



Sex, Drugs and Roller Skates

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Jane Fonda with Jon Voight at Flipper's Roller Boogie Palace in Los Angeles. Jim Frank

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A new book pays tribute to the vanished magic of Flipper's, a storied if short-lived 1970s skate palace.

By Guy Trebay

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LOS ANGELES — “Do you want to skate?” Liberty Ross said, opening a door on a closet full of ankle-height quad skates with boots in all sizes and assorted animal patterns.

We were standing in an unlikely Aladdin's Cave set in the middle of Holmby Hills, barely a two minute drive from Sunset Boulevard. Here, in a neighborhood where house prices can top \$40 million and where construction extravagances like moats and grottoes (the former Playboy Mansion is across the street) are hardly unknown, Ms. Ross had constructed her own eccentric plaything, a private roller rink, as a surprise present for her husband, the former record executive and Beats billionaire Jimmy Iovine.

“California Love” surged from unseen speakers. A lighting system beamed prismatic rays on the artist Drew Merritt's wall murals depicting a post-apocalyptic sandstorm landscape populated by a raft of Mr. Iovine's artists, along with a Dior Addict ad in which Ms. Ross, a fashion model, once featured and an outsize image of Carmen Miranda. The Portuguese-born stage and film performer of the '30s and '40s, celebrated as the Brazilian Bombshell, is unironically crowned at the Holmby Hills roller rink with a signature fruit-bowl headpiece rendered as an eruption of ripe bananas.

In under a week, the skating rink would be officially inaugurated at a party, with dinner tables arranged down the middle and a Covid-tested and select guest list that, while mildly starry, importantly included her parents and several of her five

siblings. The reasons were twofold: Ms. Ross, who has been featured on the covers of Vogue, Harper's Bazaar and i-D, would turn 43 in September, a month that also saw the culmination of an undertaking that has consumed her throughout the pandemic and, in a sense, for all the years before.



Liberty Ross in a private roller rink she had constructed as a surprise present for her husband, the Beats mogul Jimmy Iovine, in their Holmby Hills estate. Harry Eelman for The New York Times

That project is “Flipper’s Roller Boogie Palace,” a glossy book-length tribute to a storied roller disco that, during its brief existence, imprinted itself indelibly on Ms. Ross’s psychic landscape and seemingly also on that of her adopted city. She was just an infant when her father, an expatriate Englishman of scant means yet with a surplus of charm and wild-eyed enthusiasms, decided to move his family across an ocean and a continent from London to create a roller skating palace in West Hollywood.

Flipper’s opened with great fanfare in 1979 and sputtered to its end a little more than two years later in a welter of code violations, fines and, finally, looting. While it lasted, it was, depending on who you talk to, either a den of iniquity or a beacon of pleasure during a period of communal expansiveness and inclusivity that would sadly wind down as Los Angeles both grew and devolved into a city of increasingly insular enclaves.

“Obviously, I don’t remember anything firsthand,” Ms. Ross said, sitting beneath a pergola overlooking a garden and pickleball court at her manorial house, designed by Wallace Neff. She was dressed in black jeans, a T-shirt and fur Balenciaga slides, her dark hair parted simply down the middle. Her only jewelry consisted of a simple gold cross on a chain and a diamond engagement ring the size of a headlamp.

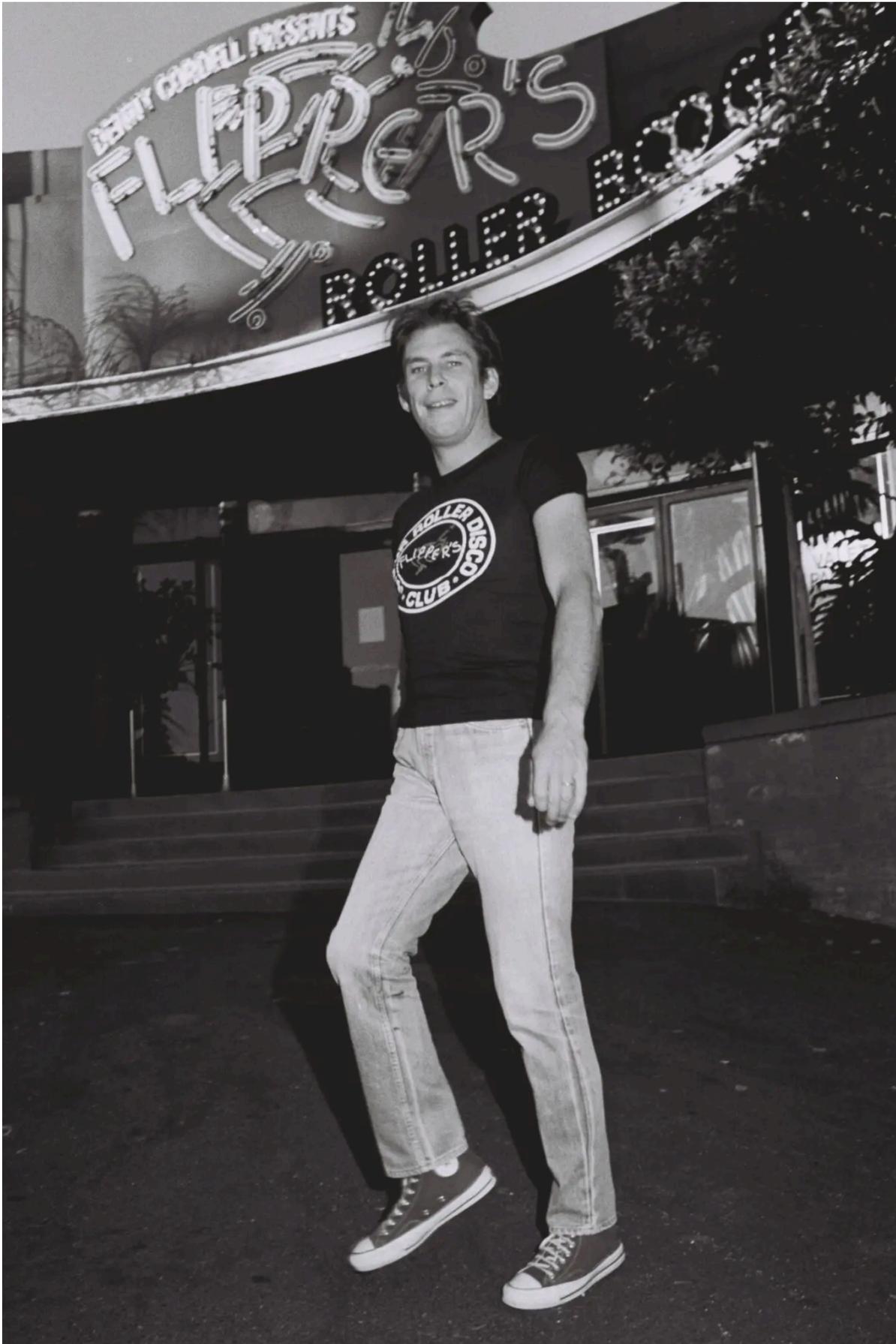
“This thing kept happening, though, that whenever I mentioned that my dad was Flipper, people’s memories would come flooding out,” she said. “I felt I had to do something with that, not just to document this amazing risk my parents took leaving England for America with young children, but to remind people of the sense of freedom that comes from skating, when you finally put down your phone and are present in your own body.”

She also aimed to evoke Los Angeles in an expansionist era still largely defined by possibilities, a pioneering time when the Sunset Strip was the axis of the rock ’n’ roll universe and the wider city was a sleeping giant barely stirring to its nascent status as a global megalopolis.

The Way West

When Ian Ross first fetched up in the United States in 1978 — an impish, dimpled and impecunious middle-class Englishman who had been instrumental in the founding of Radio Caroline, the pirate radio station, and who almost as improbably had married into the minor aristocracy — he was one in a wave of expatriate British émigrés fleeing the country's increasing austerities.

His point of debarkation was New York City. His initial destination there was Flatbush, in Brooklyn. More specifically, he made a beeline for a legendary roller skating palace read about in a snippet from *The Evening Standard*.



Ian Ross, or Flipper, moved his young family from London to Los Angeles in the late '70s to follow his dream of opening a roller boogie palace that would rival the storied Empire Roller Disco in Brooklyn. Jim Frank

“It was something about ‘Uptown Girls Going Downtown,’” Mr. Ross said in a conference call shared by his wife, Bunty, from the home of Ms. Ross and Mr. Iovine, where they were looking after Ms. Ross’s children from a previous marriage, to the director Rupert Sanders, while she was in Europe to promote her book. It is perhaps worth mentioning here that, for Manhattan club chauvinists of the late ’70s, Brooklyn was less “downtown” than a world apart.

“I got myself to Flatbush by subway because a yellow cab wouldn’t go,” Mr. Ross said. “And it was a complete epiphany: a wall of noise, heavy funk/disco type music and probably 900 people going around this wooden rink dressed in gold and silver and glitter and turbans and God knows what.”

Though it had been around for decades, the Empire Rollerdrome, constructed in a vast, converted one-story garage on the Prospect Lefferts Gardens side of Empire Boulevard, had been rechristened the Empire Roller Disco in the ’70s and transformed from a snoozy local spot specializing in family waltz afternoons to what amounted to a roiling nightly bacchanal.

With its 20,000-watt stereo system, its acclaimed D.J., “Big Bob” Clayton, spinning the latest dance hits and a gorgeous clientele of Black, Latino and Afro-Caribbean skaters vying to outperform one another, it became the kind of destination where, when Cher turned up there, she was just another figure on the dance floor. The skaters were the stars.

“You’ve never seen anything like it before,” Mr. Ross said. (Or since: The rink is now a Stop and Stor facility.)

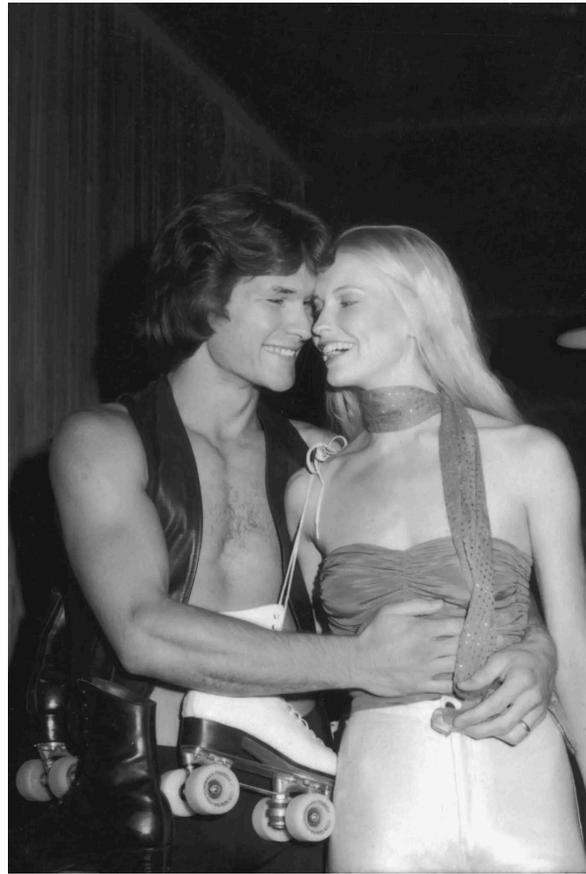
In the footloose spirit of the time, Mr. Ross continued his American migration in a westerly direction, soon followed by Bunty and their brood. Eventually they settled into what Ms. Ross calls a “shack in the sand” in Malibu. Flush with entrepreneurial enthusiasm, he set about finding the cash to fund a dream: replicating the Empire Roller Disco in Los Angeles. Thus, in a zigzag fashion and in a haze of chemically stoked optimism, was born Flipper’s.



Giant painted strawberries and Carmen Miranda in an exploding banana headdress formed a backdrop for the skaters' resplendence. David Allen/Arttrouble



“Los Angeles was an open city,” Laura Dern said. “Open to diverse lifestyles and communities.” Jim Frank



Patrick Swayze and his wife, the dancer and actress Lisa Niemi, at a movie premiere at Flipper's. Frank Edwards/Fotos International, via Getty Images

Set in what had been a mammoth bowling alley at the grubby intersection of Santa Monica and La Cienega Boulevards, the rink cost roughly a million dollars in 1979 to build and decorate, money supplied by Mr. Ross's two business partners (one of them, Denny Cordell, was the English record producer who started Shelter Records) augmented with a last-minute infusion from Berry Gordy Jr., the founder of Motown. The rink was unlike anything else in the city, its interiors a continuous mural created by John Kosh, a graphic artist who across his career would design more than 1,000 album covers, although none more iconic than one early effort: the Beatles' "Abbey Road."

“I wanted the place to have an old Hollywood feel,” Mr. Kosh said by phone from Los Angeles. “It was a magic cave with skaters whizzing around crashing into each other. The floor of the rink was poured in deep blue polyurethane to make it seem

as though skaters were skimming the surface of a lagoon. I said, ‘Let’s just go crazy and have Carmen Mirandas bananas flying all over the ceiling.’”

For opening night, Mr. Ross imported 24 members of the house skate crew at Empire Roller Disco, a group whose moves on the floor were considered unsurpassed. They were resplendent in gold lamé, high-waist stretch pants, turbans and beaded braids and cornrows, Ms. Ross said.

It was wonderful, incredible, unbeatable, Mr. Ross recalled remarking to a friend, who replied that it would be only downhill from there.

‘What Was It About Flipper’s?’

And it would, although for 36 months — roughly the same life span as another memorable club, Studio 54 — Flipper’s burned itself indelibly into the consciousness of habitués, entertained by a succession of surprises like a skater dressed in nothing but her stockings and quads, a Prince concert that featured the artist writhing on a purple bed in a G-string or the regular gigs by the Go-Go’s, who played on a stage in the middle of the rink.

“It was an awesome, awesome spot,” Nile Rodgers, the Grammy-winning musician and co-founder of Chic, said by telephone from London. Whenever he found himself in Los Angeles to perform or produce music for other artists, his nightly rounds of clubbing invariably began at Flipper’s, where he often arrived on his own eight wheels.

“I used to skate down from Sunset on La Cienega,” he said, referring to a thoroughfare graded steeply enough to buckle ankles and cause brakes to give out. “What was it about Flipper’s? Partly it was that it was that Studio 54 concept: If you’re inside, you belong inside.”



Ever since the days of organ waltz music, couples dressed for the rink. Jim Frank



Prince performing at Flipper's in 1981. Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

Yet unlike Studio 54, whose ruthless door policy excluded more people than ever made it past the door, Flipper's was "always an inclusive place," Mr. Rodgers said. "Los Angeles was also more inclusive then, too."

When Mr. Ross first conceived of the club with Mr. Cordell and another investor, his intention had been to make it a cultural mosh pit. The roughly framed notion was to foster an ethos not unlike that encapsulated by Tom Wolfe in his depiction of the '60s counterculture guru Ken Kesey and his band of Merry Pranksters: "Everybody is going to be what they are, and whatever they are, there's not going to be anything to apologize about."

Seemingly, Flipper's served as a crossroads for the disparate factions and tribes of Los Angeles in a way that seems almost unbelievable in light of the increasingly fragmented place the city would later become.

“People came there from Compton or Watts or the Valley,” Mr. Ross said. “There weren’t any rules or horrible prejudices. And we didn’t ever want to stop anyone from doing anything as long as they didn’t muck about on the rink.”

Laura Dern was a young teenager living in West Hollywood in those days, being looked after by her grandmother while her actor parents were away shooting films. Bused to a private school in the San Fernando Valley on weekdays, she raced to Flipper’s when she got home, her skates slung over her shoulder, as she explained from her home in Los Angeles. For Ms. Dern, the rink was a social center. More than that, it was an emblem of a specific California dream, one of inclusivity and blended cultural ecologies.

“People who look at the politics can break down the reasons for this with more wisdom,” Ms. Dern said. “But the L.A. that is now deeply divided and even, in certain ways, segregated was not always like that.” Between 1979, when Flipper’s opened, and 1981 — when Mr. Ross threw in the towel, watching from an adjacent rooftop one grim evening as his club was looted and all but razed — Los Angeles seemed in certain ways idyllic, she said. “It was a very open city, open to diverse lifestyles and diverse communities and not only specific to race, but also sexuality and gender and class.”

Atticus Ross, the eldest of the Ross siblings, was 11 years old when Flipper’s opened and he spent his adolescence at the club. “I would just go there in the daytime and stay there skating until my dad left,” said Mr. Ross, a musician whose scores for television and films like “The Social Network” have earned him Grammy, Emmy and Academy Awards. “Obviously parenting has changed a little since then.”

Yet Mr. Ross conceded that his parents provided their children with an upbringing that, though not exactly a scene from “The Brady Bunch,” had the elements for great TV.



“This thing kept happening, though, that whenever I mentioned that my dad was Flipper, people’s memories would come flooding out,” Ms. Ross said. “I felt I had to do something with that.” Harry Eelman for The New York Times

Sure enough, Ms. Ross has a series in development about her unconventional upbringing, as well as plans to reconstitute Flipper’s in real life. Collaborating with the seasoned fashion show producer Alexandre de Betak, she hopes to capitalize on the current surge of interest in old-school roller skating and open 21st-century roller boogie palaces in New York and London.

It is a challenge to imagine, in an age of intensified moral policing, a return to anything like the hedonism Craig Dietz, the skate club’s informal house photographer — in a call from his home in Mexico — characterized as “this nonstop

party of great music, coke, booze and pot.” And smartphone cameras long ago put an end to the likelihood of stars like Elton John, Cher or Jane Fonda, all Flipper’s regulars, cutting loose in public.

Yet it is not too late to put our phones down, Ms. Ross said, and “enjoy this one moment in life where you are in your body and out of your head.” She hoped, she added, that far from being seen as an exercise in nostalgia, “Flipper’s Roller Boogie Palace” may stir its readers to recapture the pleasures of sweaty eight-wheel communion.

“What I learned doing the book is that, in the end, it’s about making connections,” she said — the kind that endure in memory rather than the slipstream of Instagram and TikTok.

A correction was made on Oct. 7, 2021: A picture with an earlier version of this article was published in error, based on information from Alamy. The photograph was not taken at Flipper's and has been replaced. The article also misstated the length of time Flipper's was open. It was just over two years, not three years.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at corrections@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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