

# The Birth of the Bikini

Nuclear testing blasts flesh into our psyche.

By Rick Cipes

Frankie Avalon can't stop smiling at Annette Funicello in *Beach Party* (circa 1963).

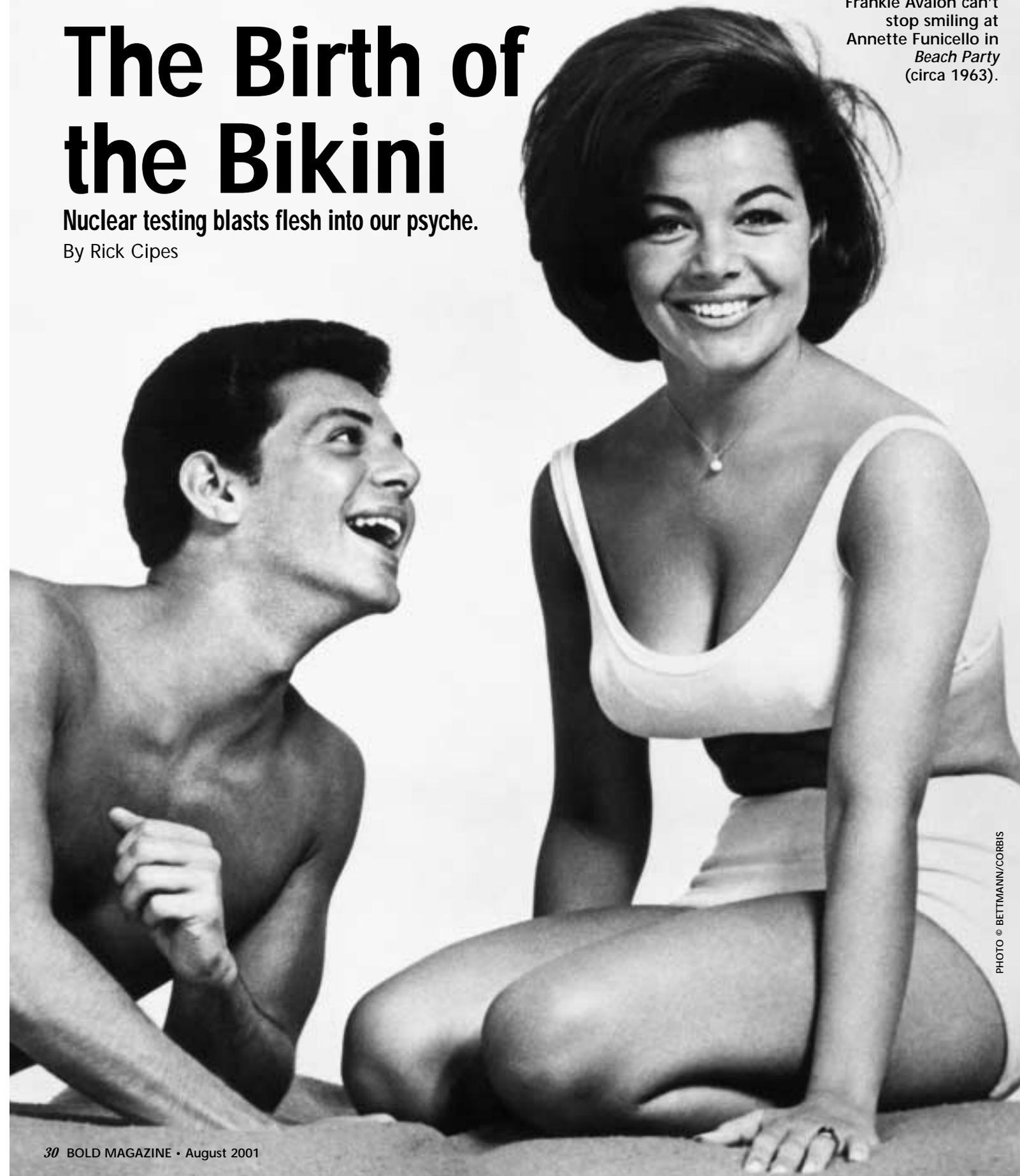


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**R**ed-blooded males around the world simply love a hot woman in a bikini. What drives them so wild? Perhaps it's the titillation of what's barely hidden underneath. And naturally, the possibility that a pair of perfect breasts may accidentally pop out of their safe but skimpy haven also helps keep their attention.

Over the years, the bikini has been crafted out of everything from nylon, fur, leaves, seaweed, macramé, vinyl, mink, string and rubber, all in an effort to make men drool. Regardless of its fabric, **BOLD** thinks the bikini has been a pretty successful invention.

But there's more to the bikini than meets the eye. Follow us as we look back and gain some perspective on the hottest, skimpiest swimwear to ever hit the beach.

To begin, let's explore Sicily in 300 A.D. Adorning the walls in the middle of a Piazza Armerina villa is a mural displaying about two dozen beautiful women wearing what are unmistakably fur bikinis. A man could be put in chains and dragged into a coliseum to be viciously stoned to death as a result of eavesdropping on these seductive bathing nymphs. Have the people of 4th century Sicily heard the term stalker?

Next stop: City of Lights and fashion Mecca, Paris. It's 1945 and a man by the name of Louis Réard is perplexed. An automotive engineer by training, Réard also runs his mother's lingerie business. He's hard-pressed to name a newly developed swimsuit that is scheduled to be unveiled in four days.

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A few months earlier, the U.S. Army tested a nuclear bomb in the Bikini Atoll on the Marshall Islands. (Yes, the natives were relocated before testing began.) When news of the successful experiment hit Réard, he was inspired and named the new suit accordingly.

In Paris, on July 5, 1945, Réard demonstrates his marketing savvy. Nude dancer Micheline Bernardini struts her stuff down the runway in one of Réard's newly christened "bikinis."

Réard's attempt to get professional models to appear in his skimpy get-ups failed (call them Prudes-of-the-Loom), and while Bernardini does not fall into the classic beauty or supermodel category, once photos of her in a reclining pose hit the press, she is besieged with approximately 50,000 letters from admirers.

In the aftermath of Réard's new design, several Catholic countries, including Spain, Portugal and Italy, ban the bikini altogether. Decency leagues in America pressure the Hollywood community to keep them out of the movies. One critic writes, "A two-piece bathing suit reveals everything about a girl except for her mother's maiden name." Truthfully, bikinis don't seem to make men want to meet a potential mother-in-law, although Réard's firm does a masterful job of assuaging their fears by saying that a two-piece isn't a bikini "unless it could be pulled through a wedding ring."

Leaping ahead to 1951, the bikini is banned from beauty pageants after the Miss World contest. In 1956, Roger Vadim's French film *And God Created Women* (which came with the tagline "but the devil invented Brigitte Bardot"), featured Satan fittingly dressing the

**Nude dancer Micheline Bernardini models the first bikini in 1945.**



PHOTO © BETTMANN/CORBIS

sexy actress in a bikini, creating a fiery market for the swimsuit abroad. Hollywood ironically gets in on the act by offering 3D glasses to moviegoers for the first time.

Other actresses join the bikini fad (Anita Ekberg, Sophia Loren and Jayne Mansfield among them), but in America, land of the sexually repressed, the bikini is still considered the attire of strippers. In 1957, *Modern Girl* magazine says, "It is hardly necessary to waste words over the so-called bikini, since it is inconceivable that any girl with tact and decency would ever wear such a thing."

But *Modern Girl* can't speak for everyone. Perhaps Americans were primed for something other than tact, decency and the missionary position, and were waiting for an appropriate influence to help women climb out of their corsets. That same year, the bikini hit radio airwaves in the form of "Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini," a song by Brian Hyland. It sets off a bikini-shopping craze among American teens and proves to be one of the forerunners of the sexual revolution, which will take the country by storm in the late '60s.

In 1962, we witness the release of the James Bond film *Dr. No*. Sex kitten Ursula Andress, as Honey Ryder, looks sweet enough in her bikini to turn any man, including Agent 007, into putty, proving that the bikini is now alive and bouncing in America. As an indication that Americans are finally coming out of their shells, ex-Mickey Mouseketeer Annette Funicello dons a bikini alongside teen heartthrob



Racquel Welch gives audiences more than just a history lesson in *One Million Years B.C.*



Bikini-clad Brazilian supermodel Gisele Bündchen (left) creates a fashion frenzy on today's runways.

Frankie Avalon (not in a bikini) in the 1963 movie *Beach Party*. The movie about surf, sand and sex (without ever showing it) leads to six sequels, including *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini*, which has nothing to do with silicone. More movie influences follow, and in 1967, bikini bunnies are busting out in Stephanie Rothman's film *It's a Bikini World*.

But, let's not get ahead of ourselves. In 1964, amidst the sexual revolution, European designer Rudi Gernreich develops the mono-kini (a topless suit), prompting more than 3,000 summer sales and causing the Vatican to denounce all things called bikinis. The Pope offers to model one to show just how sinful they are. Thankfully, no one takes him up on his offer.

Back in the States that same year, a memorable moment in bikini history takes place. Trying to find an attention-grabber between the Superbowl and baseball season, *Sports Illustrated* puts its first bikini babe, Babette March, on its cover. This establishes *S.I.*'s perpetual bestseller, "The Swimsuit Issue."

In 1966, sex symbol Raquel Welch emerges half-nekkid in the movie *One Million Years B.C.* Of course, Welch's fur bikini, and what pulsates within it, has absolutely everything to do with her ascent to stardom. The next major revolution in the world of the bikini is called a tanga suit, aka the thong, string bikini and dental floss. These seemingly uncomfortable designs are unveiled on the beaches of Brazil in the '70s.

In 1983, most men develop a massive crush on Princess Leia, who is costumed in her elaborate version of the bikini in *Return of the Jedi*. Actress Carrie Fisher tells *Rolling Stone* magazine, "This was no bikini. It was metal. It didn't go where you went. After shots, the prop man would have to check me. He'd say 'O.K., tits are fine, let's go.'" We can all agree with the prop man.

Coincidentally, through the rest of the '80s and well into the early '90s, bikini sales plummet, dropping to less than a third of the women's swimsuit market. And in 1988, Réard's company goes under four years after the father of the bikini died. It's quite possible that women were not feeling confident about their bodies due to the overwhelming number of bikini-clad super thin supermodels and svelte actresses — the bikini's first and foremost form of publicity.

For the next few years, intelligent bikini life seems to be non-existent. There is a glimmer of hope in 1993 with the emergence of the sports bra worn by athletes like volleyball player Gabrielle Reece. MTV jumps on the bandwagon, airing *Spring Break* specials that feature hordes of teens in bikinis shaking their assets. And giving the bikini some CPR in the '90s is *Baywatch*, which washes up on every shore in the world spreading its message of warmth, intelligence and skyrocketing bikini sales.

In 1997, the bikini is alive and well — at least the bottom half. Parisian lawmakers make it legal to sunbathe topless. Now, why can't we do that in our country? And in 1998, L.A.-based designer Anne Cole develops the tankini, a variation of the bikini that leaves only three to six inches of skin exposed between top and bottom. It disappoints men, but women everywhere exclaim, "Look, I'm in a two-piece!"

Here in 21st century L.A., the bikini is as popular as ever. A glance at any Southland beach reveals stunning, bikini-clad women looking to get that oh-so-golden tan while sipping mimosas on the sand. Just make sure you don't stare too long at today's modern bathing nymphs, or someone may kick sand in your face.

**RICK CIPES** is a writer whose hands are soft, yet strong, should any certain, ahem, models need a lotion boy this summer. Contact him through his Web site: [www.comedyave.com](http://www.comedyave.com).