

Robert McKinley's Transformation of Montauk

BY R. COURI HAY



Bikes line the walkway of Ruschmeyer's.

Renaissance man Robert McKinley is an environmental designer, a hotelier, DJ, installation artist, clothing designer, window dresser, surfer—and game changer. Here in Montauk, he's best known as the creative vision behind the trendsetting properties, [The Surf Lodge](#) (which has a new restaurant, Byron—currently one of the hardest tables to reserve) and [Ruschmeyer's](#). "The Surf Lodge was my dream beach house," says McKinley, who has been riding the waves for about six years, from Mauritius to Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and Costa Rica. "The Surf Lodge, in my head, was really a clubhouse for my group of surfing friends and our little community."

Montauk had been on McKinley's radar since he was a teenager. "There's no other place in the Hamptons where you have all of those little motels that are on the water," he recalls. "When the [Surf Lodge] property came up, I remember my older cousins going into all of these beach bars in Montauk in the '80s, and I remember that soundtrack in my head and the vibe and the clothes." McKinley channeled those early memories into The Surf Lodge's laid-back luxury ambience and accompanying line of sportswear. The hotel's ensuing popularity helped transform the social dynamic of the sleepy, quiet fishing village into an international resort. Soon thereafter, he sold his stake in The Surf Lodge and last summer opened Ruschmeyer's, an edgy beach-themed hotel down the block that instantly became Montauk's hottest destination. "I love the energy and the crowds that we do get," he says of Ruschmeyer's. "We treat it like a beach bar, and that's really the way that I've always looked at it. It's not an exclusive place that we're picking and choosing people. On a Wednesday evening the dining room is full with locals, and then Saturday nights is a party."

Saturday night is also when McKinley DJs under the nom de guerre Tito Cruz. "Music has always been a huge part of my life," he says. "Nightclubs are a lot of fun, and I always have that energy and that feeling of being on a dance floor, that feeling of the sound system and the music and that'll never leave me."

McKinley, 36, began his career creating whimsical windows for Tommy Hilfiger, Giorgio Armani, and Donna Karan, which led him to design projects and high-profile events for Alexander McQueen and Stella McCartney, as well as The Watermill Center's annual gala and Robert Wilson's 25th anniversary at the Guggenheim Museum. These parties whetted his appetite for nightlife, and it was his friends from East Hampton—Unik Ernest, Lionel "Kyky" Conille, and Dimitri Hyacinthe—who offered him his first nightclub interior design job. "Unik really set me loose," McKinley says of his groundbreaking work for the Haitian-themed Manhattan hot spot PM. "I went to Haiti with Kyky, and to this day it was one of the most powerful trips I've ever taken."

The success of PM inspired concepts for Cain, Table 50, GoldBar, and La Dea in South Beach and sealed his reputation as a venue designer. "I like smaller nightlife," he says. "I go to some of these big clubs and don't quite understand it sometimes. Dance music is different now, too. Whether it's Ruschmeyer's, GoldBar, or The Surf Lodge, our soundtrack has always been very classic, a lot of fun, older soul, funk, and rock 'n' roll."

Yet no matter his choice of venue or musical overture, McKinley carries with him a childhood memento as a reminder to stay young at heart. "In anything creative we always have to think like a child without boundaries," he says of the logo for his company, Robert McKinley + Creative Services, which includes a silhouette he drew in grade school. "That's why I have it there, as a little reminder."



Robert McKinley's love of surfing shows in Montauk spots like The Surf Lodge and Ruschmeyer's (pictured).

Robert McKinley is best known for his creative vision behind Hamptons hotspots, [The Surf Lodge](#) and [Ruschmeyer's](#). But beyond his life as an environmental designer, hotelier, DJ, installation artist, clothing designer, and a window dresser, the 36-year-old loves to hit the beach and catch some Montauk waves. Here's more on McKinley's love of surf culture and hanging ten in the Hamptons.

When and where did you start surfing?

ROBERT MCKINLEY: I started surfing in California. I've been surfing for about six years.

How often do you surf? Is it a form of meditation for you?

RM: I'm in Montauk five days a week—yeah, it's like meditation. Sometimes it's half an hour or sometimes it's three hours, it just depends on the day. Sometimes you're so busy that you go, eat a sandwich in the car, jump in the water for half an hour, then get back to work.

How does your love of surfing, the beach, and the ocean affect you and your career?

RM: Surfing definitely changed my life quite a bit. I think it changed my priorities. I've always loved the beach and the beach lifestyle, but when I became heavily involved in surfing the kinds of the things that made me happy changed. It's being on the beach with friends, being able to surf, and being able to enjoy that time with nature [that] really fills a lot of your life, so you don't get so caught up in nightlife.

Would you say surfing renews your soul and your creativity?

RM: Yes, definitely. Especially if I'm having a bad day, I go in, and it washes it all out.

How do you relax?

RM: Surfing, spending time with friends, and cooking with friends and family.