The History and Future of Roller Skating in African American Lives

To anyone that does not roller skate themselves, the topic of roller skating history may seem trivial and one that has nothing much to do with culture or African Americans lives in particular. It may surprise some, though, to learn that from looking at the microcosm of roller skating history in the United States, one will see the history of African Americans' struggle for equality from the Civil War through today's Black Lives Matter movement. We will see what it was like to be an African American roller skater after the abolition of slavery through the current pandemic of 2020.

Many noteworthy examples will appear here in a timeline representative of discriminatory practices in policing and regulations at roller skating rinks, economic factors forcing rink closures in urban and suburban settings as well as the ill effects on youth and communities from losing these beloved recreational facilities. This history, however, also demonstrates a resilience, progress in civil rights, and a joyous celebration of many unique styles of expression in music and dance. This is the indomitable spirit of the "Skate Family."

History of Roller Skating in the United States

The invention of roller skates ushered in over a century of pleasurable recreation for many millions of skaters. Early roller skates go back as far as the 1700s, but in 1865, James Plimpton invented the roller skate which was the precursor to the modern roller skate which is still in use today (1). In cycles of increased and waning popularity over time due to changes in factors such as politics and economy, and as skating technologies and surfaces developed, large crowds skated all over the United States, most commonly in urban areas. However, no matter the decade, the experiences of those skaters were affected by the color of their skin.

The history of roller skating almost always starts with the Golden Age, loosely defined as the late 1930s through about 1960, in most accounts. However, the history of roller skating really begins in the mid-1880s, just after the post-Civil War Reconstruction era ended. There is so much to be said of this era that roller skating isn't typically noted. But it is, especially when considering roller skating African Americans. For an eye-opening account of how the tragically short period of only about a decade after the abolition of slavery, during which recently freed men and women prospered and thrived, gave way to over a century and half of Jim Crow laws and white supremacy, see Gates's *Stony the Road* (2).

The Boom Period

The first popular trend in roller skating occurred after the Civil War, which is now called the Boom Period, from 1880-1910. An entire chapter in the National Museum of Roller Skating's ***History of Roller Skating*** (3) is devoted to envisioning a fictitious young man, Robert, and his girlfriend, Jane, in their 1880s roller skating experiences. From the admission cost of 25 cents, to the description of the rink's décor and layout, the live bands, skate lessons, the shop to buy skates, to ads and lesson plans, hardly any detail seems to be left out. What is not explicitly stated in this description, though, is that Robert and Jane are most definitely white. Unfortunately, with this start of the history of roller skating, also begins the history of racial discrimination in public roller rinks.

To get an idea of what it was like to be an African American roller skater during this time period one need only search for "colored" people together with "skating" in newspaper archives from the mid-1800s through early 20th century to piece together this picture, complete with actual individuals. Far from comprehensive, here is a sampling.

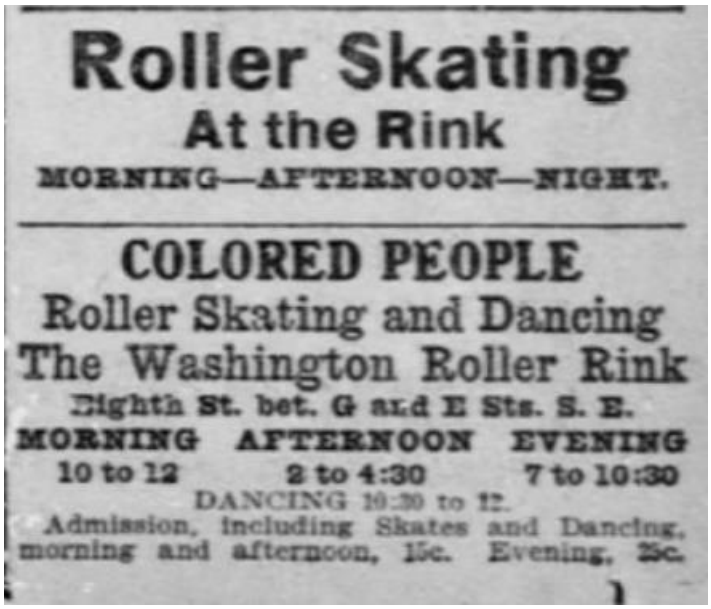
•In fall of 1884, Miss Daisy Lenox testified to the Cambridge Board of Aldermen that she attended a roller skating session at Prospect Skating Rink in Cambridge, MA, with two white children who were permitted to skate, yet she was not allowed. The same day another patron testified that he had heard "two colored lads" explain how they were refused entrance to the skate floor. "Henry Holliday, W.H. Brown and Augustus Jones, and others, all colored, testified substantially as the preceding witnesses." (4)

•In 1885, in Boston, a well-respected customs inspector, Richard Brown and his grandchildren, Louisa and Richard, were banned from the Boston Roller Rink. Both children were born after the Civil War and Mr. Brown indicated that his grandchildren "since the abolition of slavery had never till then known the extent of the prejudice which once existed against their race and color, and which lingers among ill-informed persons." In a separate incident several days later at the Highland Roller Rink in Roxbury, MA, Attorney Edward Everett Brown and George Freeman, furniture store manager, were barred from skating. When questioned why they could not skate, the rink employee stated that it was a rule that "no colored persons may skate on my floor" though spectating was allowed. This manager went on to say that he would not "break these rules even for Fred Douglas." These incidents went to court and both cases were ruled against the roller rinks for discrimination and subsequently "An Act to Punish Persons Making Discrimination in Public Places on Account of Race or Color" was passed. Unfortunately, unending diligence was necessary for following cases were brought to court and won due to continued discriminatory practices such as reserving lower quality roller skates for African American customers. (5)

•In 1885, in Philadelphia, PA, a white businessman from New York, named W.H. McIntosh, opened the Lombard Street Roller Rink as "the first and only roller rink in the nation exclusively for colored people." (It may also have been the first in a long line of primarily white-owned roller rinks with mostly African American clientele that extends to the current day. The similarities to today don't end there, however.) That opening night saw nine police officers "who used their clubs freely" though the extremely large "crowd was good-natured." That night only 400 of the approximately 1,200 in attendance were able to enter the facility and even fewer were able to skate. The rink owner explained that he conceived of the idea when he heard of a case where a black man was able to retrieve $150 in damages in a lawsuit against a roller rink that had discriminated against him. He said that he would not allow white people into his rink. A "white only" roller rink manager said in response that, "In one way the establishment of a rink for colored people will save us a great deal of annoyance. The only question is whether the opening of the rink will have a tendency to injure roller skating."(6)

•Numerous accounts of masquerade balls from 1863 to 1893 revealed that white skaters at white roller rinks in San Francisco, Petaluma and Los Angeles, California, mocked ethnic and racial groups by dressing in costumes such as "Chinamen, "Spanish Señoritas," "Indian Princesses," "Negro Aristocrats," and "Fancy Negros." Through these indignities and also being denied entrance to "white only" skating rinks, such as the case at Woodward Gardens in San Francisco in 1872, black skaters developed their own form of cultural resistance by creating their own roller rink. Black entrepreneurs, W.H. Blake, J.W. Wilson and S. Walker created an African American only skating rink in San Francisco. (7) *The San Francisco Examiner* said of this, "We have no doubt that the rink will hold many gay gatherings of our colored belles and beaux." (8)

•If one were lucky enough to find a place to roller skate while black, there might be special sessions for "colored people" only, like this one advertised in the *Washington Times* in 1906.

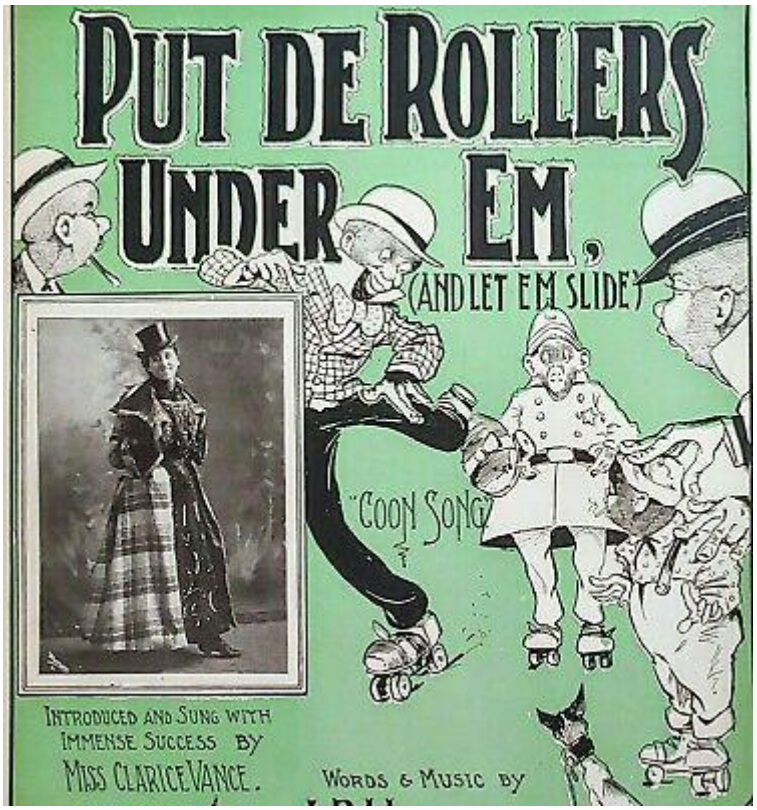


•In 1906, in Toronto, a successful black barber, Armistead Pride Taylor, took a case to court and "won" when his wife, Lydia, and 12-year-old son, Arthur, were refused entry to roller skate at the Granite Club. The judge ruled that "In this country, nobody has a right to subject anybody to indignities because of their colour. Be a man or woman coloured...he or she is entitled to respect and protection. Reflective of the times, however, he stated that if management intended to deny entry based on skin colour, a notice should have been conspicuously posted." Arthur went on to become the assistant District Attorney in Brooklyn, NY. (9)

•"Coon songs" were a national "craze" from 1890-1910. They were typical in vaudeville acts, but early forms evolved from minstrel shows, with the most famous being the 1828 hit song, "Jump Jim Crow." A "coon song" was typically performed by a white man in blackface or a white woman known as a "coon shouter." It was during this time period that "coon" became commonly used to refer to black people and "coon songs" were about, and sometimes even written by, African Americans. The songs themselves were meant to be comedic and were enjoyed by a primarily white, male audience. Aside from their ragtime rhythms, their defining characteristic was a stereotype/caricature. The "coons" of the "coon song:"

…appear as not only ignorant and indolent, but also devoid of honesty or personal honor, given to drunkenness and gambling, utterly without ambition, sensuous, libidinous, even lascivious. "Coons" were, in addition to all of these things, razor-wielding savages, routinely attacking one another at the slightest provocation as a normal function of their uninhibited social lives. (10)

> All lyrics were extreme in this portrayal and would be considered highly unacceptable by today's standards. Two examples, albeit with no lyrics or recordings available at the time of this writing, are:
>
> > Put de Rollers under 'em ... Coon song. [1899] (sheet music image below) (11)
> >
> > Come roller skating. A coon rinking song [1910] (12)



Howley, Haviland & Co, [1899]

During this time period Jim Crow laws proliferated in the South and "informal segregation" was common in the North. Disenfranchisement of black voters and the terrorist acts of lynching, mass incarceration and convict leasing prevailed. (13) From about 1910-1930, which included the years of American involvement in WWI, roller skating in vaudeville and in recreational facilities was in decline, although there were many local and regional competitions mostly in speed skating and endurance races, which eventually evolved into what became known as roller derby. (14)

> *Unlike public parks and picnic grounds, which had existed for decades and where there was some interracial mixing in the Reconstruction period, commercial recreation reached its height at the same time as statutory Jim Crow. Therefore, there was no historical memory of interracial contact in skating rinks and amusement parks. Like segregation itself, commercial amusements were modern institutions that came of age in the 1890s.* (15)

It wasn't until the late 1930s, when the Roller Skating Rink Owner Association (RSROA) was formed and was said to be the force that brought roller skating back to another peak of national focus, as it shifted to a more ballroom dance type of activity done to organ music.

Golden Age

Much has been written about the Golden Age of roller skating from the late-1930s through 1959, most accounts with only the briefest nod to the Boom Period before, if any at all. But like the Boom Period before it, the image of the African American participant is virtually nonexistent, in spite of the tenacity and perseverance of African-American roller skaters dedicated to their pursuit of this activity. Though

the reader of this quote below cannot attribute intentions to the author, one can readily interpret the language of the "desirable clientele" to mean the burgeoning middle-class white American, while the "unsavory characters" could be interpreted with no large trick of the imagination to represent the people that most often are arrested by police or simply are of lesser means.

> *Skating at the local roller rink is a fond childhood memory for millions of Americans. Dating back to the late 19th century, roller rinks offered genteel recreation in an atmosphere that accommodated the social mores of the day. Before World War I, however, rinks had practically disappeared from the American landscape. The few that remained often developed the same reputation as the pool hall: a hangout for unsavory characters looking for trouble with a capital "T." The Roller Skating Rink Operators Association formed in 1937 to reclaim the activity for a more desirable clientele. With dress codes (coats and ties for men, knee-length skirts for women) and other rules of etiquette, roller skating soon became wholesome entertainment suitable for the entire family.* (16)

This quote from Victoria Wolcott will help to put the once again under- and misrepresented African American roller skater in the context of the Golden Age:

> *Rarely do these depictions incorporate the longing African American children expressed to...skate in rinks... White suburbanites continue to wax nostalgic about urban amusement parks, viewing them as symbols of the melting pot and memories of halcyon days.* (17)

Roller skating for African Americans during the Golden Age is not very different from the Boom Period, though perhaps even more dangerous. A longer list of examples of discriminatory roller rink policies and actions could be made, just as above, but suffice it to let representative examples, primarily from Wolcott's book, set the tone before we move into the Civil Rights era of the 1960s.

- In 1938, a reporter from the Communist Party newspaper interviewed a Brooklyn roller rink owner when the paper received a complaint about their discriminatory policies. The owner explained that they had no formal policy to ban blacks, but that "whites objected to Negroes and routinely beat them when they tried to skate." (18)

- In 1943, an inter-racial group of teens from a Victory Club supporting home-front activities, attempted to skate in Los Angeles's Skateland but only the white teens were told they could enter. The teens protested the discrimination to the manager and were told that blacks cause fights and integration is not beneficial to them because they are happier among their own people. The teens held a peaceful protest and insisted that the United States was not fighting the war only against the Axis, but against the fascists within. (19)

- In 1946 Philadelphia, a group of African American roller skaters formed to seek the purchase of their own rink due to so few area rinks permitting them to skate. As they pursued their own rink, they were able to skate at some rinks on specific nights and by the early 50s had formed the Sepia Skating Club and the Ebony Skating Club to skate, usually, on Monday nights. (20)

- In June 1948, two African American couples were initially barred from skating at the Skateland Roller Rink in Bridgeport, CT. After discussion with management, they were allowed in but purposefully given the wrong skate sizes and willfully mistreated. The couples retained the services of an attorney and after a long court battle, the manager was fined $100 and sentenced to jail for two days for racial discrimination. Although this was noteworthy, it was not typical. By this time, however, it was common for legal challenges to be made in response to segregation in roller rinks. (21)

- In 1949, the inter-racial Committee of Racial Equality (CORE) staged a sit-in at the White City

Roller Rink in Chicago to protest against racial discrimination there. When a lawsuit against White City Roller Rink for racial discrimination failed, a four-year long series of nonviolent sit-in protests ensued. Relations between police and white customers became heated, but nonviolent techniques such as blocking ticket counters were used. (22)

•In 1950, Levittowns were developed to give affordable housing opportunities to whites only, especially returning WWII veterans. In Maryland, New Jersey and New York, seven Levittown communities were constructed with government support from the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration for post-WWII white veterans. (23) Housing developments, and movement from urban areas into suburban areas, like these, had many societal implications, including those on recreational activities such as roller skating.

> •*The popularity of the sport outstripped the available resources and money to build enough of these grandiose roller rinks-cum-ballrooms. As Post-World War II America began the country's rapid suburbanization, and roller skating rinks began following fleeing urbanites into the new subdivisions that now ringed the emptying cities of the Northeast and Midwest, a new design paradigm was needed.* (24)

•The Levittown Roller Rink in Long Island, NY, was constructed in 1955. With it's beckoning neon sign, cavernous spaces and polished maple floor, over 1,700 skaters would fill it on weekends. There is

no doubt that in these segregated communities, the community roller rinks would have played a role in the continued discrimination against African American skaters as well as contributing to the long-lasting decline of urban facilities. This roller rink was demolished due to economic trends, after 30 years, which once again left long-standing negative impacts on today's black skaters in a similar fashion all over the United States. (25)

- In 1951, Eroseanna Robinson, a young black CORE activist, set out to desegregate Skateland in Los Angeles. Over a period of several days, Robinson was repeatedly tripped on the skate floor, harassed, and assaulted by white men. Each time she returned with inter-racial friends for support, but the violence continued. She was injured from her falls, but she continued to skate, as a "skate-in" protest, until after one forceful shove her arm was broken and she had to seek medical attention. In the end, Robinson's efforts failed. The white-owned Skateland remained segregated and also ran the black-only Play-More rink which remained segregated also, unless whites chose to skate there. (26)

But like the Boom Period, the Golden Age was affected by events of the times, one of which was the arrival of rock and roll music. As roller skating and the music to which it is skated go hand in hand, the decline of the Golden Age could reasonably have been due to this musical development. (27)

Roller Skating African Americans & the Civil Rights Movement

It is difficult to draw a line in time before which the Civil Rights Movement had not yet begun. Although many thinks of the 1960s as when the Civil Rights Movement took place, it had its roots as far back as the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. But as can be seen scanning through the years since 1865, there was never a time since the invention of the roller skate, that African Americans didn't fight for their rights, including those to roller skate. After decades of protests at many institutions all over the nation, and legislation in lower courts as early as the mid-1800s, the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. Some of these earlier historic demonstrations were noted previously and a few more follow that lead up to the 1970s when the next roller skating boom occurs, with African-Americans at its heart, once again.

- In 1957 Philadelphia, a Baptist minister, Reverend S. Amos Brackeen sued the Lexington Skating Palace for racial discrimination. The court found that the Lexington Skating Palace's "Skating Club" was formed to exclude blacks, and none were included among the 30,000 plus membership. Furthermore, whites were permitted without being members while blacks were routinely barred entrance. The court ordered the Lexington Skating Palace to refrain from these discriminatory practices. (28)
- 1961 Greenville, SC – a city-run skating rink was closed to "ensure peace and tranquility" after a district court ruling. Though the court acknowledged the African American student activists' constitutional rights to use the Cleveland Park Roller Rink, the judge ruled that they were there primarily to protest segregation which caused a "disturbance." Causing a disturbance was deemed not a right and thus prevented them from using their constitutional rights to use the rink recreationally on an equal basis with white skaters. The roller rink was never integrated and never reopened. (29)

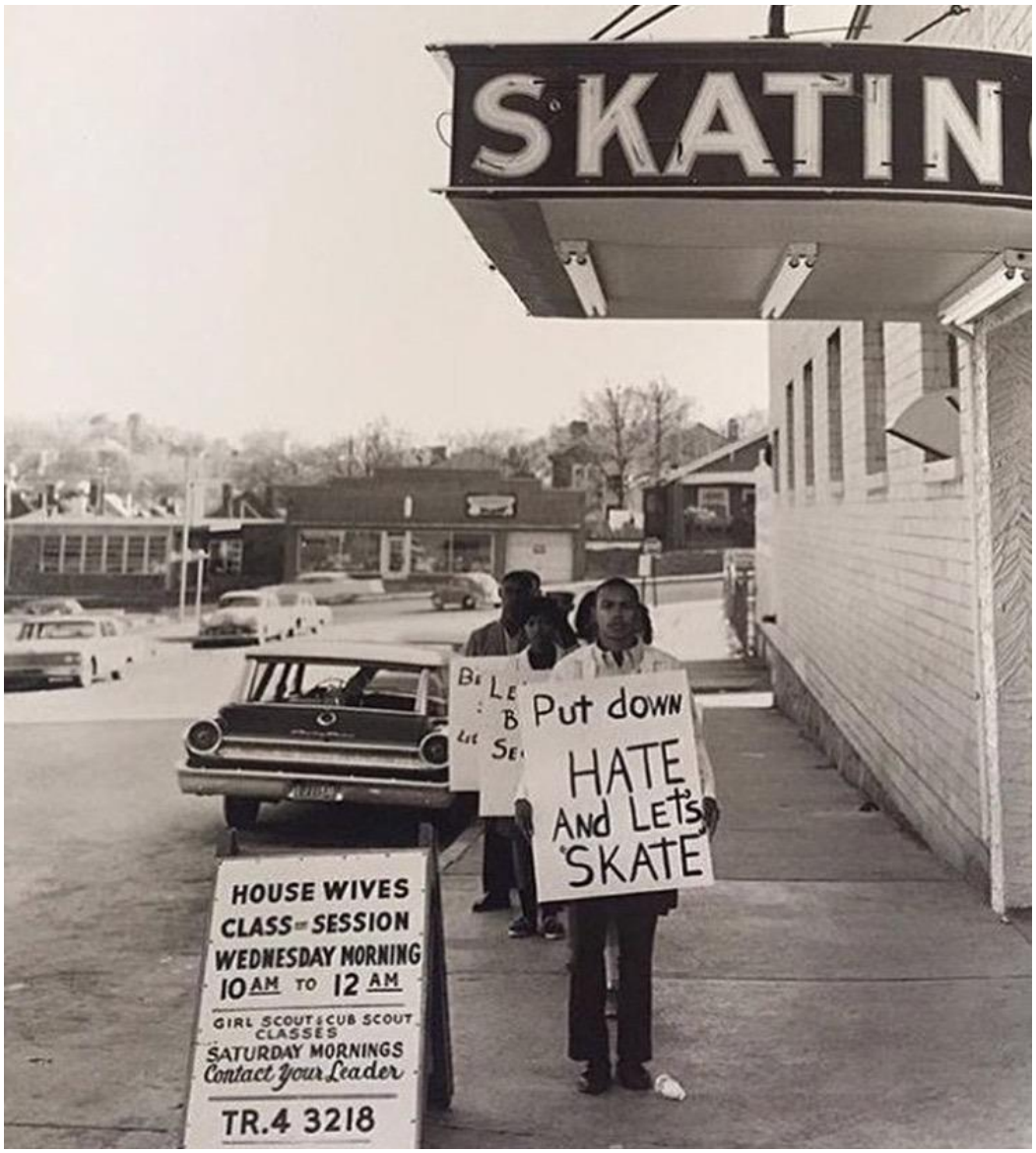
- 1961 Detroit, MI – White skaters tripped and harassed the black and white teenagers who attended a skate-in to desegregate the Arcadia Roller Rink. The owner adopted the policy of desegregation but with separate nights for blacks and whites. (30)

- 1962 Cairo, IL – Many demonstrations occurred in Cairo over the summer of 1962 by student activists, including (recently deceased US Senator) John Lewis. The demonstrations were focused on a restaurant, a swimming pool and a roller rink. Once the attorney general of Illinois had issued a legal

opinion that the Roller Bowl could not legally exclude black people, the student group, trained by John Lewis, protested there in August of 1962. Eventually, all three businesses conceded that they would serve black customers, but unfortunately not without significant violence towards the nonviolent protesters, including some that were hospitalized. The swimming pool was only desegregated for two weeks before it closed and was filled with concrete. (31)

(c) The Baltimore Afro-American

•August 1963 - Ledger Smith, aged 27, roller skated 685 miles over 10 days from Chicago to Washington DC to see Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic "I Have a Dream" speech. He was one of the 250,000 in attendance, along with his wife. Along the way, in Fort Wayne, IN, a racist driver attempted to run him over. He wore a Freedom banner and had protection from NAACP volunteers that drove alongside him. (32)



©Richard Avedon 1963, Atlanta, GA – Civil Rights Demonstration

All the many efforts and demonstrations, the violence and indignities suffered, during this time, and even after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, did not lead to a racially integrated society in most ways, and specifically, not in recreational facilities such as roller rinks. Post-WWII "white flight" from urban areas to suburban communities resulted in continued and intensified housing discrimination and redlining. Urban roller rinks that complied legally with desegregation saw fewer white customers or the businesses closed altogether to avoid the issue of integration. Such was the previously mentioned case in 1961 in Greenville, SC, with the closing of the city-run roller rink.

Those roller rinks that still had both black and white customers served them on separate nights of the week. Dyana Winkler, one of the co-directors of a recent documentary on the history of African American roller skating culture, *United Skates* (33), said this in an interview with California Humanities:

> *Roller rinks saw that and realized, "Hey, if we integrate all of our nights, all these establishments are going to close down. We have to find a way to keep them segregated." They were no longer allowed to call them "Black nights" and "white nights," but they started using coded language: They would call white nights things like "Top 40's Night" and "Family Night," and they would call Black nights names like "Soul Night," "Martin Luther King Jr. Night." The line was drawn in the sand. African Americans stayed on the nights that they were allowed to go and that has carried through to today.* (34)

1970s Roller Disco Era

As rock and roll entered the mainstream and organ music skating sessions were slowly replaced by specialized sessions using record players instead of live music, roller disco became extremely popular beginning in the early 1970s with adults and teens. Disco music had a beat that was perfect for roller skating moves, although much less structured than the prior more ballroom dance-like steps of the Golden Age. African American skating culture in the 1970s, though we will see still came with its challenges, was thriving and became a joyful celebration of a community focused on movement and R&B music.

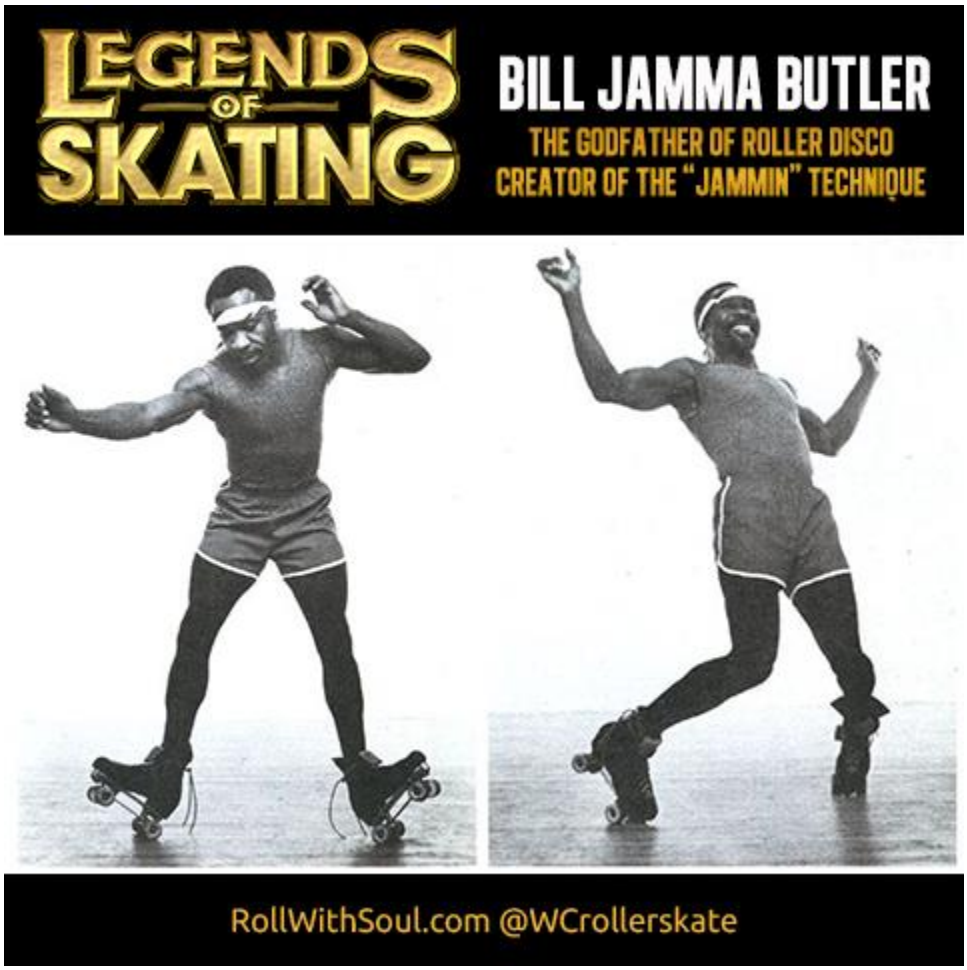
Rather than detract from African Americans' ability to enjoy and develop their skating forms, segregated nights enhanced them.

> *Although we're quick to say that segregation is bad, the irony is that many of the African American skaters we talked to told us that on their own nights, they didn't have to abide by white rules, listen to white music, or play by white standards. They were free to be their complete selves and that is how this culture was able to thrive. That probably wouldn't have been the case if all the nights were integrated.* (35)

As a result, African American skate nights became immensely popular and long-standing during this time period.

> *A typical African American skate night had a party-like atmosphere. Skaters showed off their skills on the rink to the loud soul and R&B music. Lights, fashions, and food helped to round out the skate party, all reflecting the lifestyle of the skaters. It was a celebration of black culture in America. It was also a social way for older teens and young adults to celebrate the artistry of roller skating -- it was a demonstration that skating wasn't just kid stuff. This continued throughout the '60s, '70s, and into the '80s.* (36)

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, the Empire Rollerdrome in Brooklyn, NY, rose to fame as the birthplace of roller disco, a skating craze that swept across the nation. Bill Butler, whose unique Jammin' style set the stage for roller disco, became known as the Godfather of Roller Disco. His skating style influenced roller disco skate sessions all over the country.



From Bill Butler's 1979 book on roller disco skating technique, *Jammin'*, he says:

> *In 1957, I was assigned to the air force station in Brooklyn, New York. On July 7—I'll never forget the date because to me New York was the Promised Land—I arrived and headed for the nearest rink, the Empire Rollerdrome, before unpacking anything but my skates and the record that accompanied me everywhere, "Night Train." At that time, the Rollerdrome had "Bounce Night" every Friday. That was when the organ music was up-tempo and everyone did the Brooklyn Bounce, the local style of jamming, which I immediately subtitled "The Wobbly Duck."*
>
> *I approached a woman who looked as if she might be in charge and asked her if she would play "Night Train." I explained to her that I had a way of skating that they had probably never seen in Brooklyn. It was fast and it looked dangerous. I was afraid that if I just got out there and skated, I might be barred from the rink.* (37)

While Bill Butler was developing his Jammin' roller disco style in New York during the 1970s, other African American skaters in Chicago were developing the "JB" style of skating.

> *In Chicago, a new corps of skaters described themselves as "JB skaters," followers of James Brown's songs and a style reminiscent of rhythm-and-blues. This style emerged during the 1970s, what some have described as the height of the roller revolution, as well as when Chicago became known as a roller skating city. The JB style of roller skating, which originated in Chicago, consisted of grooves and bounces, fancy footwork and standing dance*

routines borrowed from the Godfather of Soul himself and dating back to the 1970s. (38)

Simultaneously, Hip Hop and "breaking" in NYC and California were developing and have had major influences in roller skating over the next 3 decades.

> *During the 1970s, an array of dances practiced by black and Latino kids sprang up in the inner cities of New York and California. The styles had a dizzying list of names: 'uprock' in Brooklyn, 'locking' in Los Angeles, 'boogaloo' and 'popping' in Fresno, and 'strutting' in San Francisco and Oakland. When these dances gained notice in the mid-'80s outside of their geographic contexts, the diverse styles were lumped together under the tag 'breakdancing.'* (39)

Throughout the Roller Disco era, black skaters all over the country were embracing these local skating cultures and dance styles. NYC, Saint Louis, Memphis, Houston, Los Angeles, Detroit, Miami, Indianapolis, Chicago...the list goes on...all have their unique skating styles that go far beyond disco dancing. These skating communities and styles, taking root in the 1970s, flow through the decades and connect us to today's modern skate communities.

As we move into the 1980 and 90s, skaters' heads all over the nation are turned to California, where Venice Beach skaters are also creating their own style, skating to James Brown's "I'm Black and I'm Proud," responding to ground-breaking musical trends as well as heart-breaking police brutality.

1980s-1990s Hip Hop, Break-dancing & Roller Skating

Many seem to think that roller skating once again saw a decline, after disco's popularity faded in the early 80s. That was not the case. Roller skaters everywhere, especially African Americans, still skated in rinks all over the nation. Also, from the late 1980s into most of the 1990s, primarily white roller skaters laced up in-line skates which were extremely popular both outdoors and in roller rinks and depicted in a dozen or so rollerblading themed Hollywood movies.

> But when skating died down as a fad, we kept at it. Not just in Park Hill, across the country. Skating may have been a fad for some people, peaking in the summer of 1979, but for Black folks young and old it was a part of our culture. Skating, Roller Skating, Jam Skating, Fastback Skating, Snap, whatever you call it, being on four wheels was as Black as Black eyed peas and collard greens. Skating rinks united generations and neighborhoods. (40)

As always, new and evolving musical genres became inspiration for roller skating moves. As hip hop came of age in the 80s, it found fertile ground in roller rinks as venues from New York to Los Angeles and Houston to Miami. Some may be surprised to learn that DJs at African American skate parties were the foundation of rap music, not only in selecting the music to play, but as rap music concert promoters. Dr. Dre and Queen Latifah were both actually DJs at roller rinks in their early careers. (41)

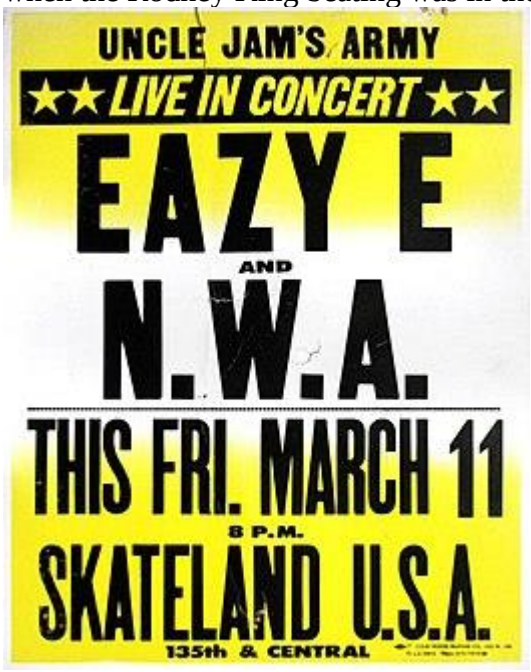
> *Because radio didn't play Rap and there was only a few Rap videos (which weren't played on MTV or BET) Skating Rinks were one of the main mediums for the spread of Rap music.* (42)

Luther Campbell was a key figure in the history of rap music in roller rinks in Miami. He was a DJ, concert promoter and ultimately the leader of the rap band, 2 Live Crew.

> *The first time I ever played inside for skaters was at the Sunshine Skateway in Homestead, which is out in the suburbs. This was in the early '80s and back then, like today, Miami was a very diverse place. I'm from Liberty City, which is about as far as you can get from the suburbs. At the time, not very many rinks let real DJs into the premises, especially African American DJs, because the rinks around here were predominantly white. But on Sundays, when the rink was*

supposedly closed and the white kids were off doing their thing somewhere else, that's when they let us in to do our thing. (43)

Meanwhile in Los Angeles, Eazy E and NWA (Niggaz Wit Attitude) got their start at the Skateland roller rink. NWA is considered one of the most influential rap bands although their active years lasted only from 1987 through 1991. *Straight Outta Compton* is an excellent biopic of this band. (44) Their musical style is still an influence today and in the late 80s they seemingly bridged the musical gap between blacks and whites with a strong white following. Although their sub-genre of rap music was known as "gangsta rap" and thought by many to be misogynistic and glorified drugs and crime, their most prophetic works, still highly regarded, are their protest songs, such as "Fuck tha Police" which is a scathing critique of racist police brutality and racial profiling. It was in 1991 that they broke up and when the Rodney King beating was in the national headlines.



Source: *LA Times* (45)

The 2017 documentary *Roller Dreams* (46) gives an excellent overview of roller skating at nearby Venice Beach at this time. The film follows a core group of mostly African American roller skaters from South Central LA. Compelling evidence is shown that this group should be credited for the popularity of roller skating at Venice Beach and its subsequent popularity in films of the late 70s and early 80s such as *Roller Boogie, Xanadu* and *Skatetown USA*. Unfortunately, it seems Hollywood created whitewashed versions of their stories with these films which had no African American characters in spite of the locations at Venice Beach. One of the Venice Beach skaters was asked to appear in *Roller Boogie*, but only from the chest down, as a "skate double" for the white male lead. He declined.

As we get to know all of the individual skaters in *Roller Dreams*, we learn that most came from neighborhoods with gang and drug activity, or abusive childhoods, and found roller skating at the beach to be not just a way to stay out of trouble, but "lifesaving" and in one case turned into a career.

The skaters recount how the police brutality against Rodney King was a turning point at the Venice Beach skate area.

"All of a sudden the police got orders out of nowhere that amplified music on the beach is not allowed. The police started coming and shutting off our music and having decibel meters and

you can only have it this loud. We were like you can't even hear it. Up to 3,000 people would be there watching the skaters and only 10 or 20 cops, who were afraid of something going down. They started shutting us down at 8, then 7, then 6...pretty soon altogether. During that time Mad was thrown into jail many times, repeatedly, for amplified music." --Sara

"All we wanted to do was dance, skate and play. There's no law against skating, so we're going to skate. Being black, you get music on the beach, as far as in white community, white eyes, no. You guys can have fun, but not like that." --Mad (47)

After 20 years of skating in the same concrete area on the beach, the LAPD told the skaters that they needed an emergency access to the beach at that location.

"Citing that the activity attracts a "certain element" seems the African-American roller skating community is an ongoing target. They wanted to kick out who they didn't want to be on the beach. Then they figure out that the only way to get rid of us is to rip up the pavement. That ground under which we skated was sacred ground as far as I'm concerned. They brought in bulldozers and ripped it up. That is when the soul left Venice Beach.

These days the cops don't have to hassle us anymore because we have been neutralized and marginalized. They have shunted us off to this funky little area which has coincidentally become the hygiene-challenged, homeless area." --Sara (48)

Hip hop and breaking remained a key component of African American roller skating throughout the remainder of the decade, as did racial injustice.

Roller Skating in the 21st Century

The early 2000s saw a primarily white female reinvention of amateur roller derby. This movement continues through today and is still popular in most large urban areas in the US and internationally. However, simultaneously the previously discussed developing African American roller skating styles continued and grew into national participation at large parties in urban centers, which are a key focus of the 2019 documentary, *United Skates* (49).

The early and mid-2000s saw some important roller skating films. *Eight Wheels & Some Soul Brotha Music* (50) came out in 2003 and was the widely unnoticed and underappreciated precursor by a full 16 years to *United Skates,* which also recounted the civil rights legacy of African American roller skating, as well as the modern-day African American skating scenes and the current struggles they and their rinks now face.

In 2005, *Roll Bounce* (51) was released. This film details the life of young Xavier (played by Bow Wow) in the late 70s as he struggles with the grief from the loss of his mother, graduating from high school and the closing of the roller rink in his Chicago neighborhood. Bill Butler (previously mentioned as the Father of Roller Disco) was the Skate Director for this film. Bow Wow skated his own parts except for a jump and a spin. This movie recounted this era of roller skating, but also drew attention to the contemporary roller skating scene.

An excellent example of the African American roller skating experience in the late 2000s-early 2010s, is this young black man's account of working at his parents' roller rink, Skate Zone, in Atlanta:

The height of my teen night experience was during the era of "Crank Dat," the DJ could do

> *30 minutes of any Super Hero dances, Batman, Wonderwomen, Aquaman, doesn't matter the song, there was someone that could do it flawlessly. If Vine existed back then, I know a few people that would be famous for mastering all moves. I cringe reminiscing on our oversized t-shirts, see through Bathing Apes, black or white Air Force Ones, Girbauds and fake Evisu jeans, it was an age of big clothes and YouTube dances. DJ Unk gave us "Walk It Out" and "Two Step,"Lil Jon's "Snap Ya Fingers," BHI's "Pool Palace,"and the embarrassing "Bunny Hop" by the Get Rich Clique. There was nothing quite like "Whoop Rico," a song that was practically "Knuck If You Buck" meets "Crank Dat Superman" the perfect combination of violence and synchronized dancing. One unforgettable teen night moment is Down South Presidents' Skate Zone theme song. (51) The song was created for a contest we ran, they won, and my aunt shot the music video. It's the epitome of the era. (52)*

In 2006, *ATL* (54) was released, in which Rashad (played by T.I.) and three friends are at a crossroads as they graduate from high school and make life decisions as they roller skate at their local rink, Cascade. T.I. is from Atlanta and actually regularly skated and performed at the Skate Zone roller rink that is detailed in the quote above.

Popular Culture & the Future of Roller Skating in the US

By now it should be clear to anyone reading this far that there are separate and very unequal spheres of reality for blacks and whites in the United States that rarely intersect in meaningful ways. This ranges to everything from housing, education, business, finance, religion, recreation and arts, including music, dance and roller skating. In the case of roller skating, however, in spite of many challenges faced by African American participants, a vibrant and amazing culture continues to prosper.

Cultural appropriation is a concern as popular culture is absorbed from WiFi-enabled quarantines during the 2020 pandemic. Suddenly and frequently, it is announced that "roller skating has made a comeback" and roller skates are selling out (55) as people turn to them as a source of recreation and fitness during the times of social distancing. From some, however, this comes with a warning to know the history of African Americans in roller skating before jumping on this bandwagon. (56) In addition to knowing the history, it is important to understand how easy it is for the dominant white culture to appropriate all that is "cool" and amazing about African American culture for their own.

> *This is such a common pattern of cultural appropriation: Black folks struggle for affirmation, then develop tools to resist anti-Blackness, only to have white folks claim those tools as their own and erase the significance. (57)*

And financial harm comes from cultural appropriation as well when African American art forms become white-owned business enterprises. Such an example can be seen in the hip-hop-culture that goes hand in hand with roller skating. As Billy Wimsatt, a white hip hop journalist prophesied in the 90s:

> *He warned black artists that the next time they invented something, they had better find a way to control it financially, because whites were going to steal hip-hop. "And since it's the nineties," he concluded, "you won't even get to hear us say, "Thanks, niggers."* (58)

A few music videos over the last couple of decades from Faith Evans's *Love Like This* (1998), to Mariah Carey's *Fantasy* (2009) to Beyonce's 2013 *Blow*, show that skating has remained a part of the popular dance and music scene of African Americans. In August of 2020, Stokley features his uncle Snoop Dogg in a roller skating-themed music video, *Vibrant*.

Yet in an April 2020, a TikTok video of light-skinned Ana Cota skating on the streets of her neighborhood to a Jennifer Lopez song have gone viral and been credited with this so-called "recent roller skating resurgence." While Cota does not credit herself with this development and supports the Black Lives Matter movement, it is hard to deny that it has had an impact on news reporting of roller skating where previously it had been all but ignored.

Simultaneously, skating blogs and YouTube channels have taken off during the pandemic. Most notably, in May 2020, Indy Jamma Jones, a white roller skating aficionado and YouTube instructor, came under fire when Faieryn Faun, a black follower, was silenced and then blocked from discussing an incident that she suffered when "skating while black." Following the George Floyd death by police in Minneapolis in May of 2020, apparently this was deemed not to be "appropriate for all ages," though posts about LGBT discrimination have been routinely allowed. And all the while discriminatory practices continued, before the pandemic, in roller rinks across the nation such as:

> *Even today, many rinks have signs that read "no saggy pants," or "no hip-hop music," which some interpret as discouraging African American patrons. Other rinks ban smaller custom wheels, a style favored by many black skaters, because, the rinks say, those wheels harm the wood floors.* (59)

Roller rinks that were already beleaguered with the threat of closure due to economic factors forcing sales for development in urban and suburban areas, are now mostly closed due to the pandemic and have no revenues. In a typical year, www.skategroove.com is the web site for the hundreds of mostly African American skating parties all over the nation. To look at it in 2020, sadly, is to see a long list of cancellations. However, some skating bright spots that have occurred during the COVID closures have been people teaching roller skating via Zoom and people making their own outdoor skating surfaces and rinks in their homes (60, 61, 62) And prior to the pandemic, in August of 2019 Venice Beach hosted it's first annual roller disco and "Skate Against Hate."

The future of roller skating is uncertain due to the rapid loss of roller rinks all over the country. The pandemic has a very real possibility of accelerating this already staggering loss. However, it is certain that the lifeblood of roller skating lies within the veins of African Americans. There are a few black-owned roller rinks hanging in there, such as in Detroit and Atlanta. At no time in the history of roller skating has it disappeared or diminished in importance in African American lives. This is despite the many challenges faced across time, geography and age. As one skater put it in the *8 Wheels & Some Soul Brotha Music* documentary film*:*

> *Look at what we've done in spite of all the adversity, all the fighting we've had to do just to be allowed to skate. Imagine what we could create if we just were free to be ourselves any night, anywhere.* (63)

In conclusion, roller skating is a metaphor for the Black experience in this country in many ways. It is this, within the context of the Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID relief support to black-owned businesses that give cause for hope for another century plus of African American excellence in roller skating, strong inter-generational community roller rinks, and a "new Reconstruction" that

addresses the inequities for all people of color.

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