

Enpippl at

WHEN CAPTAIN JAMES COOK SAILED INTO BOTANY BAY ON APRIL 28, 1770, his Endeavour was undoubtedly the first vessel of its kind and size that had ever been seen there. Some natives in a canoe passed within a quarter mile of the ship and didn't look up. A group of men onshore watched disinterestedly when the 106-foot, three-masted collier anchored near shore. The leader of the scientific expedition on board, Joseph Banks, observed a naked woman onshore with three children. "She often looked at the ship, but expressed neither surprise nor concern. Soon after this she lighted a fire, and the four canoes came in from fishing. The people landed, hauled up their boats, and began to dress their dinner, to all appearance totally unmoved by us..."

Considering how huge and otherworldly the craft was compared to a canoe, the speculation is that it was too bizarre and monstrous to be understood. The natives treated it like something supernatural, hoping that if they ignored it long enough it would disappear.

If something as unfathomable as the apparition of that ship was to the aborigines comes into view, what is the reaction? Is it ignored, reacted to with fear and fled from? Or with exhilaration and a rush to make contact with the unknown? What happens when the shattering of the usually immobile plane of reality is witnessed firsthand? Does the mind snap with bewilderment, or does it manifest a joy in instant understanding? There is no luxury of easing into it, no gradual buildup. Just a violent progression into the future, in less than a second.

What I saw in September 1984 wasn't quite as unbelievable as what the aborigines saw. What came before and what followed were closer than the canoe and the Endeavor, but it was a major leap into the abyss of a different dimension.

In the 1960s surfers in California, practicing the modern version of the waveriding Cook saw in Tahiti, found something to do when the waves were flat. Taking the handles off pushcart scooters, they began to ride the boards themselves, standing up as they would on a surfboard. Sidewalk surfing was born. The intention was to simulate surfing on concrete. The fad spread, there were contests, and it was on the cover of *Life Magazine*. After a couple of years, skateboarding's popularity drastically declined. It got to be considered too dangerous. The composite clay wheels were too sensitive. Skateboarding went underground for the first of many times.

In 1973 a Floridian named Frank Nasworthy perfected the urethane skateboard wheel. They were faster, longer lasting, and much more resilient than the clay wheels. A little later precision-sealed bearings came into use, a marked improvement over the crude loose-ball bearings that had been used previously. It was an immense technological jump forward. By 1975 skateboarding was back in the public eye and getting more and more popular. Kids all over were seduced. Every kid wanted a skateboard. A lot got them. Skateboarding's image was closely linked to California and surfing. The appeal was worldwide. Equipment was much better all-around than in the 60s, and besides slalom and riding on streets, people began to ride backyard pools and schoolyard embankments. A wave of construction driven by the desire to capitalize on the reborn fad beget hundreds of skateboard parks with snakeruns, bowls, halfpipes, and the all-important pro shop, with skate goods for sale and a few primitive video games. There were magazines, movies, and a travelling show called Skateboard Mania. It was in advertisements. Farrah Fawcett was photographed smiling and profiling her feathered hair while riding. It was massive.

Skateboarding techniques and tricks made leaps and bounds. Vertical (pool riding) was the main emphasis, and pioneers like Tony Alva and Jay Adams took to the air above the coping (the rounded lip of concrete jutting out at the edge of the top of the pool) with the first aerials. Blasting out over the top, grabbing the board in the air, pivoting 180°, then landing back on the wall and continuing to the other side. People started rolling into pools

from the top, going upside down (the inverted handplant, first done by Bobby Valdez in 1978) and doing higher and more intricate trick variations. It was a far cry from cruising down the sidewalk.

By the end of the 1970s the decline had begun. The bottom fell out of the market, and the fly-by-night opportunists dropped out. As with most trends, the majority of people moved on to other amusements: BMX bikes, rollerskating, breakdancing. Poor design and astronomical insurance costs eliminated most of the skateparks. The craze imploded and got passé. It wasn't the cool thing to do anymore. For a second time, skateboarding disappeared as far as the public was concerned.

This cycle of rise and collapse was to be repeated. In the mid-1980s there was another upsurge, followed by a downturn, then in the early 1990s the street skating revolution [smaller boards and wheels, the ascendancy of the ollie (popping the board into the air without grabbing it) as the prime trick ingredient] pushed skateboarding forward into the limelight, with heavy influence exerted on fashion and graphic design. There were new magazines and another movie. What comes around goes around. No matter who is paying attention, there will always be a core of maniacally possessed skaters. It's undying, perennial—exposure or not.

I started skateboarding after the fifth grade, in 1977. The craze was an onslaught that few could resist, and my friends and I weren't immune. I got a GT Woody board with clear red wheels. There wasn't a skatepark in our town, but there were paved roads, parking lots, and tennis courts. I remember a contest at the local Holiday Inn with a slalom course and an announcer, girls in cutoffs and layered

there will always be a core of maniacally possessed skaters

hair riding tandem, and guys with longer layered hair. It was a classic scene of the 1970s, one that could never be recreated, despite the nostalgic efforts of hindsight aficionados of that decade.

After a year or so, I had moved on like just about everyone else. My skateboard was neglected in the garage. We lived in the Rockies, so skiing was the primary activity. I got a BMX bike. A year or two went by. At the end of seventh grade, I was hanging out in a

bookstore with my friend, looking at magazines. After leafing through the usual *Car and Driver*, *Cartoons*, *Mad*, and *Cracked*, I picked up a *Skateboarder Magazine* with a blue cover. By this time no one was skating in our town. It might have been the last issue of *Skateboarder* that made it into that store. The magazine had glossy color photos of people who didn't look very 70s riding wide boards, doing tricks that were inconceivable to me. It looked exotic, and something about the skaters and the graphics on their boards was creepy and slightly subversive. I'm not sure exactly what did it, but the two of us were convinced. We got religion. We were going to skateboard again.

At first we just had our old skinny boards, which were about 7" wide. We got my friend's mother to drive us to the skatepark in Boulder, 35 miles away. The park had a huge keyhole-shaped pool and various bowls. It was across from a bowling alley, in a desolate field by the highway to Denver. A world we had no idea existed revealed itself to us. 10" wide boards with pink and green wheels with names like Gyros and Bones, skaters doing the tricks that were in *Skateboarder*. There were locals who were ripping: Vince, George, Jack Lovell (the smoothest skater I've ever seen), Billy Fox, and Billy Wolfe. They had an aesthetic that was so different from the dazed and confused Led Zeppelin reality we were used to, it was shocking. What would now be called an early punk/new wave look. A tall spectacle named Bart was the dean of the group. His bleached hair, cut-off leopard print shirt, and black girlfriend lounging at poolside made a deep impression. Once I saw him fall, causing a large clump of snot to land on his arm. He licked it back into his mouth. They were all unlike any clique of teenagers I had been exposed to. There was something rebellious about them. Culturally revolution-

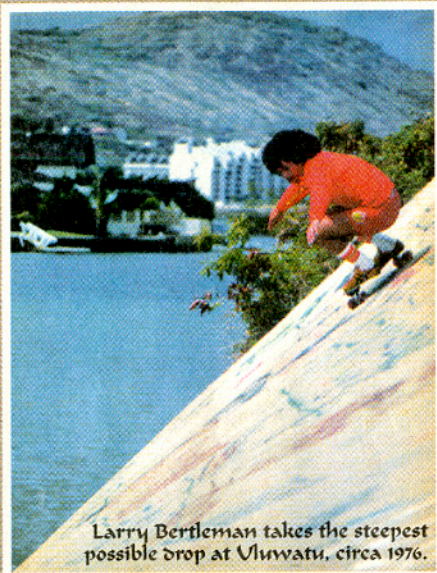
ary is what they were, whether they knew it or not. I was mesmerized. They, along with the pro skaters in the magazine, became my heroes.

Back in our town, we got subscriptions to *Skateboarder* and new modern boards and

safety pads. We skated the roads, sidewalks, and even the slanted flagstone on the walkway by my house. We built primitive ramps, leaning pieces of plywood against sawhorses. I spent an inordinate amount of time lying on my bed with a board on my feet, pretending to do skate moves.

As time went on, my friend and I went our separate ways, and he turned his back on the skateboard scene. I got a portable wooden halfpipe from an old-time skater and rebuilt

and expanded it in a meadow behind our house. The fact that no one else skated in my town wasn't a deterrent—it had the opposite effect of solidifying my conviction to be an iconoclast. Skating was now illegal in the town, and that combined with the entrance of punk rock into my life just served to accelerate the process. My self-imposed ostracism was complete. I skated the ramp, read 'zines, and ordered records through the mail. I took the bus or hitchhiked down to Boulder to skate the park, which was now closed, but was still being skated. There were still diehards hanging out, skating, camping in the bowls at night. I slept in my sleeping bag there or at my sister's boyfriend's houses, eating their food or buying one pancake at a time at the International House of Pancakes.



Larry Bertleman takes the steepest possible drop at Uluwatu, circa 1976.

The inevitable happened. The park was bulldozed. Some people scavenged and saved the coping blocks that survived, relics to be used later on wooden halfpipes. The number of active skaters in Colorado dwindled to 20 or 30, a far-flung group. I still skated my ramp almost everyday, with my boombox disturbing the quiet of the mountains, while the elk watched from the other side of the meadow. When I could I would go skate the only other ramp I knew of, 40 miles away in Ft Collins. The ramp was on the farm of an eminent llama veterinarian. The long-necked ruminants grazed undisturbed as we skated. The biggest session I ever participated in at the pink ramp in the middle of the cornfields consisted of 4 people. Skating almost didn't exist at this point. I was moribund. The prevailing attitude was clearly revealed to me after one of my last times at the doomed skatepark. As I skated by the booming roller-skate rink on my way to the bus stop, a foxy 14-year-old girl looked at me and derisively said, "Dude, don't you know, 4 wheels are out, 8 are in" with utter contempt in her voice.

When I moved to Hawaii a year later, at the age of 16, my immersion in the skating life was total. By the end of the first week there I had met the hardcore group of 15 or 20 skaters on the island and quickly fell in with them. We spent almost all our free time skating—or talking and thinking about it. Our principle terrain were the drainage ditches

that are common on Oahu, their purpose being to channel the run-off from the saturated mountains into the sea. The famous (in some circles) Wallos, with its steep walls, descending levels, and unmercifully abrasive surface. An added attraction were the neighbors who sometimes threw rocks at you while you were riding. The incredibly silken (for concrete) Off The Walls, where the skaters had put in the transitions under cover of darkness, and you were a half mile from the beach with a view of Molokai on a clear day. Zones by Pearl Harbor, next to the freeway and covered in red dust. It was so named because it was close to a high school whose students went there to "zone out." Hahaiones, in a dank,

malaria gorge next to some high-rise apartment buildings. Pipeline Bowls, a mile from Hahaiones and in a completely different climate, above the highest houses on the ridge overlooking Maunaloa Bay. There was also Uluwatu, a gargantuan cement box at the end of a lagoon with 30' walls, with a spooky and primeval atmosphere. There was a crude halfpipe dug into the ground high up in the jungle of Tantalus above Honolulu. We skated Waikiki at night, parking garages, and abandoned fish ponds. We skated everything.

We had fledgling punk bands that have never been heard of since and our own homemade magazines. Fending off aggressively acquisitive locals and Samoans who demanded you give them your board was a weekly occurrence. We ran from and fought, both verbally and physically, with security guards. I was arrested for trespassing at Off The Walls and spent an evening in jail, the husky Samoan girl in the cell next to mine yelling abuse at the guards the whole time, demanding to be taken to the hospital, and then informing me that she had to urinate. Then she did, the liquid slowly flowing under the door into my compartment.

Our only contact with the outside world was *Thrasher*, the sole skateboard magazine in those lean years. We poured over it. The camaraderie was intense. Certainly it had something to do with youth, though that

wasn't the only reason. It was an arcane society. If you saw another skater, a stranger visiting from the mainland, an instant friendship developed. You were both part of a very select group. Outcasts, weird people who were avoided like members of a cult. You went to great lengths, taking long bus rides or cramming 7 people into a smelly Toyota Corolla to get to the other side of the island to skate a sub-par ramp hidden in the sweltering jungle. You endured and persevered towards the goal of being with your friends and skating as much as possible—to do tricks better, faster, higher.

Vertical skating epitomizes the narcotic allure of skateboarding. It isn't a sport or an art, it's somewhere in between. Standing on top a 10' high halfpipe with your backfoot on your board. Waiting for the person skating to fall or finish their run. The moment that happens a clatter of boards being pushed over the coping into the tail-drop position. You wait a second for the silent understanding that you're going next, and then drop in down the first 2 feet of pure flat wall. Then down the curving slope, across the bottom at speed, bending your knees, and pumping up the other wall. Popping off the lip into the air, the board flying out with you on it, catching it, and keeping it to your feet, turning back in and releasing, trying to avoid a disastrous hang-up on the coping. Grinding on the coping, the metal of the trucks scraping the metal at the top of the ramp with a rough, grating noise. Or going upside down, one arm extended to the top, the other holding the board above your head, stalling, inverted, then coming back in. Ollies, rock n' roll

an escaped convict from rigid and normally unavoidable physical laws

boardslides, boneless ones, lien to tails, method airs, you and a 30" long piece of wood with some sandpaper on it to make you stick better, rolling on 4 tiny wheels. Sliding, flying, hurtling through space, an escaped convict from rigid and normally unavoidable physical laws.

A year after moving to Hawaii I moved again, to San Diego, California. The gravitation towards the center was complete. I settled 5 miles from the Del Mar Skateboard Ranch "where the surf meets the turf." By then it was one of the last skateparks left in America. Like the pilgrim making the haji after following a winding path around the

world, I had arrived at Mecca.

My entry into the promised land came at a fortuitous time, a week before the 1984 NSA (National Skateboard Association) finals. Skaters from all over the United States as well as Europe, professionals, sponsored amateurs, and anyone else who could make it. There was no corporate sponsorship, the purse for first place was \$1000. But contests were few and far between, and the best skaters were there, doing new tricks and old ones higher and better. Legends were hanging out, photographers were recording the event, spectators were checking it out, skate groupies were hovering. It was happening.

This was a subculture in the truest sense. It was apart from, below culture. There was absolutely no attention given to it in the mainstream media. There wasn't anything salable about it. It wasn't examined, co-opted, or commodified. Skaters were considered a nuisance—noisy, damaging public property, dressing weird (baggy clothes way before hip-hop made it a fashion), freaky. It was looked down upon, it wasn't understood. And skaters couldn't have cared less. They weren't going to get famous or recognized. They might get their photograph in *Thrasher*, where 20,000 people would see it. It was the inverse of the present situation in which an alternative culture is immediately hijacked and sold to the masses in a watered down form. There was no gap between the real thing and the neutered mall version, because there was no mall version.

I spent the days leading up to the contest at the park, skating without paying and without pads; "security" was even more lax than usual

because of the competition. Back by the fence next to the freeway, away from the contest pool, heavy sessions were going down in the square pool, the banked slalom run, and the halfpipe. At the end of the halfpipe, it turned and became a sloped ditch with a grindable edge—a perfect acclimatizer for me. That week I alternated between watching the pros practice, getting excited and inspired, and then joining the slightly illicit gatherings at the back of the park. Life was good.

Watching the pros with the photographers and hangers-on, smelling the dust, the concrete, the sea, the racetrack across the road. The Mediterranean sun of San Diego ever

present. Tony Hawk, a contortionist and skinny as a famine victim, 16 and blond, was the top pro skater (and is still one today). He ollied all his aerials, touching the board with a few fingers as more of a gesture than anything else. Mike McGill, whose skating was taut and controlled. Gator Rogowski, who is now serving a life sentence for murder, did incredibly hard combinations of tricks with style and could rip the rest of the park like no other. Allen Losi, over 6 feet tall and burly, punished the coping, a very powerful skater. Christian Hosoi, the closest thing skating had to a sex symbol and the most natural and flowing skater that ever was, doing the highest airs. Mike Smith, a personal favorite of mine. He wasn't a top contender, but he had the most style, an innovator of his own brand of tricks—the Smith grind and the Smith vert—which are still staples today. He was an intriguing blend of punk rock and California surfer. I once saw him ollie the hip where the halfpipe turned into the ditch. It was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. An effortless fusing of form (his style) and content (a very hard trick) done with what can only be called élan.

As the week went on, I started meeting people, forming friendships. The universal brotherhood. One skater, Pete Finlan, told me he had seen McGill do something astounding in practice. He described it as a backside air that was turned 1 1/2 times and upside down. I questioned him and tried to figure it out. It didn't make sense or sound possible. At this time people did airs 6 feet out—6 feet above the coping and 15 feet from the bottom of the pool. And there were plenty of hand-plant variations in which the skater was upside down for a second. What Pete was talking about didn't compute. I thought he was exaggerating. I was very curious, but there were so many other things going on, so much stimulus, that this seemingly apocryphal story fell by the wayside.

Excitement was building. The day before the contest I was sitting in the bleachers, watching the pros practice along with about 50 others. I had heard more vague and unsubstantiated rumors about McGill without paying much attention. There were more immediate concerns, like enjoying this skating paradise. It was like reading a book you have heard about for years and finding out you are a character in it.

McGill pushed along the top of the pool deck and then rolled into a high backside air. He landed and glided up to the wall where I was sitting. And then it happened. Grabbling like a regular mute air (backside-

hand around the knees, clutching the board by the front foot) but twisting strangely, torquing his body as he launched. As he flew out 4 or 5 feet, he went upside down and spun. And kept spinning... until he had turned 540°, completely inverted at the 360° point with his head 3 feet above the coping. It transpired quickly—he was in the air for a little more than a second. In retrospect I can see it in extreme slow motion. He came around and landed solidly, continuing his run.

In that moment when he was flying with his top and bottom reversed, everyone who was watching the pool saw something so amazing as to be unbelievable. As he landed, a collective gasp turned into a wail of astonishment and dumbfoundedness. People literally lost it. There was a shared and unifying hysteria. Everybody howled. I howled along with them. The agony and delirium of a severe cognitive break was heard in those hoarse yells. An animalistic cheer that was equal parts an expression of confusion and a grasping of comprehension's bliss. A tearing of mental fabric.

Things had changed. In an instant a new dimension had opened up. The impossible had occurred. Tricks up until then had built on the past. The McTwist (as it was first called) also did, but in a way that went so far beyond precedent that it was almost unreal. I had seen it and so had the others. There was perceptual and empirical proof. It was a quantum leap out of the realm of the imagination into the real.

After seeing the McTwist a few more times, I calmed down. I saw it enough to really believe. McGill went on to get 2nd place in the contest, which struck me as a little ungenerous on the judges' parts, considering how dramatically he had expanded the boundaries of skateboarding. McGill was cheered wildly every time he did a McTwist, but never with as much abandon as that first time, that initial unhooking of consciousness.

Now McTwists are referred to as 540°, and they are no longer a big deal. Almost all pro vertical skaters can do them. There have been new heights and breakthroughs, though none of them can compare to that single evolutionary leap. It may not have been quite as momentous as the aborigines' first contact with the western world. A closer analogy might be Dick Fosbury's introduction of the Fosbury Flop at the Mexico City Olympics in 1968, which won him a gold medal and institutionalized a revolution in high-jumping. No matter how fateful or relevant to later history such a sudden jump into the future is, to see it firsthand is to be both witness to and participant in an intuitive apprehension of a new reality. The shock of epiphany.