

MILESTONES: THE STONE MASTERS AT 50

Upland, California, 1970:

Their ranks included John Long, John Yablonski, John Bachar, Tobin Sorenson and Richard Harrison, this long-haired band of bros from Southern California, who, armed with little more than frayed cut-offs, dark shades and folded bandanas, heralded the golden age of American rock climbing.

They called themselves the Stonemasters—cheeky, but warranted—in their stripped-down, bare-bones approach to climbing, they devised revolutionary techniques, underscored by their renegade attitudes. Balancing intensity and exuberance, this motley Coppertoned crew were some of the most innovative daredevils the world had ever seen, and in the early 1970s, these laid-back originators of adventure sports were risking life and limb, long before the X Games had a moniker, before Title IX passed legislation, and before the Z-Boys had a pubic hair to scratch between them.

Hybrid pioneers bound by a communal spirit, these surfers of stone followed the cowboy code, “no complaining, no explaining,” while letting it rip across the mountain ranges of the American West. All hail: El Cap, the Column, Half Dim and Middle Cathedral: these peaks were their stomping grounds, their turf. And together, with a sun-bleached flair for the dramatic, the Stonemasters challenged the boundaries not only of the sport, but of nature itself, catapulting themselves to the world stage of Yosemite.

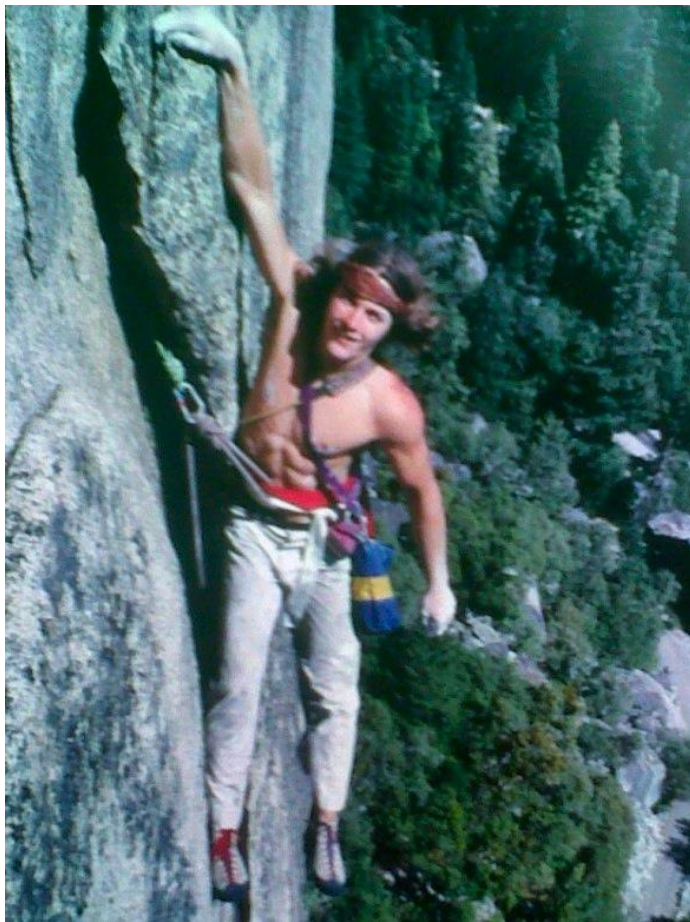


In the words of author Jeff Jackson, “climbing wasn’t about victory. It was about style.” Fortunately or unfortunately, in this case, style didn’t trump substance. To be sure, there was real substance—many substances, in fact. Intoxicated as they were intoxicating, these new frontiersmen brought a playful

free-spiritedness that had been sorely lacking in rock climbing, and thereby inspired an international following of countless kids who emulated them, all trying to talk and dress and climb, fashioning themselves after the Stonemasters, with admirers, past and present, as far-ranging as Patagonia's founder Yvon Chouinard to Band of Outsiders fall 2011 menswear collection.

But it was more than that—it wasn't just the way they walked, talked, dressed, climbed—in fact, style is an afterthought of their infectious and innate appeal. The reason why they are still emulated the world over is something far more universal: *fun*. Look: just look at them: they were having so much goddamn fun, and you can't help but want to be a part of that.

Really, looking at these images, don't you just want to grab a few ropes and hit the road, in hot pursuit of this happy-go-lucky albeit death-defying community of crags? Poring over the photographs gathered in this book, looking at this picture, in particular, I nod my head at that boyish grin on his face, precariously suspended in thin air, halfway between heaven, above, and sure death, below, captured in a moment of such divine and demented communion, I can't think of any way to describe it, except Spicoli meets the Sistine Chapel.



That's just one of hundreds of images tirelessly collected and preserved by Dean Fidelman, the de facto Stonemaster archivist, in the book, *The Stonemasters: California Rock Climbers in the Seventies*. Individually, I marvel at every climber; each so alive, so present, so connected, and so ballsy—damn you, all. But when viewed as a whole, the Stonemasters' greatest contribution to sport becomes most evident: unity and selflessness. Team by any other name.

Even now, fifty years later, in the wake of so many climbing expeditions gone wrong, and despite knowing the all too real individual and collective trials and tribulations of the Stonemasters, it's difficult not to romanticize their moment in the sun. But still, theirs is the legacy of a time and place as eternal as it was ephemeral, offering us one shining instance in which the young were wasted, but youth was not wasted on the young.

Courtney Eldridge, c. 2011











