BROKEN FINGERS

freestyle skateboarding quarterly



In Honest Praise of Late Tricks

What's Your Scene?

UK Issue



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photos and layout by Turi Zoltan



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Cover Photo: Simon Mrozinski (Varial Fingerflip) Photo: Tony Gale
top: Christian Heise (Rail Flip) Photo: Melanie Gebert



Alexander Rademaker (Footplant Fingerflip) Photo: Simon Mrozinski



Matthew Smithies (360 underflip) Photo: Matt Pyro

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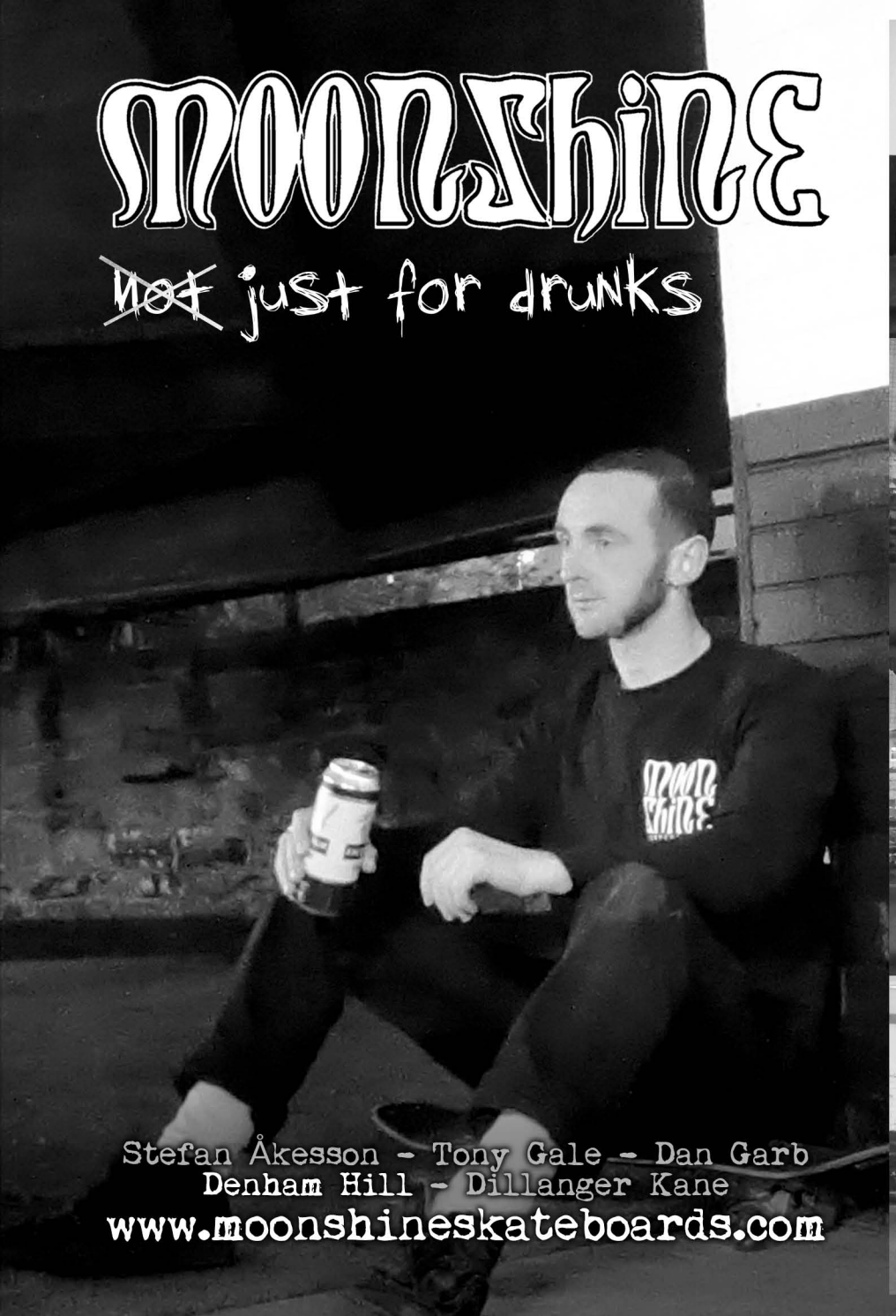
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Stu Dummigan (Handstand) Photo: Alex Foster



Tony Gale (Double Finger Flip) Photo: Andy Turner



Yo-Yo Schulz (Gymnast Plant) Photo: Christian Heise

What is Freestyle?

By Tony Gale

In the second issue of this very magazine, my friend (and former teammate) Jesse Whalen wrote a piece on the state of freestyle and its place in modern skating. It was very erudite and raised some salient points regarding where we should be aiming as a community, but I don't think it went far enough; while it was a good analysis of the act, it missed the crucial topic of what "freestyle" actually is. What it means. And I believe that this is crucial because in order to improve, advance or promote something, you need to know exactly what that thing is.

(It may be a bizarre question to raise in the sixth issue of a magazine dedicated to freestyle skateboarding - maybe we should have opened issue one with it as a manifesto of sorts - but it seems that maybe it is a question that needs to be explored nonetheless.)

See, there are multiple viewpoints as to what freestyle really is, and I've come to believe that all of them - including the one I held on to for years - are intrinsically wrong. In this article I aim to go through each one in turn and explain why. You probably won't agree with me, but hopefully it'll make you think a bit more about the subject and widen the discourse for those long, boring hours spent on Facebook when your favorite skate spot is covered in rain.

Viewpoint One: Freestyle As A Casper Delivery Mechanism

There is a certain mindset - predominately one held by "street skaters" (a term I use loosely and will deal with later) - that once you deviate from the ollie-based hegemony of modern skating, you're doing freestyle. It doesn't matter what the tricks are (although some, such as bonelesses, tend to lump you into the more generic "old-school" category) or where you're doing them, they're just "freestyle tricks". Do a casper on a bank? That's freestyle. Done a 360 flip to a one footed manual on a pad? Yep, freestyle. Pressureflipped off a ledge? You're a freestyler, lad. Sorry to break it to you.

Spotting the error here? The last one should be the giveaway. All of these have been done by people in the mainstream skateboarding industry who would never consider themselves freestylers. The last one - the pressureflip - was even a central part of street skating in the early 90's.

It's a fallacy to assume that doing "weird tricks" on an obstacle is anything other than "street skating" - and I'm wearing out these imaginary air quote fingers typing all this - because street skating was born out of taking freestyle tricks to obstacles. Hell, the essentials of street skating - the ollie and its derivatives - are freestyle tricks. All that happened was that the tricks that weren't as applicable to the new paradigm - like the casper and the fingerflip - were abandoned and neglected in favour of those that did. Reinserting them does not suddenly change the form; "a fingerflip is off a ledge is no more a freestyle trick than Tony Hawk's fingerflip airs", as Jesse pointed out.

So if it's not the trick, is it the setting that makes the art?

Viewpoint Two: Freestyle As A Home For The Vertically Impaired

Okay. So if we've ruled out obstacles as a potential location to find freestyle, we must be left with the flatground as our hunting ground. This makes sense and is a good starting point, but it doesn't go far enough.

Of course, it did once. In the 80s you either did tricks in pools and on ramps, or you did them on the floor and called it freestyle. In the latter half of the 80s, as mentioned above, those tricks were combined with tricks from the ramps and taken onto obstacles and the result was called, correctly or not, "street skating". Freestyle was still the thing left over when no objects existed.

But in the 90s, this changed.
Street skaters, looking to push the technical capabilities of the ollie, started doing flatground lines incorporating shuvits, late flips and impossibles - all moves drawn from or inspired by freestylers. Entire chunks of Questionable could fit into any modern freestyle video on Youtube (if the boards were thinner and the footage was filmed by a camera on the floor).

While this era was short-lived, with street skating eventually becoming a battleground between stylish ledge technicians and stair-obsessed stuntmen, we're now seeing a resurgence of flatground flippery in the street realm. Late tricks, double flips and other forms of ollie arcana are cropping up more and more in Facebook feeds across the world, possibly led by the Berrics-driven popularity of the Game of SKATE.

(Aside: I find it very amusing that freestyle was once criticised for its slow-paced flatland competitions featuring strict rules on tricks, and that while street skating partially came about as a reaction to that, it's now come full circle and adopted a competition format that's even more restrictive. Irony; ain't it great.)

So flatland isn't our safe haven any more. What else can define us as a group?

Viewpoint Three: Freestyle As An Art Form (or: The Dance of the Sugar Plum Loner)

Until I started considering this topic in the final months of 2014, the best definition of freestyle I'd ever heard came from the late Bob Staton, whose position was thus:

"Flatland skateboarding is doing tricks on a flat surface. Freestyle skateboarding is about figuring out how to arrange those tricks."

Staton argued that until you start paying attention to flow, style, and building a routine, you weren't really a freestyler. It's the aesthetics and the routine that matters, not the individual tricks. In his definition, a single trick is worthless; a mere amusement or curiosity that only has value with regards to how it integrates with things that precede or follow it. Maybe, in today's video-driven age, single tricks can be considered in a new way, as the tricks that surround it to do not need to be immediately accessible by the skater - instead, it's the video editor that creates the sequence.

The problems with this definition are three-fold; firstly, freestyle is not the only facet of skateboarding that considers the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts. In fact, most good trick-based skateboarding in any particular arena is based on this principle. (Any skater who relies on the constant shock and spectacle of the individual trick, the new or the technical will struggle to keep up the pace; the effect only works once, and that's why overly technical periods in skating eventually burn out and collapse.)

Secondly, this overly artistic viewpoint is so far removed from common ideas about skateboarding that it alienates many people who might otherwise be interested in freestyle. (It's worth noting that it could also benefit freestyle - if freestyle can be seen as a more artistic, thoughtful pursuit, it would attract people who otherwise wouldn't be interested in skateboarding. This is effectively why longboarding has grown so massively.)

Finally, this approach requires a huge amount of time and a dedicated, driven mindset to continue to progress. This is one of the reasons why there is such a schism between 80s freestylers who have a viewpoint along these lines and the young skaters of the new generation who haven't been indoctrinated into the way of the two-minute competition format; when your aim is to put together a two minute routine, you are more inclined to play safe with the trick selection, and so the technical development stagnates. I once heard it said that a skater needs two hours of practice every day just to maintain his skill level; imagine how much more time is needed to innovate on top of that.

So where does that leave us? Well, we fall upon the final argument - and one based on a linguistic fallacy created by an artefact of skateboarding's history.



Scaife Gooch (Tucknee Swedish Nose Wheelie) Photo: Alex Foster

Viewpoint Four: Freestyle Isn't Freedom, Freestyle Is Opposition (or: A Railflip By Any Other Name...)

The counterpoint to any of these definitions - or the resistance to any definition at all - is connected to freestyle's name. After all, the word Free is part of the name! See it? Right there, at the start! That has to stand for something.

You're right. Or at least you were.... forty years ago.

See, freestyle got its name when it was the only facet of skateboarding that had no easily-measureable goal or results. It stood alone alongside slalom, barrel jumping and high jump as a trick-based, artistic medium; it was the only type of skateboarding where you were free to indulge your creative impulses. Presumably, when trick-based skateboarding spread out into different arenas as the 1970s progressed, the name was kept simply because everyone knew what freestyle was and it didn't seem necessary to rebrand it with a more specific moniker. Of course, as we've seen, things got a bit more complicated later on, but the name remains, and continues to be misappropriated and misunderstood by people who aren't considering it in these historical terms.

The reality is that freestyle cannot be defined purely as any of the previous three viewpoints. All of them capture an aspect of the form, but do not accurately address the whole. Instead, it occurred to me that freestyle has always been, and will always be best defined in opposition to whatever the dominant ideology is. Think of its position in skateboarding history - it's always been the oddball and the home of the weird, the introverted and the creatively minded. It took to tricks when everyone else was racing, stayed on the floor when people moved to the pools, took to being artistic and choreographed when ramp riding was becoming more spectacular and wild, and largely neglected its own child - the ollie - when street skating ran away with it. To be a freestyler is to be an outsider by virtue of its history; it is to stand up and say "that thing over there is what you know of as skateboarding. This thing over here is something else."

This isn't a popular viewpoint. There are those within freestyle who would like our scene to modify itself to be more acceptable to street skaters. I say to those that this is a corruption of freestyle's inherent opposition; freestyle exists because it has to exist. It gives a place to those who are scared of obstacles, to those who aren't physically able to skate stairs, to those who have no ramps or parks. It lets the old man who wants to dance and flow skate on the same level with the flip obsessed teenager. Its strength lies in this opposition, and to sacrifice that will effectively write it out of skateboarding forever; it will be subsumed into whatever is the dominant ideology at the time and never be seen again - much as it did as street skating and freestyle intermingled in the early 1990s.

If we can not only understand and embrace this position, but promote it, then we have found the future of freestyle. Longboarding built its own industry and marketed itself completely outside of skateboarding, and we - shunned by the mainstream for a decade and a half - have already started down the same path. And as longboarding attracted a whole new demographic and gave wheels to a whole subsection of the populace who never would have been interested in popsicles, ollies and stair sets, so can we.

Embrace the weirdness - the tiny boards, the flat noses and the headbands - for that is where our strength lies and our future can be found.

-TG



Erwin 'Shuv-it' Schuijtvlot (Hang Ten Nosewheelie Space Walk) Photo: Andy Turner



Callum Bowran (Carousel) Photo: Simon Mrozinski



Bart Brunninkhuis (One Wheel Nose Wheelie) Photo: Christian Heise



Michael Erskine (Casper Disaster) Photo: Andy Turner



Tony Gale (Flamingo) Photo: Andy Turner



Christian Heise (No Handed 50-50) Photo: Melanie Gebert



Bert Mathieson, Terry Synnott, Dan Gallagher (Jammin') Photo: Jenna Synnott

What's Your Scene?

Bob Loftin

While it may seem like the most obvious point ever, in a small world like that of freestyle skateboarding, scene-building is of utmost importance.

It's been said that freestylers are by nature a solitary lot. I think that the requirements of freestyle practice do require a lot of alone-time, but I think the best times are still to be had when we are sessioning together with friends, at events or everyday jams. The internet is great for sharing videos, and certainly the current international freestyle scene could not exist without it, but it's important to get together in the real world too.

So -- full disclosure. I personally have not always been good about this. In fact, it's only in the last few years I have taken the trouble to travel and see everyone. That was a mistake. It's time and events that I can't get back. Don't make that mistake.



Southbank Scenesters Photo: Simon Mrozinski

Anyway, back to scene-building. The critical factor in such efforts usually seems to be the existence of a scene-builder. Usually, if there's an event everyone is happy to show up and enjoy it, but rarer is the person who makes the event happen, or who facilitates communication and camaraderie. We've featured at least one scene builder in this magazine before -- Marius Constantin. Promoter, teacher, skater, mentor. Marius wears many hats. We see the talent coming out of his region. It didn't happen overnight. It's the result of years of work and promotion of FREESTYLE. Certainly Marius has experienced personal success and fame, but not because of self-promotion. Marius always put the skating at the forefront.

In the UK, in recent years, two names come to mind. Alex Foster and Tony Gale. Through his work with latetricks.com, Alex has become an information hub for the UK (and world) freestyle scene. Through his efforts, he reinvigorated Tony Gale, who has himself become an organizer of events and spreader of the art of Freestyle. With no doubt, the British scene is stronger than it has been in years.

Here in the US, the scene is very geographically dispersed. It's a big country, with one contest - AJ Kohn's Philly Freestyle. But AJ is one man - which is simply not enough for a country this size. Honestly, when we lost Bob Staton, the US scene took a nose dive. The importance of a real scene-builder is felt most acutely when that person is gone, and no one of similar energy of mind, body, and spirit steps up to fill the void. I regret that I didn't attend any of Bob's events. I was stupid. Don't be like me.

In the US, I think we need to nurture regional scenes. This is already happening. Terry Synnott is working on it in his part of the country. Various areas of California have their active cells. Here in north Texas I've started having a couple of freestyle jams every year, and made some initial efforts to connect everyone. It's tough because, well hell, it's work. But it's fun work, with a massive payoff.

Here in the page of Broken Fingers we wish to give voice to your local scenes. In the coming months and years, we'd like to hear about your local and regional events. Nothing is too small. From full contest to a jam with 2 people, we want to know. We'd like to print contest results, write-ups of your jams, and pictures of everyone. That means we're asking you to contribute, but more than that, we're asking you -- yes YOU -- to step up and become a scene builder yourself. Send your contributions to me (bloftin2@gmail.com) or Jeremy Elder (jeremy_elder@smallschool.biz).

-BL



Simon Mrozinski (Paulino Variation) Photo: Callum Bowran



John Hanson (No Wrap Impossible) Photo: Andy Turner



Graham "Mac" McEachran (Switch Foot Pogo) Photo: Simon Mrozinski



Denham Hill (Casper) Photo: Simon Mrozinski



Alex Foster (Filming at NASS) Photo: Simon Mrozinski

In Honest Praise of LateTricks

By Tony Gale

When we first discussed doing a UK-centric issue of Broken Fingers, it was obvious who we had to interview for the main feature: Alex Foster, the man behind LateTricks and the hub on which the UK freestyle scene turns. It's perhaps hard for someone outside the UK to comprehend how integral Alex is to the scene; without him, 90% of the growth we've seen in the UK over recent years simply wouldn't have happened.

I owe him a lot on a personal level, too; I walked away from freestyle (and skateboarding in general) in 2007. There were many reasons for this, but one of the main ones was that I didn't like the way British Freestyle v3 was playing out (if you assume the 1970s as v1 and the 1980s Rouse/Mac/Bevel era as v2). When I got back on a board in late 2010, I told myself that I wouldn't get involved with it at an organizational level again, and purposefully avoided every event that cropped up. It was only when Alex put together a demo (at the worst trade show ever) and asked me (via Matt Smithies) to get involved that I finally came out of hiding, and I'm very glad I did; it was there I met the guys who ran Jimmy'z, and the seeds were set for me to move out of the hole I lived in and get a job I actually loved. It also reconnected me with a revitalized, more positive and welcoming scene than the one I left -long live British Freestyle v4 -and I love being able to work with Alex to keep nurturing it.



Simon Mrozinski (T.V Stand) Photo: Alex Foster

I have said it over and over again in various locations that Alex is one of the most unsung heroes in modern freestyle. His work both as an organiser and curator is, I feel, incredibly important not just for the modern day, but for future generations of freestylers (if we're not completely wiped out in the coming years). However, Alex is also one of the most humble men I've ever met, and I realized that an interview with him would not do him justice. I'm not even sure he realizes how important his work is, and I can picture the sheer embarrassment on his face when he reads these words. As such, I decided to turn to those most affected by his work with LateTricks -my fellow British freestylers. What follows is a testament to a man who deserves a lot more credit than he gets.

-Tony Gale

John Hanson: Since meeting Alex at NASS in 2011, I have seen how much of a big part of the freestyle scene he has been. He's not only inspired others with his great editing skills but put British freestyle out there; if it hadn't been for his videos I'm pretty sure no one would have heard of any of us. I see him as the Brett Novak of freestyle camera skills, and when he films and edits a part just for you or when you have a few tricks in one of his longer videos, it is an honour in being part of the big picture that he has brought to the freestyle world. On top of that, his skills don't just stay behind the camera, but he is known to throw some bangers down. He is an absolute legend.

Bob Loftin: Alex is a scene-maker. He's been critical to the reinvigoration of the UK freestyle scene through his tireless efforts, which in turn is lending its energy to the greater European scene and indeed the world freestyle scene. He's one of those guys who always puts the scene first. Traveling with him to Paderborn last year was an honour, and I really enjoyed getting to know him. His Road to Paderborn trip video is probably the greatest freestyle video of the last 10 years in that it makes clear the camaraderie of our little world. A Hero of Freestyle.

Michael Erskine: Alex Foster is the motivation behind the British freestyle scene, tirelessly documenting and reflecting our little band of oddball characters -bringing out the best in everyone and putting out those class edits to show the world what we are doing. Thank you Alex and thank you LateTricks; it wouldn't be happening without you.

James "Fairbro" Fairbrother: I met Alex through friends. We knew of each other -mainly because I am loud and outspoken I'd imagine. But I had heard of him because of the things he has done for skateboarding such as LateTricks. The guy ploughs through acres of information like corn fields to compile all that anyone should need to know and publishes it for all to see. His work ethic is shadowed by the fact that he is humble and kind. I judge people after I have met them and don't base my opinion on hear-say, and my opinion is I'm lucky to have another good friend. Simple as that.

Matthew Smithies: Alex's work has brought UK freestyle to the forefront of the global scene. In the last 5 years he has been the major forerunner for media exposure from when UK freestyle seemed essentially non-existent from the outside world. Due to his efforts I would arguably say that our UK scene is as strong as our Japanese brothers. He is passionate, patient, dedicated (he told me tales of editing the NASS 2013 edits in the early hours) and a really nice guy which is a rare combination. I only wish more people had his attitude and passion for freestyle globally as there would be no risk for us, our skating, and our videos to disappear into the abyss.



Alex Thompson (Space Walk) Photo: Simon Mrozinski


Alex Foster (at Paderborn) Photo: Simon Mrozinski

Nathan 'Laiszie' Pseuzan: Alex Foster is a refreshing mix of inspiration, talent and humbleness. Insofar as I can see, his tireless efforts to document all of contemporary freestyle are only broken by his own spells of epic but woefully underexposed time on a board. But it's when you get to meet the man that you really experience his personality. His passion, his lack of prejudice, and his innate inclusiveness make him a welcome antidote to what many have come to expect from the mainstream street scene -the arrogance, the snide quips, the grandeur. Alex possesses none of these traits.

As the most amateur skater in the UK scene, I expected to be the curiosity at the sidelines of events -the hanger on or groupie. Alex never allowed this to happen. The first time we met, and despite my wobbling like a drunken newborn on my deck, he was there with a camera, pressing me to perform anything from the tiny array of moves I could manage. It was at that moment, perhaps more than any other, that I grasped that Alex was as excited documenting the beginner as much as the high end, high performance professional. He embodies the persona of free-style's greatest archivist, and I can think of nobody better for this role than him.

If you haven't skated with him, take the time to make it happen. A more encouraging skater you'll never meet. If you have, then make it happen again, and make sure that next time you turn the tables and document the man with his own camera. He's as lethal when he's in rail as he is behind a lens, and more people need to see it.



Graham 'Mac' McEacheran (Double Kickflip) Photo: Simon Mrozinski



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