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Rediscovered Photos of the 70s Hollywood Skate Scene

Take a trip into a world of tube socks, short shorts and empty swimming pools.

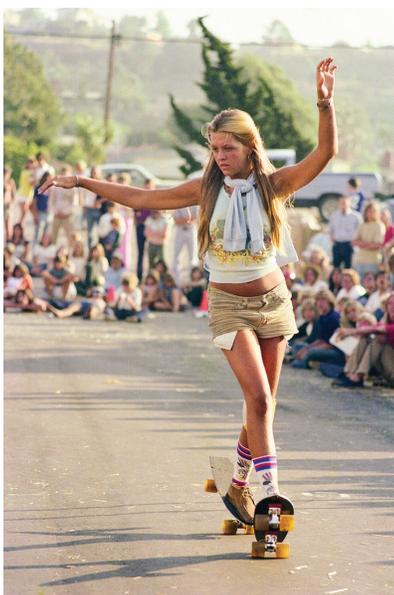
By Alice Newell-Hanson
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Photographer Hugh Holland was in the right place at the right time, he says. That place was LA and the time was 1975. "Skateboarding was happening in many places, but not like in California," he says over the phone from LA, where he still lives at 74. "To me, it seemed like this was the center of everything." Hugh's photos of long-haired, golden-skinned kids gunning down Hollywood's hills and tearing up its boulevards document the very origins of skate culture.

Over the course of three years, Holland took thousands of photos of the scene as it changed from an unruly after-school activity to a professional sport, complete with competitions, endorsement deals, and helmets. Glowing with late-afternoon California light, the images sat unsorted in boxes at his house for decades. But earlier this month, they went on show at Blender Gallery in Sydney (Hugh: "So many of these Australian surfers looked just like the kids in my pictures!"). And Hugh is still sifting through his crates.



Sidewalk Surfer, Huntington Beach, 1976



Del Mar Daffy, 1975

How did you first get into skate photography?

I just was here in Southern California, living in Hollywood. I wasn't particularly interested in skateboarding but I noticed that there was a lot of activity, and I liked the way these kids looked when they were skating. I was around 32 and I had a business. I spent all my extra money on film and processing after I discovered the skateboarders. Before that, I had been shooting black-and-white mostly.

Why did you switch to color?

It just seemed better for these shots. And I had a new photo lab that sold repackaged but unused movie film - because this was Hollywood. It had that soft warm look of old movies, which sort of started my look.

Do you remember the very first shot you took?

I was starting to take notice of the skateboarders all around, and then one day I saw them skating in a drainage ditch when I was driving through Laurel Canyon. I saw these little heads bobbing at the surface of the road, because the ditch was below ground level. I pulled over at the nearest street, walked back and started taking pictures.

They welcomed me immediately because I was the only one around with a camera. They had these new wheels then from Europe which gave them traction on the vertical, so everyone had new things they wanted to show off. They started in the drainage ditches up in the hills. (Since it hardly ever rains in Southern California, they're mostly dry.) Then it didn't take long before they discovered empty swimming pools. And since I had a car, which most of them didn't, I was in.

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Team Line-Up (No. 60), 1970s



Reach Out, 1976

What do you make of people's fascination with these pictures now?

I've noticed that the people who are the most interested are fashion people. Like Dov Charney [the founder of American Apparel], who spotted one of my photos on a wall at a party and used it for his stores. He said he really liked the 70s. And he did. He wore those long pointy collars and had sideburns. One thing that I wasn't too crazy about was the tube socks everyone was wearing. Dov said, "You're kidding, I love the tube socks. We're getting tube socks in. I'm going to talk to a salesman tomorrow about tube socks." That was in 2005 or so. I'm 74 now and I don't dislike tube socks any more, in fact I'm getting to really like them.

Did any of the skaters you shot go pro?

Some of the first group I stayed with became pros really quickly, even before I finished. After three years, some of them were taken by companies like Quiksilver or there were t-shirt companies making money off of them.

One of my favorite images is called Down on the Corner. It's of a kid just skating on the street near the beach. He was really, really good - a lot of style. A few years ago, someone was looking at it and said to me, "Do you know who that is? That's Danny Kwok." He became very famous for surfing, and now he's the president of Quiksilver entertainment.

Why did you stop shooting the scene in 1978?

I kind of lost interest. Things began to change. It started with skateparks and contests - suddenly all the skaters were dressed up in t-shirts with company logos on them. And knee pads and elbow pads and helmets. I was interested in that shirtless, no socks, no shoes time.

How old were most of the kids then?

They were in their teenage years, anywhere from 13 to 19. I was mostly working during the weekdays so I went out in the late afternoons. Another reason why I love my pictures is that they have that sunset look -- because I wasn't free to shoot earlier in the day. There was also more smog in LA then, which gave the photos their yellowish, orangey cast. It was a great time.