a boycott from the surf industry.

“If the magazine that publishes your photos and writes stories from your travels is put out of business by your sense of vendetta... well, what then? Talk about biting the hand that feeds. I guess if you win the suit you’ll be dining well upon those bloodied knuckles.”

The letter has since been removed from *The Inertia* by Myers, but its effect on Otis’s life was significant.

“I cried for another three days. Literally just sat inside and felt shit. I was just starting to feel good about myself again after the description. It hit pretty hard that letter, it was so insensitive and so unprofessional. It turned people against me. That’s not what the whole thing was about, it was about taking a stand.”

On the same day that Myers’s open letter was published on *The Inertia*, *Tracks Magazine* published a story on its website that interviewed Myers on his perspective of the situation (strangely, with Myers’ own written introduction to the piece).

“Australian surf mags refer to American surfers as Seppos all the time. Harmless or racist?” Asked *Tracks* at one point of the interview.

Amongst Myers’s answers were comments such as, “The world has bigger problems. He could be lending his heritage to fracking and mining issues, rather than surf mag typos.” And, “It’s like Otis is suing my kids. Taking food from their mouths.” ... “One poorly chosen, poorly edited word should not be enough to sink the ship. It all just seems wrong, and a terrible precedent to set. I hope surfers will stand up for the magazine. I hope Otis will think about what he’s doing here.”

At the time of writing, these quotes can still be easily found in their original context of the interview on the *Tracks* website. As are the dozens of articles that report on Otis’s suing of *Surfing Life* and Myers for AU\$200k, which has since been publicly announced as false by Myers in the same place he first announced that information, *The Inertia*.



Otis with son Beige and dad Rod. And surfing of course. Always surfing.

If the story that Otis was upset at the *Surfing Life* description was big news, the story that Otis was taking legal action around it was gigantic, and the way that it was presented (suing the writer and magazine for a sum of AUD\$200k) lit up the Internet. Journalists wrote articles in detail about a lawsuit that had been misrepresented. Debate raged on Twitter, Facebook, and comment boards across the world. There was an intense reaction from the surf community, swinging the narrative from an Aboriginal surfer allegedly racially vilified in a national magazine, to an online argument about opportunism, “money grabbing” and a country more inclined to hire lawyers than to harden up and grow a thick skin. The fact that Otis was the victim here, and not the magazine or its staff was not only forgotten but reversed. To many, he was not a man standing up for the good of his culture, he was a “fake money hungry cry baby” who needed to “grow up”*.

“I was just starting to feel a bit better, then I started getting messages on Facebook from people telling me I’m a dropkick and to go kill myself,” says Otis. “I had these two wounds, one was trying to mend, and then there was this new fresh wound.

“As soon as that open letter came out, with that false information about money, the whole thing turned around and I was the bad guy.”

The increased attention, and the lack of empathy online had Otis hurt, and

*Quotes taken from comments on various surf-related websites

scared. He didn’t leave home. He stopped surfing. Otis, his family, his friends, and his legal team remained silent, preferring, as they did from the beginning, to keep the issue behind closed doors. But that mattered little. He was news, and people seemed to overlook that while Otis had issued legal proceedings, he was still very much a man in pain.

“The reaction hurt nearly more than the actual incident. I just felt so targeted. Then I had to deal with strangers, like some dude driving past and yelling out the window at me in Mona Vale, called me a money-grabber.”

“Just another aboriginal looking for a handout...” reads one comment by an anonymous person under the name James A, on *stabmag.com*. There are many comments underneath Australian surfing magazine articles published online that would not be respectful to republish here. But the message from them is clear, a staggering amount of Australian surfers think that it is not okay for an Aboriginal surfer who has been racially vilified, to take legal action for it. Some even called his behaviour unAustralian.

Otis read those comments. “Shit. I felt I had to,” he says. “I had to keep track of what was going on, on what was being published and where. I’d read the comments to remember how insensitive people can be towards the culture, to know that I’m doing the right thing by taking legal action. People need to know how messed up it is.”



Homeward bound. Otis hits the Pacific Highway. JENNINGS

Before the sun has lifted over the horizon and thrown light on the sloping of banana trees across the road, Otis tiptoes back out in the very same darkness he arrived home in. He's planning on surfing all day, getting the best of the breaks he grew up on. We drive out of town and through a series of country backroads before stopping on a gravel track surrounded by thick bush, just as the sky's turning a lighter shade of blue. Through a gap in the trees we can see the surf at the beachbreak beyond a creek below. For the non-local it's hard to make anything of the glimpse of ocean the view gives us but Otis is confident it will be good. He knows these breaks well, and returning to Gumbaynggirr country to go surfing is a special feeling, a large part of his healing process.

"Returning to where you belong and coming back to your centre, to your place of belonging, it's really empowering and really grounding," he says as we get into our wetsuits. "That's a big part of why I was home for a while. It kind of helps put everything into perspective, a place of comfort."

Train tracks lead to a 50 foot wide creek you have to paddle across to get to the beach. We gingerly enter the freezing water and Otis laughs, "I saw a bull shark eating a cow in here a few months ago." It's exactly what you want to hear before paddling through an unclear body of water. The beach on the other side is incredible. The warm water pushing a mist over kilometres of empty sand. Hollow peaks litter the length of it. We walk a few hundred metres and find one that'll suit us. We're the only ones out. It's fast, perhaps a little straight, but pitching wider than it is tall. They throw over quick and swallow

themselves but for a compression of air and water spitting at barrel's end. Despite only being about three foot with the odd four foot set, it can punish you, drill you into that sand and hold you there till the ocean is satisfied with the amount of granules in your hair.

Otis slowly strokes into on, ducks under the lip and flies out. A close-out that somehow doesn't. Surfers known for airs often have other parts of their game overlooked. Ozzie Wright, Chippa Wilson, Josh Kerr, are far better barrel riders than we often are aware of. Otis is the same. He feels his way through the tube, picks off peaks that don't look good, that somehow turn out amazing. An innate tube sense that comes from surfing waves like this a lot.

"When we were kids we used to go camping here with my buddies' older brothers on school holidays. We'd always beg them to take us," he tells between sets. He gets more barrels. He takes off deeper than he should on all of them. Some don't let him out. Some do. Each one a process of laconic paddling, dropping into breakneck speed. Each one met with laughter, and stoke.

With every wave the sun rises a little higher, the tide a little more wonky working against us. And hard as it is to do, we leave the empty breaks to get some breakfast and find somewhere else in Otis's country to go surfing.

"I definitely feel in the right place every time I surf back home," says Otis as we paddle back across the creek. "It's like a new beginning, every time."



Leaving home is a tricky proposition at the best of times, surf this good doesn't help matters. Otis keeps an eye out for cow eating bullsharks.

“HE NEVER BLEW UP PUBLICLY, HE NEVER LASHED OUT EMOTIONALLY ON SOCIAL MEDIA. HE NEVER BOUGHT INTO THE SENSATIONALISM OF IT ALL.”

“The kids would get called stuff when they were growing up. But to see something printed...” Otis's father Rod stops for a moment, comprehending the idea of what happened, “...in a national magazine...” He shakes his head rather than finishing the sentence.

Rod is doing the dishes. Dinner is finished. Everyone is full and sleepily satisfied on this Friday night. He's a champion fisherman, a real ocean man. The sort that greets you with a strong handshake and then starts discussing the state of the banks on local beaches. Jovial, strong, but ultimately warm and welcoming, making the Carey house feel like a place you want to be. He caught dinner that morning.

“I was absolutely devastated,” he continues. “I have mates who say to me stuff like, ‘Well my son gets called a ranga at school and it doesn't bother us. Why would this bother you?’ And you have to stop and explain for a moment the history and context between the description. Do people with red hair make up 28% of people in prison? Do people with red hair live 10-to-15 years shorter lives than people who don't have red hair? Were they massacred? Were they taken away from their

parents? And that's what you think of when something like this happens, all that stuff comes up when someone's racially vilified.”

Otis's mother, Julie, is leaning across from the other side of the kitchen counter. Julie is a NAIDOC* award-winning director of Kulai pre-school, an early learning centre which helps develop a sense of identity in young Gumbaynggirr children encouraging them to take pride in their culture and heritage while also learning songs and greetings in the Gumbaynggirr language.

“It was harder on you I think,” she nods to her husband. “I'm used to... well you never get used to it. And they say, ‘but we said he's a good surfer!’ Well we know that, he wouldn't be in the magazine otherwise,” she laughs.

“I'm really proud at the way Otis has dealt with it,” says Rod, placing the last soapy dish into the rack. “He never blew up publicly, he never lashed out emotionally on social media. He never bought into the sensationalism of it all. And he could have done all of those things. Who would blame him?”

*National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee



Back to the big smoke.

“I didn’t feel the need to speak out about it,” Otis says, eyes still fixed ahead. Voice still quiet and thoughtful. “The whole situation spoke for itself so I just thought there’s no need for me to speak and if I did it probably would have just made things worse. If there was no wood in the fire the fire wouldn’t keep burning, so I just didn’t put wood in the fire. Now that there’s no fuel, I think people are more inclined to listen and take it in.”

The only thing we can see on the Pacific Highway are the white lines of the bitumen rolling down the windscreen like credits at the end of a movie, as Sydney edges closer, Coffs Harbour further away. The issue with Morrison Media has been settled. For legal reasons Otis can’t comment on it further than that. Other than to say he’s glad it’s behind him. “It’s a relief, a step in the right direction,” he says.

His phone is still ringing hot. *The Project*. *ABC Lateline*, and more. He hasn’t answered. Yet.

“I will though,” he says. “I just feel like it’s not the right time. When I start to feel a bit better, when all my wounds have fully healed up I’ll be able to pronounce myself better if that makes sense.”

Tomorrow he’ll be finishing a commission piece of his contemporary Aboriginal art for AbSec*. He’ll be back in Coffs in a few weeks to compete in the Australian titles (where he’ll finish 4th). The wildcard to the event part of the prize Otis won when he took out the Australian Indigenous Title a month earlier. Following that he’ll be proudly representing Australia in Peru for the ISA World Surfing Games. And yeah, die-hard keyboard warriors are still fighting online, but slowly Otis is healing.

“I had an old dude tell me I was doing the right thing the other day,” he says. “Just this old white dude walking his dog while I was checking

*Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat

Long Reef. He asked me if I was Otis. I said, ‘Yeah.’ He shook my hand and said he was proud of me. I’ve still got people that write to me with support and that’s a big help with my healing... knowing that there are total strangers who show support and knowing that what I’m doing is good for my people.”

In the same period this has made news, Australian mental health organisation Beyond Blue has launched a campaign attacking passive racism in everyday Australia. The ads titled *Stop. Think. Respect.* are powerful, and reflect information from a recent national survey they conducted that might go some way in answering why so many Australian surfers think that Otis’s stand is wrong.

The TNS survey conducted for Beyond Blue revealed that 42 percent of young Australians believe Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders are given an unfair advantage by the government, and that 37 per cent of young Australians also believe Aboriginals are lazy. It’s not a wild idea to think that within that 42 per cent are surfers who comment on articles of surfing websites and social media. And that despite Indigenous Australians making up 3% of our population, despite their people 14 times more likely to end up in jail, and on average live ten to 17 years less than non-Indigenous Australians, this is how a large proportion of Australia, and Australian surfers feel.

“The most important thing I hope comes from this is that people become more aware and more understanding,” says Otis.

We pull off the Pacific Highway, and head in the direction of Narrabeen. Our weekend to Otis’s country is over, but Otis’s stand has a long way to go.

“What I think people don’t understand is my Aboriginality is more important than my surfing career, and that’s what I’m sticking up for,” he says. “My culture is who I am. It’s part of me. And people don’t get that.” ■