

## **SKATEBOARDING'S JASON JESSEE PROBLEM\***

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By now, you may be aware that the skateboarding industry has been reckoning with a race problem. Or rather, it's dealing with its Jason Jessee problem. Jessee, one of skateboarding's longest-standing legacy figures, has come under the microscope for his past racist and homophobic remarks, and for continuously donning Nazi symbolism and imagery throughout his career, and it looks like he's finally having to atone.

If you aren't caught up here's a rundown: In early-May a SLAP poster started a thread with screenshots of a 1995 interview from a biker-magazine where Jessee uses some disgusting racist and homophobic language. Other posters began replying with pictures of JJ's more recent rocking of Nazi swastikas and other white-supremacist symbols - like this clothing like he did with Neighborhood in 2009, or this swistaka-studded leather biker jacket JJ submitted to @theskateboarding museum a few weeks prior, or Jason's most recent Independent Trucks collection featuring an adaptation of the Hammerskin Nation logo, or his affiliation with the band the Highway Murderers. More responded with personal anecdotes that seemed to reinforce this upsetting image. The conversation picked up speed to the point where a response became impossible to avoid. JJ issued a letter of apology on his Instagram, and his sponsors at NHS (OJ Wheels, Santa Cruz, Mob Grip, and Independent Trucks) all released public denunciations of hate-groups and adding that "anyone suggesting that our compan[ies] support or promote these offensive beliefs is simply wrong." And then, as reported in Vice, his sponsors at NHS and Converse indefinitely suspended Jason from their teams.

So that's it, the precipitous fall of Jason Jessee. Coffin nailed shut and case closed. But of course the conversation continues, and the response to all of this has been expectedly messy. Some have argued the repercussions have gone too far, that the social justice warriors have executed an already-repentant man, and, anyways, it was all for the shock value in the first place, offensive imagery has been ingrained in punk and skateboard culture since their beginnings, that all these millennials are just too sensitive. Others say if only everyone involved had just handled it

differently, if only JJ had not used such vague and seemingly evasive language in his apology, then maybe we could get back to appreciating his frontside ollies and wacky hat-stacks like the good ol' days. And still others want more and broader actions to be taken against all these other skaters who have been propagating heinous views in their personal life for decades, let the dominoes fall and crush out these bigots once and for all.

And, behind all the noise, a few larger questions linger: If Jason Jessee's bigotry was so overt, then why did it take so long for anything to come of it? And why was it now that it all boiled over? And, most importantly, what happens next?

None of these questions have simple answers, the world is complicated and filled with contradictions (what of JJ's friendship with Elissa Steamer? Or the fact that he sponsors a bunch of Black skaters with his wheel company?). But one reason for the industry's slow and tenuous response is money. It's no secret that shock sells, and JJ was in the midst of a major marketing push via some of skating's biggest brands. And, admittedly, there is no independent journalistic outlet in skateboarding free from worrying about losing these brands' support. Everyone who's trying to make a cent off of skateboard publishing is acutely conscious of the financial effect something they say or write can have on the bottom line. (One reason why Vice was the first publication to pipe up about this story is that they're not subsistent on skateboarding, they've got Disney-money.) So we all either embrace the offence as a marketing gimmick or else turn our heads away in saddened silence.

But it's 2018 in Trump's America. Times are hyper-tense and social media can have a magnetizing effect that intensifies the lens through which we view things. Some get scorched in the glare. We're in a national uproar over what it means to be a bigot, all sides armed to the teeth with accusations, and skateboarding is no longer exempt from that discussion. If Jason Jessee's case has shown us anything it's that skateboarding, despite our rebellious self-perception, is a part of this same national culture. That the skateboarding industry at large will continue to have to answer to issues of race, gender, sexuality, and equality, and that instead of issuing empty statements like, "Skateboarding doesn't care if

you're black, brown, gay, etc." meaningful change will have to be made by those in the position of power.

But "meaningful change" is a slippery term. What does it mean that a single person lost a couple of their skateboarding sponsors? Does it matter that his Instagram followers, a fair-enough metric for a celebrity's marketability, have continued to rise since the controversy broke? And who else deserves judgment - are his former sponsors exempt from scrutiny now that they've cut ties? Are us media-types responsible for not harping on all of skating's many many issues until your ears bleed the bitter blood of long-deserved equality? I don't have the answers to these questions, and you don't either, at least not alone we don't. The only way to suss out some sense from any of this, to move forward and upward, is to struggle ourselves through these difficult topics. Like lighting an unfamiliar room we have to stumble and grasp in the darkness for a switch, and once that light is on move on to the next shadowed corner, and then the next after that.

And if your response to this is something along the lines of, "Shut up and skate! Keep your politics out of my skateboarding." Well then how about you take your own advice and let those who are willing to work through these thorny issues talk them out while you boneless 360 in the dark. There's still a lot of work to be done, there always will be, but many hands make light work, so why don't we light the way for a more inclusive culture to get it started?

-CK