

Aug. 4, 1993----

Surf's up!

At age 56, the legendary Dick Dale will make his debut on Chicago turf Sunday night at the Cubby Bear, across the street from Wrigley Field. During the '60s Dick Dale and the Del-Tones cut surf instrumental hits like "Let's Go Trippin" and "Pipeline." The world's first hula-thrash guitarist has influenced everyone from the Beach Boys to Ted Nugent to Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth.

"Nobody ever sat to talk with me, the guy who started surf music," Dale said in a long talk from Dick Dale's Sky Ranch, an 80-acre ranch with two landing strips in the desert of Twentynine Palms, Calif., north of Palm Springs.

Here's the skinny on the man with the fat sound: New to California from his native Massachusetts, Dale met guitar designer Leo Fender in 1955. Dale played it straight, telling Fender he was flat broke and he needed a guitar. Fender liked Dale's candor and got to work on Dale's request.

Fender's right-hand man was Freddy Traveras, a Hawaiian steel guitar player in Harry Owens' Royal Hawaiians band. According to Dale, Fender had been making the Telecaster guitar for country players. "It had more of a chicken-plucking sound," Dale recalled. "He did not get all the bugs out of it. Freddy is the one who perfected it."

Dale changed the course of rock music. Before Dale's emergence, guitar players used to travel with small amplifiers and 10-inch speakers. The ferocity of Dale's playing on his custom Fender Stratocaster demanded more powerful amplifiers, so Dale and Fender collaborated on the Fender Dual Showman Amplifier (with 15-inch speakers), which created sparks when up against the Fender reverb boxes.

"I blew up over 48 speakers and amplifiers," Dale said. "They'd catch on fire. The speakers would just separate from the cones and start smoking and burning."

Dale said he still uses his original gold Stratocaster, which he nicknamed "The Beast," although reports from the road indicate he's playing a newer model called "The Beauty." A Dick Dale Signature Custom Fender Stratocaster is currently in production.

"The original guitar has been painted 117 times," said Dale, who is left-handed. "It was a right-handed guitar. I held it upside down, backwards. The first instrument I learned to play was a ukulele because I wanted to be a cowboy singer. I held that

the same way. I never realized it was wrong. I had gotten my rhythm from (listening to) Gene Krupa's drums. I had rhythm in my left hand, which is why I held it that way."

Dale is on the first tour of his career to promote "Tribal Thunder," his debut project for Hightone Records. "Tribal Thunder" features Dale in prime form, cutting loose on instrumentals such as "Nitro" and the blues-tinged "Shredded Heat." Dale's last recording was in 1984, when he dueted with Stevie Ray Vaughn on a remake of "Pipeline" for the film "Back to the Beach."

"I play like a lumberjack cutting down a tree," Dale said. "I don't profess to be a musician's musician. I play to the people. I create sounds like surfing and lions screaming by making my hands go up and down heavy-gauged strings."

Dale, who once raised lions and tigers for a living, only carries a bass player and a drummer. The rigors of regular touring have created some unusual special effects.

"This staccato picking I use is non-ending," he said. "And when I do it so fast, my picks start melting down. I used to melt a few dozen picks a night. But now, I melt about two or three picks in one song. I'm also breaking more strings. Did you ever see a person put a torch to a piece of steel and it turns blue? That's exactly what's happening. I'm heat-treating, because I'm hitting so hard and fast. . . . I've never been so excited about my music."