



Ben Harper on surfing, parenting and the outdoors

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ben harper

speaks up

HOOKED TALKS WITH THE ROOTS-ROCKER ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT, SURFING AND EXTREME PARENTING

BY MARK ANDERS PHOTOS BY COREY RICH

“Is my ’fro symmetrical? Am I round?”

Ben Harper asks me as he gently pats the bushy perimeter of his head.

“Check my symmetry, man.”

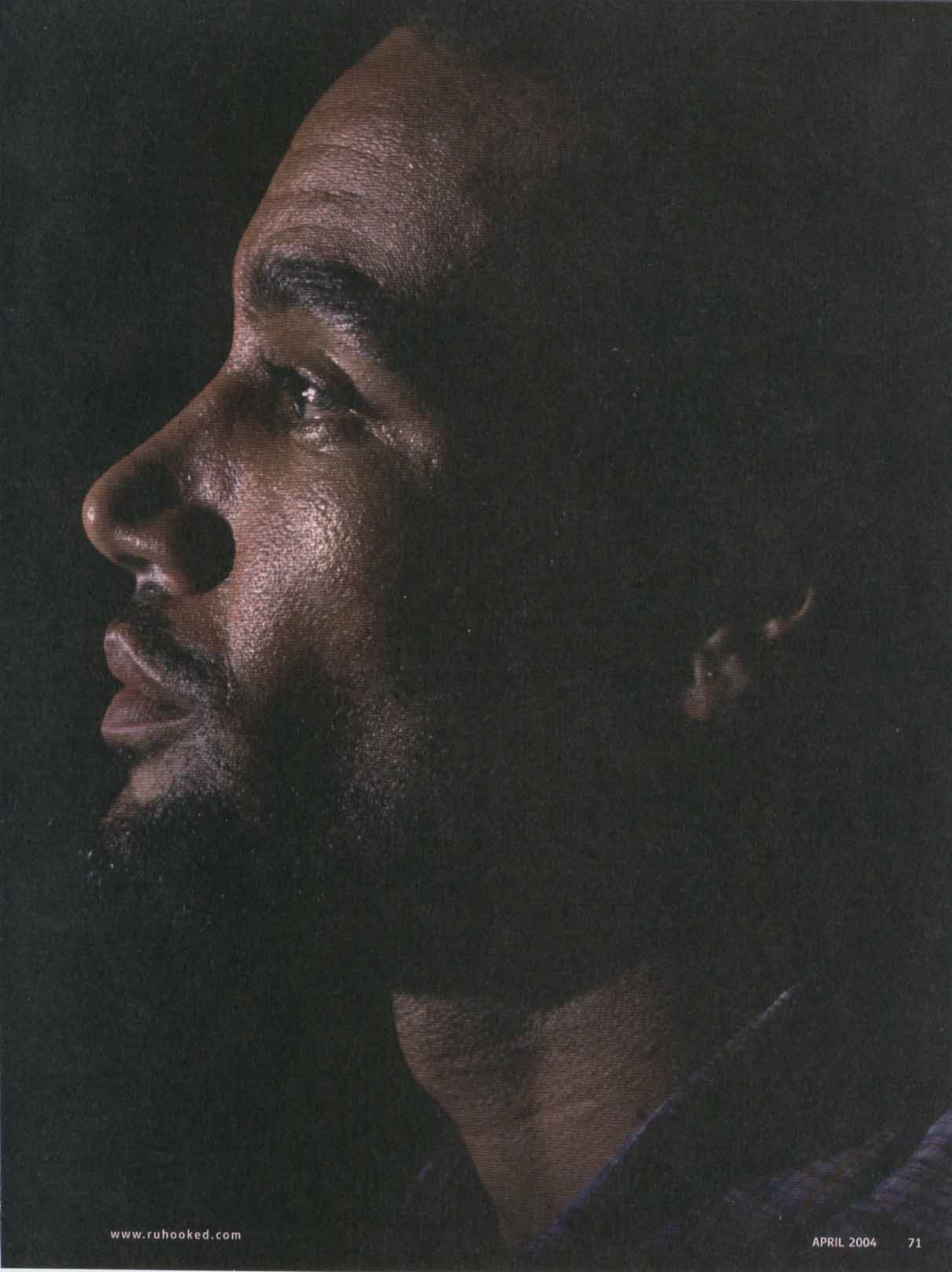
He’s laughing slightly, but dead serious.

We’re at a photoshoot in the bowels of Los Angeles’ Hollywood Bowl (in a corner of the parking garage, to be precise), where Harper is deep in the throes of filming his first live-concert DVD. I have yet to be formally introduced to the prolific roots-rocker, but I am standing near the photographer, so Harper commandeers me as his official Afro symmetry checker.

Harper is a musician’s musician and something of a guitar virtuoso. His trademark is an all-wood acoustic lap slide guitar called a Weissenborn, which he usually plays sitting down. Although the 34-year-old Southern California native gets very little radio airplay, he’s amassed a cult following. His music has grown organically, passed from one friend to another in classic grassroots style. Of course, all of that word-of-mouth is spawned by the hard work of Harper and his band, The Innocent Criminals. Ever since their major label debut, *Welcome to the Cruel World*, in 1994, they’ve toured tirelessly, spending an average of 300 days a year on the road.

Because he surfs and skates, it’s no surprise that Harper’s music has caught on with action sports junkies. You’d be hard pressed to find a musician more popular in the surf world than Harper. His songs are featured in a wide range of surf videos, including *Drifting*, *Laird* and *All for One*, and nearly every surfer on the professional tour is a hardcore fan—pro standout Rob Machado even had the rocker’s face painted on one of his boards.

Beyond the beach, Harper’s a man of many soapboxes, and his lyrics don’t pull any punches. He’s never afraid to speak his mind. That’s why we were eager to sit down with him for an interview. Our conversation popped around like a hot potato, from skateboarding to his stance on environmental issues to his deep connection with the outdoor world. And for the record: He was looking quite round.





(Left) A custom skate shoe designed by Etnies exclusively for Harper and his friends
(Right) One of pro surfer Rob Machado's surfboards emblazoned with a Harper image

Hooked: So you're a surfer, right?

Ben Harper: Yeah, I've been surfing now for five years. Anytime I'm at the beach it's great to know I can go out. I'm at the level now where I can hit the beach confidently. You know, I'll get hammered. No big deal. But I'll ride. I'll get mad vertical.

H: I heard you say in an interview once that you hear music when you surf.

BH: There's always one song when I'm out there that takes hold. It's what I'm supposed to be singing in that moment. It could be something I'm making up—if it sticks. Or it could be somebody else's music. But every time I'm in the water, there's something to listen to in my head.

H: So what's the connection between you and the action sports community, especially surfers?

BH: There's a strong reggae-surfing connection. There's a strong folk connection to surfing and there's a strong rock connection to surfing. And somehow I'm mixing all of those up, so that might have something to do with it. Plus, there's something about the slide guitar, specifically, that is very wave- and ocean-like. When I'm surfing there's a connection with the slide guitar. Like sliding around and surfing—they're super-similar. Surfers would make great slide guitar players.

It's a very surf-like motion, moving up and down the fret board with a slide.

H: I've noticed your music is featured in tons of surf videos...

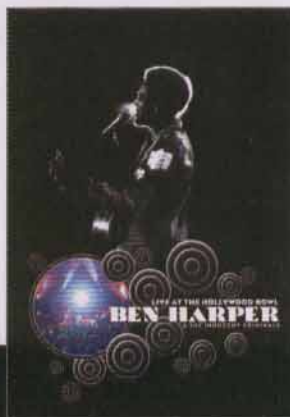
BH: Some legally and some not (laughs). Which is really even more the beauty of it, man. Because if people want to use it that much—then just do it. You've got to admire that, too.

H: You have a song in a big wave movie where Laird Hamilton is surfing 40-foot waves at Jaws in Hawaii.

BH: That cat, Laird, I don't care if my music is in that video or not, I don't give a f@#*, that's one of the baddest motherf@#*&#*'s alive! That is some other level shit. I tell you what, man—I want to drink the water he drinks. He is just doing some other shit man.

H: So is there an equivalent in the music world to surfing massive waves?

BH: Look man, I've swan dived off 30-foot balconies before, into a crowd. If I'm not caught I'm going straight to the concrete and I'd be f-i-z-z-l-e-d—and that's still nowhere near. But to have that level of near death, and be in command of death. I don't know man, that's a whole other connection to God that I'm afraid I haven't been introduced to. I don't know if I want to be.



the experience

ON HIS FIRST LIVE-CONCERT DVD, *Live at the Hollywood Bowl*, Ben Harper and The Innocent Criminals play like they've got something to prove in front of a packed house at the landmark Los Angeles venue. Harper spends a lot of time dancing around the stage, but, rest assured, the man sits down with his Weissenborn lap slide for more than a few classic jams. To see Harper live is to understand; this DVD is the next best thing. \$20; www.benharper.biz.



Screen grabs from Harper's new video, "Diamonds on the Inside"



H: I heard you're a pretty good skater too?
BH: You know what, I'm not bad. I like to bomb hills at 30 mph—that's more my shit. Just the adrenaline rush. I couldn't even pretend to keep up with real skaters. Well, I could keep up with them—just in speed—but not in tricks.

H: Where do you skate?
BH: Mostly here in L.A., because that's home and there're some great hills downtown.

H: Have you ever been really injured doing that?
BH: Yeah, I've gotten worked to the point where I'm super-selective about when I'm doing it.

H: Let's change gears here. In "Excuse Me Mr.," you sing about big business versus the environment. Can you talk a little about that?
BH: It's just putting up a mirror in front of them. Going check this out, man—seeing as though you're holding all the money, doesn't it seem like you could find a better way for the rest of us, for the rest of the environment, the rest of the planet? Seeing as though you're cutting the checks—homie—for the majority, why don't you cut them in the people's favor? Not big business's favor.

H: Do you have a favorite environmental soapbox?
BH: Here's my thing man: I just wish to God that people who are in the business of polluting would turn that around and be in the business of environmental consciousness. Where technology has arrived in this

day and age, there is no excuse for us to be having cars where emissions are legal at all. We should not need fossil fuel—period. We're that smart. We're that technologically advanced. We should be at the forefront of the technology of clean-burning fuel-efficient automobiles... Believe me, man, I'd be the cat who'd pay another extra 10 Gs to get one that runs on canola oil or water or whatever, but there's got to be a better way. And the people who are in a position to make a better way seemingly aren't—that's what's super-frustrating. Everybody wants change at an accelerated rate. Everybody wants Federal Express next day delivered on Saturday to their front door. It doesn't work like that, man. Change is a collective movement over time. It's time that our generation takes hold of the reins. It's one thing to have an ideal that can last a generation or a decade and fade away. But change is about a long-lasting ideal that's continually lived by a generation. I think this generation is ready to live an ideal, and anybody who can contribute to that ideal is the change.

H: So what's your favorite thing to do outdoors?
BH: Just to take my kids to the park and let them chase me around, man. Let those kids just tackle me, pounce on me. And if you think being a father is not an extreme outdoor sport, you better check yourself, homie!



tony hawk, meet ben harper

"IN A FIT OF STUPIDITY, I decided to amalgamate two of Ben's passions—skateboards and lap steel guitars," says Brad Clark, guitar designer for Cole Clark Guitars. "The idea was simple: Ride the thing onto stage, tear the top off and go nuts." The result, the 32-inch long Skatelap, is a fully functional lap slide guitar handcrafted from Rock Maple, Blackwood and Queensland Maple. It features a single coil pickup, Grover Chrome "3+3" tuning machines, volume control—oh, and of

course, Independent trucks and World Industries wheels. Wacky? Sure, but "it's a nice sounding instrument and rides pretty well," says Clark. In fact, during a recent appearance on the *Late Show with David Letterman*, Harper rode his Skatelap onstage, ripped the top off and started jamming. Australia-based Cole Clark, which also builds high-end guitars for Harper, expects the instrument will become something of a collectors' item. \$1,000; www.benharper.biz.