



Blood brothers

Born in a tough Sydney suburb and shaped by the beach and gang culture, the Abbertons found fame and infamy, one as a surfing champ, another in a sensational murder trial. Then the third one made a film - and now Hollywood wants in on the act



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In August 2003, the body of Anthony Hines, a 37-year-old member of Sydney surf gang the Bra Boys, was found at the bottom of cliffs in the suburb of Maroubra. He was naked except for one shoe and had been shot several times in the head. It could have proved a fiddly case for the New South Wales police - trying to find someone without a motive to kill the violent extortionist - but fellow Bra Boy Jai Abberton, then 29, admitted to the killing almost immediately.

Two years before, Hines completed a five-year sentence in the town's Long Bay Correction Complex for rape, during which time he had become convinced that Abberton had slept with his long-term girlfriend. Of the two other men Hines suspected of the same deed, one had just been killed and the other beaten to within an inch of his life. On the night of 5 August, Abberton and a female companion, known in court documents as 'BC', were walking to her car near the Coogee Bay Hotel, when Hines sprang from nowhere, forced the pair into the vehicle, took up the front passenger's seat himself and pulled out a gun. 'He'd been a friend of mine since a young age,' Abberton later said. 'So for me, I was spewing that such a good close mate was putting me in a situation like that.'

Deciding that Hines was planning for both men to rape the girl - Abberton testified in court that he said: 'We're taking BC back to my house and we're fucking scotching [raping] her' - he began a struggle that culminated in the shooting. Afterwards, Abberton and BC dumped the body at the base of a nearby cliff. No one, least of all the defendant himself, denied that he had pulled the trigger, and so his plea of self-defence rested largely on the fearsome reputation of the victim. 'Anthony Gerard Hines was known widely - and in fact he encouraged this knowledge - as a violent man, a standover man [extortionist] and a rapist,' defence barrister Graham Turnbull told the jury, before moving at least

one of them to tears with stories of Hines' cruel behaviour.

Jai was in custody on remand for 21 months before the jury acquitted him after just 90 minutes' deliberation - as he emerged from the court, he repeatedly kissed a crucifix and said: 'I always had faith in God.' This period had been made even darker for the family by his brother Koby being charged with accessory to murder after the fact, hindering the police's investigation and attempting to pervert the course of justice. 'Some of my statement was false,' Koby, a professional surfer, later admitted to Surfville.com. 'I said that I never seen Jai that night [of Hines' death], but I said that because I just wanted to keep myself away from Jai.' In 2006, Koby was given a nine-month suspended sentence.

The family's agonising wait for the verdicts would later make a poignant and compelling focal point to a documentary about the gang called Bra Boys. Perhaps inevitably narrated by Russell Crowe, it has broken box-office records for a documentary in Australia and is now set for release in the UK. Writer and director Sunny Abberton, the oldest of four brothers, had decided long before the murder trial that his family's story would make a great movie. 'Jai's arrest meant we had to make the whole film much more personal, but with definitely no guarantees of a happy ending,' Sunny says. 'But then, we thought, "Isn't that our lives? Isn't that typical of the story I'm trying to make? The day-to-day struggle of a family in our community? The rise above adversity?" And so I convinced Jai, "Look, isn't this exactly what we're trying to show?"'

Seeing his brother's point, Jai continued to participate in the movie but, wary of more controversy, has avoided the media since. Thus, only two of the brothers are at this interview. The 34-year-old Sunny is stocky, eloquent and surprisingly avuncular: no-nonsense bruiser and community-welfare entrepreneur rolled into one. Koby, 29, is one of the world's foremost big-wave surfers (he once beat eight-times world champion Kelly Slater at a showdown in Maroubra) and the gang's pin-up boy: strong jawed with a glassy-eyed insouciance that is complemented nicely by several tattoos bearing the gang's slogan, 'My Brother's Keeper'. Over lunch at a café in Coogee, metres from where Jai's short but fateful car journey began five years earlier, it becomes ever-more apparent that calling Bra Boys a 'surf-flick' is as over-simplistic as calling *The Wire* a 'drugs show'.

Maroubra - the last syllable of which is key to the gang's name - is an Eora Aboriginal word for 'place of thunder'. It seems appropriate to the Abbertons' turbulent childhood. Their mother, Lynne, was a heroin addict. They have little recollection of their different fathers (although Koby knows his was a bank robber). How aware were they of the dankness of their upbringing? 'I remember being a teenager and me and some mates beating the shit out of mum's drugs dealer,' Sunny says with a laugh. Koby adds: 'I definitely knew heroin was bad and killed you and Mum was addicted to it. I knew what a junkie was, I knew why they were asleep and had shit all over them, and why they were looking terrible. Everyone around us who took heroin was [considered] scum. Older guys at the beach knew what was going on with our mum before we did, and maybe that's why they took us in.'

And so, the Abbertons' childhood house quickly lost its status as 'home'. Much of the brothers' time during the Eighties, along with that of scores of other local kids from broken homes, was spent at the nearby home of their grandmother, aka the Bra Boys matriarch or 'Ma'. 'If anyone started Bra Boys, it was Ma,' Koby says in the movie. The rest of their time was spent down at the water, where entry into some kind of gang was inevitable. 'When I was growing up, the beach had seven board-riders' clubs,' Sunny says. 'They were so rough, so localised, fragmented. Australia is really tribal in that way. Go out to the Palace Hotel on a Saturday night and you'll see all these different groups - country boys, visiting footie teams,

Aboriginal surfers, mixed race, homeys. Our generation was the first one to kind of bring it all together.'

Sunny was inspired to unite the factions in the area by the strong social fabric, spun from deprivation, that he had witnessed in the slums of Brazil and apartheid South Africa in the early Nineties while touring as a junior surf pro. Two decades on, Bra Boys has, he estimates, around 400 members, about 30 of them hardcore, including several top-grade rugby league players - John Sutton, who plays for Russell Crowe's Rabbitohs team, Damon Alley-Tovio, now with Newtown Jets, and Canterbury Bulldogs' Reni Maitua among them. It has all the rites and rigmarole of an organised gang, including a standard-issue tattoo, that good Old Testament slogan, and a masonic-style greeting that, in keeping with their fraternal ethos, involves an affectionate reciprocal clasping of the recipient's upper forearm.

Surfing, the brothers say, is the glue that holds together the gang culture. Maroubra, with its vicious rips and jutting rocks, is renowned as one of the city's most technical surf spots; the risks that they took in the water inevitably seem to have crossed over into other areas of life. 'Pushing social boundaries is not new to the boys,' Sunny says in a voiceover segment of the film. 'And it's that same carefree - perhaps careless - attitude that sees the boys push the boundaries in the surf. There's nothing better than being with your brothers and your friends, psyching each other up to see who's going to charge the hardest.' Is it possible the Bra Boys think they're invincible? 'We all grew up trying to go harder in the waves than everyone else,' Koby says. 'So yeah, I got to an elite level, and then realised, "Fuck, my friends go as hard as these guys if not harder."'

'When we started to make the film,' says executive producer Michael Lawrence, 'there was a massive riot that lasted three days out inland near Campbelltown [40km south-west of Maroubra]. They were burning their own houses, the riot squad were in there - they were even going to send in the military. So Sunny said, "I want to send a camera crew out there because that's what happens when you have nothing - that's what Koby and I could've ended up like. We could've been those kids. The ocean saved us." The only reason we didn't go and film was it was too dangerous.'

I ask both brothers separately what would have become of them if they had had the same childhood, but inland - say, in a similar suburb of Melbourne or Brisbane. The answer they give is, word for word, identical: 'Dead or in jail.' 'I see that everywhere I travel in the world,' Koby says. 'People who have been going through the same stuff we did are normally already in jail.' It's telling that the film concludes with an RIP montage. 'Those guys died in jail, drug overdoses, some were stabbed, shot - we wanted to end by showing the ones that hadn't made it through,' Sunny says.

After lunch, Sunny and Koby take a wander around Maroubra. It's a bitterly cold, stormy day, but Koby appears warmed by beer and nostalgia, peacocking happily around, nonchalantly throwing a beer bottle he has just drained into a hedge and reminiscing about his youthful career as a minor vandal with pride. The brothers are obviously close - they have been ever since Koby came to live with Sunny after being hit in the head by a baseball bat wielded by their mother's boyfriend of the time - and their banter is playful:

Koby: 'I was at the circus the other night, and thought the clown was going to call me up on stage. I was scared fucking shitless. I'm not scared of 50-foot swells, but I hate those fucking clowns, mate.'

Sunny: 'You didn't mind in New York when they pulled you up on stage with those strippers.'

Koby: 'That story should stop there...'

They pause at a modest redbrick bungalow. 'This is where our mother lived,' Sunny says. As they pose for the camera on the porch, glad to be briefly out of the rain, the current occupant opens the door to check who the intruders are. He clocks who is occupying his doorstep then departs with some furious, obsequious nods of consent.

The wind-and-rain-lashed suburb we are touring is the setting of what Sunny calls 'The Struggle', which goes right back to the earliest days of white settlement in Australia. Maroubra is only five bays south of the flush, flash beach-burb Bondi, yet it has continually managed to dodge the shower of wealth that has befallen Sydney's coastal Eastern Suburbs, almost from Captain Cook's arrival in 1770. As Crowe's narration explains in *Bra Boys*, 100 years after the First Fleet landed, the area's impoverished settlers were forced to live in caves and beach shacks, along with the Aborigines. In 1930, up to 1,000 families were moved from these camps to stark, imposing, government housing. Since then a sewage works, a rifle range and Australia's largest prison - Long Bay, which sits atop a hill in full view of potential inmates - have sprung up to make Maroubra a carbuncle on an otherwise idyllic stretch of coast. 'That's the uniqueness of Maroubra,' Sunny says. 'Next to all this terrible infrastructure we have the ocean, which taught us respect and pushing your body and so on.'

It is a place where poverty, domestic turbulence and crime have always seemed to feed each other. 'There's been tension with the police in this area for over 100 years,' Sunny says. 'The first convicts, the early colonisation years - they're our ancestors. Maroubra was the first place where Aborigines were banned from going in the sea, and much later the counterculture surf movement started because the council passed laws that banned surfing.' He breaks into a giggle. 'The authorities decided to make surfers wear skirts, but larrikins started turning up in bonnets and bows - that law was soon dropped.'

Their distrust of authority, which has simmered ever since, boiled over on 22 December 2002 with an incident that features prominently in the movie. That night, professional surfer and Bra Boy Mark Matthews was celebrating his 21st birthday with 300 friends at the Coogee-Randwick RSL Club. On the floor above, two or three hundred off-duty officers from the Waverley Police Force were holding their own Christmas party. It was a volatile mix and, while no one can agree on who lit the touchpaper, the melee that broke out was big enough to draw helicopters, police dogs and riot squads. By the end of it, more than 30 officers were injured.

Sunny is incandescent about the media coverage of the incident. 'The press didn't hear about that fight until four days after,' he says, 'because none of the phone calls police made went through the emergency number - they were all from personal mobile phones to other personal mobile phones between the police. They were trying to cover it up, because it was an event where police officers were drinking. Then, there was huge publicity about the eight Bra Boys arrested, but nothing the day that eight were found not guilty.' Police said there were 80 officers at the party by the time of the incident and that they had been unable to call the emergency services. One Bra Boy admitted assault. Rugby league's Reni Maitua had his conviction for assault overturned when the appeal judge found conflicting evidence. No police were charged or reprimanded.

Bra Boy John Gannon, meanwhile, says that 'it was just a good old-fashioned brawl' with 'no knives and no guns pulled... It was a fight, we won, and they were licking their wounds.'

'People weren't convicted,' says Matthews, 'but it was still costing friends of mine

A\$30,000 [£14,000] to go to court. They were losing deposits for their home loans, but everyone acts like we got off scot free.'

The Bra Boys came off better in the media, however, during the race riots on Sydney's Cronulla Beach around Christmas 2005. The gang mediated in talks between the white-supremacist mobs and the mostly Lebanese 'outsiders' from whom they wanted to 'reclaim the beaches', as their sinister tagline went. Sunny was glad of the chance for the Bra Boys to demonstrate their take on race. 'The papers, prior to us telling our story, were vilifying us as a white Anglo-Saxon racist gang,' he says. 'I mean, they were saying that migrants and ethnic people had been beaten in the area, Asian shopkeepers beaten on the beach - all absolute bullshit. That runs against the whole ethics of what we are, who we are.' Koby adds: 'Like, out west and stuff, you don't get different crews hanging with each other. Maybe it's the same in England. There's not many places where you get black and white guys, 300 of them together, and you know, all loving each other.'

The Bra Boys documentary is a chronological retelling of the gang's evolution: talking-heads interviews with members, spliced with archive amateur footage, street battle re-enactment and big-wave action, soundtracked by the obligatory power-chord rap-rock. Critical reactions to it in Australia were polarised, as epitomised by Margaret Pomeranz and David Stratton, presenters of the influential ABC show *At The Movies*. While Stratton was suspicious of the movie being directed by one of its own subjects and deemed it amateurish, Pomeranz thought the subject matter gritty and captivating enough to overlook the accusations that the film was unpolished or self-serving. Either way, it became the most commercially successful Australian documentary ever following its local release in 2006.

The film generated enough media buzz for the gang to become regulars in the tabloids. The headlines tend to be innocuous these days - a successful campaign to rid Maroubra beach front of parking meters, so that the poor can continue to use the beach; rumours of Koby dating Tara Reid (true) and Paris Hilton (shaky), and the brothers giving the latter an impromptu surf lesson on Malibu Beach. But they show no sign of letting up - and Jai's recent suspended sentence for his sixth offence of driving while disqualified probably did not help.

Their recent promotional tour in the States saw Koby and Sunny lord it up with Hollywood's glitterati, who apparently saw these rough-at-heel Aussies, with their movie already made and nobody to impress in pursuit of funding, as a breath of fresh air. They made such an impact on the stogie-smokers in the big studios that a Hollywood adaptation of the Bra Boys' story is reportedly in the pipeline, with Mark Wahlberg touted to play Koby and Russell Crowe himself considering the role of Anthony Hines.

As for their personal lives, their mother has finally put heroin behind her ('It's only been in the last year that we've been able to sit down and have dinner and a glass of wine together - first time in 25 years,' Sunny says). But despite the film's success, the brothers still find themselves in financial hardship. 'We went bankrupt after the court case,' Koby says.

Sunny elaborates: 'We lost three properties, including our grandma's place that she'd worked two jobs all her life for. Koby lost his main sponsor, too.' Koby is also grappling with a charge of assaulting an off-duty police officer in Hawaii - a charge he denies - and, according to the Australian tabloids, repeated rejections of his marriage proposals by his model girlfriend, Tahyna Tozzi. In an attempt to raise funds, the Abbertons have launched a clothing line called *MyBrothersKeeper*, with fans of the range sometimes known as *MBK Soldiers*.

Still, these are probably the happiest times in the brothers' lives to date. On a

sunnier day than today, they and their mates would be board-shorted up and, high on solar rays and Toohey's New, partying hard - which, judging by some of the movie footage, means turning themselves into human infernos and jumping from lofty rock platforms into the sea, sliding lit bangers into mates' bum-cracks, wrestling each other dressed in giant cornflake boxes and diving into wheelie-bins filled with ice and lager. It seems that the spirit of the Bra Boys is unquenchable.

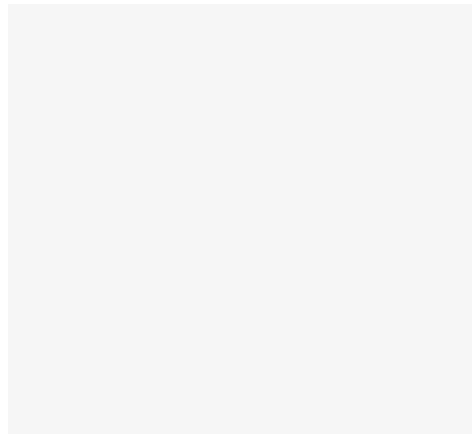
- The Bra Boys documentary opens in selected cinemas later this month

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