



MIKE V. AND RODNEY

PHOTO: GIOVANNI REDA

RODNEY SMITH AN OPEN & SHUT CASE

INTERVIEW BY
MIKE VALLELY

I personally owe a lot to Rodney Smith. When I was just starting out in skateboarding he was my mentor. He encouraged me more than anyone else or sometimes in spite of everyone else to pursue my skating and my dreams with everything inside of me. He believed in me and pushed me to get better. I remember him telling me fairly early on that I was destined for sponsorship and a pro career. That kind of unconditional support is rare. He was simply a good friend — no, he was a great friend and still is to this day. Now sometimes we don't see each other or speak for years at a time but we can always pick up right where we left off... skating together on the streets of New Jersey.

The following is Rod's story and history in skateboarding as told to me. He's been skateboarding since the mid-seventies and through the years he has played a major role in the New York and New Jersey skate scenes and in turn in the global skate scene. He's one of the true unsung heroes and architects of modern skateboarding. And those who know him and have been lucky enough to befriend him and skate with him will tell you without a bad word one, that Rodney Smith's fingerprint is on all that's good about skateboarding. And no doubt it will be for a long time to come.

—Mike Vallely

RODNEY: In and around 1974-75 I became addicted to the skateboard. Kids all over my town were skating. I think I saw the first skater while driving in the family mobile, en route to the store. One day I'm hanging out around the block and see this kid skating. I quickly ran over to him, with thoughts of asking for a turn and he says, "Ya want to try?" I was shocked he let me catch a turn on his blue plastic, Mercedes emblem wearing, rock hitting death machine. From that point on, I vowed to get a skateboard at what ever the cost. My next feat was how to obtain one. No chance in asking the parents for one. "You'll break your neck" is all I heard from my over protective mother. That was the main reason. I also felt guilty asking for stuff knowing how hard my parents worked (seven days a week with two or three jobs each) to give my siblings and I a better quality of life. Requests were taken really seriously and you had to have a good game plan that made sense, or it was never going to happen.

1976 rolled around and I still had no luck getting a skateboard. I resorted to borrowing friend's boards

for a night, but could never get much time in half a day. Henry Street was the local starter hill, equipped with a sidewalk and fresh pavement. I caught my older brother riding some orange plastic stick one afternoon, "Man! Where did he get that board?" I couldn't believe it. He was in some sort of session with some of the older trend followers. That was the first and last time I saw him skating. The next day I spotted that orange stick in the shed. I eyed up that board for days until I got up the guts to take it out one day before my brother got home from school. I knew if I was caught I was finished!

This routine went on for days until I was nabbed mid-way down Henry Street. "HEY!" I dragged my foot to a stop and prepared for death. Every once in awhile I wouldn't get the royal thrashing from him and this particular day was a good day. He says "can you ride that thing?" and sure enough all I needed to do was show him I could ride it and it was mine. Life was good! The following months showed some weird signs of de-population in skateboarding. At this point my crew and I hit the skate scene late and didn't know skateboarding was fading to the wind at a rapid rate. I became even more interested and all of the kids on my block started to quit. To my knowledge, three die-hard skaters remained on my block. Now that might sound like

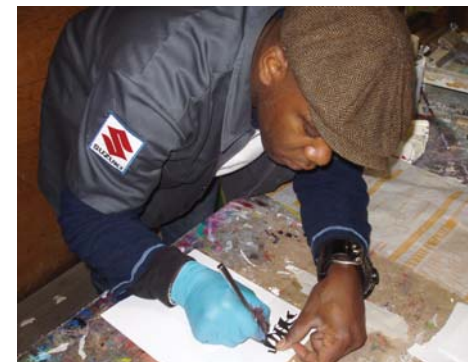
a small thing, but it was huge! Knowing scores of kids skated religiously for three years then quit! It was all kind of unbelievable. I never contemplated the fate of skateboarding. There was no doubt in my mind that I would ever stop skating. It wasn't long after the scene started to diminish I started to believe I was going to be the king of skateboards on the block, until the day of days came.

One day while sessioning Henry St. I saw David Sadler, a sponsored Jersey skater/surfer. He was power carving down Henry Street at mach speed. I'd never seen the likes of him before, ever! He lived down the block from me and never had any use for Henry Street, till that day. He was testing out a new set-up! Sadler rode this super wide skateboard that looked like it was made of wood. I stood there with my mouth open as he pushed back up the hill (at mach speed). He looked down at the orange plastic and said, "What the heck is that thing?" I reply "a skateboard?" He laughed at me for like a minute (it felt like an hour in kid time) then told me to ask my mom if I could check out his skateboard collection. I ran to my house like a mad dog. I was so out of breath I couldn't even spit out a complete sentence. All I could get out was "David Sadler." She knew his mom worked for the town and agreed.

That day changed my whole life! I got an eye and ear full from the real King of local skateboarding. He gave me a time-lapse history lesson I'll never forget. He started with the late 60's and followed with brief info to the current time. His attic was full of skate product from skateboarding's past. There were surf and skate magazines from every era to current (1978). Boards of all sizes, wheels in multiple shapes and colors. At that point I didn't even know what a truck was. He showed me the first issue of SkateBoarder magazine and I couldn't believe my eyes. Magazines dedicated to skateboarding!? From that day on he became one of my mentors. He taught me just about everything there was to know about skateboarding. I would hang out in front of his house for hours, waiting for him to get home from school. He gave me my first real skateboard. It was a Sims Pure Juice 44" solid oak deck with California Slalom trucks and the first generation blue Kryptonics. I earned it through a deal I made with him. I had to bomb one of the biggest hills in town, at high speed and make a turn into a narrow street that led to our homes. Not so easy when a portion of the street was filled with pebbles. I was goofy footed and it was a left hand turn, with a house smacked right on the corner. Four tries and a handful of pebbles later and I finally made it. He

kept his part of the deal and granted me the board.

From that time on I made it a regular monthly thing to buy boards from his collection. Real cheap! Vintage rides for like 7 to 20 dollars. The older the board the cheaper the price. It's crazy what he was giving away. Of course back then collecting meant nothing. I accumulated a sick collection and got my fill on set-ups of all sizes, shapes, wheels and trucks etc. I got tired of being the kid with the old product and went on to find a way to get up to date product. By that time there was only like 5 skaters in the entire town. The passing of the torch began and I took a few steps forward to help the survival of skateboarding locally. I began giving away the collection of boards I accumulated, in hopes to get kids interested in skating again. When that plan didn't work, I set out on the hunt for skaters elsewhere. Sadler told me about some kids that he knew from the local YMCA skate team. They lived in the middle of town and still skated daily. He took me over there and they had a quarter pipe in the street. I was pumped! There were three skaters with the same drive as myself.



We started hitting the parks that remained in the state of New Jersey. Monster Bowl, Asbury Skatepark (the original), Paved Wave, Staten Island and of course The Wally Holiday special Cherry Hill. Cherry Hill ended up shutting its doors last and when that happened we had to go "back in time." We hit the streets, ditches, embankments and hills. We attempted to build quarter pipes (in the streets) but the township would chain saw them to pieces by the time we got out of school. This happened about five or six times then we gave up. My dad agreed to let me build a quarter pipe (or should I say, I built it and waited to see what he'd say) in the back yard. The local YMCA ended its skate program two years prior and we acquired the (RAD RAMP plans 1/2 pipe) ramp that had been abandoned in some parking lot two towns over. My quarter pipe became a half pipe. Plenty of wood searching sessions went on back then. For transport we used the station wagon of Zack



Leffand's mom or the trusty old wagon in tow by Schwinn. We'd ride from one end of town to the other with plywood from wherever. You spent half the day looking and 15 minutes building just to get some carves and wheelers in. By 79/80 the death of skateparks and the lack of participants made it clear to me where skateboarding was headed. My crew spent less and less time on the boards and I went on the hunt for skaters out of town.

All the dreams of becoming sponsored were crushed. The crew saw no point in riding anymore. We all had been playing soccer a lot more but I found time to skate everyday. I skated to most of the spots I knew of and I was always searching for new ones. I ended up in many situations in search of places high and low. Highways, dogs, sticker bushes, cops, whatever... you name it and I probably encountered it. The day SkateBoarder magazine was delivered as Action Now and Cherry Hill closed for good, I got desperate. 1981 had passed and I had no idea Thrasher magazine was out and became one of the new skateboarding bibles. I finally found one skater (Steven Willis) who was new to the skateboarding game. Seeing as most of the shops closed in N.J. Steven Willis spent time at some NYC shops and was well clued into the current market. He gave me his back copies of Thrasher ('81 to '82). I got well caught up in one night.

By the time 1983 rolled around the scene started looking bright again. The skate scene in the East Coast became all about the back yard ramps, pools and ditches and street. No different from what was happening all over the U.S. and no different than skateboarding's early days. The industry started showing a positive sign of growth. Thrasher Magazine and Transworld were on the move and backyard ramps were being built. I started getting tips where to find new spots and riders. All the while skating the streets and my hole-ridden ramp. Street skating played a major role in my daily skate sessions. My crew and I were always try-

ing to come up with something new to try. We attempted everything we saw in the mags and then some. Thrasher and Transworld pictured all the existing styles of skateboarding and gave hope for things to come. I still had the drive to be sponsored some day and pushed myself even harder to reach that goal.

I thought being an all around skater would better my chances of becoming a sponsored skater. Of course back then video was non-existent and pictures had to do most to all the talking. You were fortunate to be discovered, but that was slim to none back then. I sent photos to Dogtown, Sims and a couple other companies and got no response. I had no idea what it took to be sponsored and I guess I sucked pretty good or they had no interest in hooking up people from the East Coast. I was just some wannabe sending a picture. I started to figure out they probably received tons of crap from kids all over and wasn't at all discouraged. I gave up on trying to get sponsored and just kept



skating for the love of it. In and around this time I made contact with Tom Groholski and his crew. Murph, Steve Herring, Chuck Treece and a few other cats. My dad saw an advertisement for a 4-H demo at some town fair. These guys shredded the vert scene like nobody's business. Tom invited me to his Ramp in North Brunswick N.J. Groholski's sessions were all the rage and I got a better perspective of what it took and how dedicated you had to be to master big ramps. Most of these guys had some sort of sponsorship. They had the persistence and skill to achieve their sponsorship goals. I shifted my attention on attacking the street movement. I started beating myself up (in the streets) in attempts to create and innovate. The street was my outlet to blow off steam. Street skating was responsible for my getting involved in skating so...I always craved cruising first and foremost. To a point, bombing giant hills and jumping off loading docks (and any forms of street) got me

just as stoked as pumping transitions. That feeling of flying across the earth could not be surpassed and the architecture out there lent endless possibilities. The ramp was useless and nobody wanted to volunteer on wood-searching sessions or donate money to fix it.

I played soccer year round, had no extra cash and no drivers license. Questions like "where are you going with this skateboarding thing" from the folks kept me from asking for rides to go anywhere. Most to all of my skating adventures had to be attainable by skateboard or bike. Those adventures got tough after awhile. At the end of 1983 I got a job with (my ex-local Good Humor ice cream man) Bruce Rockman. He and his two brothers owned a soccer store and wanted to get into the skateboarding/surf retail game. He asked me if I would help him with the venture and I did. The shop was called Freestyle and sold skateboards and surf wear. It was in a big local mall, the first of its kind in the East Coast. "Skateboarding expert" was my title. I taught the owner along with all the employees and customers everything I knew about skateboarding. I was stoked knowing skaters from all over the tri-state area would come in and we'd make contact. I'd keep people up on demos and contests. I formed an information network of skateboarders.

I ended up getting a sponsorship with Variflex (before they went completely toy store) and was happy to endorse that name based on the past and present riders. George Orton, "El Gato", Steve Hirsch, Alan Losi, Lance Mountain, John Lucero, Dave Tucker, the lists goes on. Variflex were one of the best teams back in those days. I got to see some of these guys rip up Cherry Hill before it closed. I also liked their style depicted in their advertisements. The manager of the store asked me why I wasn't sponsored and I said it wasn't important to me, in most part due to me getting the job at the shop. She told me to get some photos together and she sent them to Variflex. They started sending monthly boxes for me, but to seal the deal I had to somehow skate with the team manager. At the time it was pro skater Mike "Ziggy" Sigfried. I kept thinking, "when would I ever get to California or when would he ever come to the East Coast?"

MIKE V: When I started skating in late 1984 you had already been skating for sometime and because you worked at the one store (Freestyle) that carried skateboards in our local mall and the fact that you were a skater and knowledgeable about skating you became a mentor for me and many other skaters in central Jersey. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that you really helped

give birth to and nurtured the central New Jersey skate scene at that time and I'm not sure it would have been the same had you not been the guy working at Freestyle. I remember hanging out at your house reading SkateBoarder Magazines. You really harbored the spirit of skateboarding and seemed excited about passing it on to others. I know myself and the other guys I grew up skating with really learned a lot on many levels from being around you.

RODNEY: I remember the first time I met you. It was the fall of '84. You hadn't even really started to skate yet and you were singing punk rock. You gave me a hard look that day. I'll never forget that. I actually thought you wanted to start something with me and I was like "what's that dudes problem?" It wasn't until early 1985 when I saw you somewhere sporting a Sims Jeff Phillips. I said "you skate?" and you said "yeah! I skate." From that time on we became skate comrades. We practically skated everyday and night. You were a natural and becoming an icon in the local sect. I was just the older guy who wanted to get everyone into skating. You played a major inspiration to many young kids coming up, you and I both.

I know you grew up skating parks but it seemed that when I met you that you had always been a street skater. That was your vibe. Did you always skate in the streets or was that something that you got into as the magazines began to push that type of skating?

In and around that time, I was spending a great deal of time in NYC skating with the raw street skaters. Those locals had real street skating down packed. Skating in traffic, embankments, slapping curbs. Skating from spot to spot at high speeds, hitting everything in our paths. I guess I fit in with my skating abilities being tight enough to hang with the likes of Bruno Musso, Aly Moore, Ian Fram, Harry Jumongi, Jeremy Hederson, Puppet Head, Beasley and countless others. Hardcore skating, encountering all sorts of terrain from block to block.

Tell me about your trip to California.

I had always wanted to give California a shot so...while attending the ASR show with my boss and like many skaters, I too had this desire to journey or live out west. I left him at the show and decided to stay to make a go at Upland's Pipeline skate park. A friend and I visited the park two years prior and I was stoked to get back there. The Combi pool was a serious pool. I think Holliday built that pool. I needed a larger dose of California just to see what it was really like and to skate some of the historic skate spots. I took a bus up north and headed straight

for Pipeline. Thanks to Marcus Soloman my stay became a reality. He put me up while I was there. One of the coolest people I ever met. He worked at Pipeline and also had a half pipe at his mom's house. We hit the Mt. Baldy pipe and shot "The Baldy Line". We stopped by the infamous Signal Hill. I always wanted to bomb that hill but it didn't happen due to there being a major intersection at the bottom. At least I got to see it. It was a great trip but I soon found out how rooted I was in the East and my extended vacation to California was over.

What is the history of SHUT: how it started, why it started, how it ended and why it ended?

I returned back to the East Coast and started competing in street contests more than I had before my trip. In and around the same time some of the NYC crew and I started talks of making boards. It was Bruno Musso, Aly Moore, Beasley and a few other cats. Due to the growth of street skating and the new moves being attempted there was a need for better skate decks. All the current decks were made for vert riders except for a few and those few needed help. Boards broke like matchsticks and we felt the need to search for better product. It started with a middleman distributor that supplied pro logo knock off shapes and un-cuts. Bruno made contact with them and ordered some un-cuts. We cut the first boards out on Aly Moore's rooftop in Brooklyn. I think they were pre-drilled, so we cut sanded and spray-painted them and we were off and running. Our intentions were not on starting a company, we merely wanted to make boards for ourselves and to assemble a team of riders to compete with.

At that point we were a competition team and nothing more. Bruno and I took on the responsibilities of making product and handling the team and travel. We soon made contact with the actual manufacturer. The middleman would not hook us up with the main source (to get boards at a wholesale price) for blanks. One day we were waiting for an order from the middleman and when the decks arrived one of the blanks had a business card taped to it. It was a card from the main source (Marion) and we were stoked beyond belief. This was our turning point from competition team only, to company. That same year we started getting phone calls from shops inquiring about our product. The kids took note and started asking for SHUT product. They already knew our team shredded and I guess figured part of it had to be the boards. By this time the Brooklyn roof deal (for obvious reasons) was long gone and we had opened shop in my Garage in N.J. My parents started getting



some insight to where I was going with this skating thing but still didn't understand.

We had a small, sketchy factory going with no real direction or order. We attempted to fill all the orders that came in — only we couldn't supply the demand. We put shops on monthly waiting lists and told them we'd get to them when we could. Funnily enough, most of them obliged and waited. Our biggest concern at the time was to be out on the road, winning contests and blowing minds at other companies demos and stuff. Over the years the team included Jeremy Henderson, Felix Arguelles, Beasley, Aly Moore, Coco Santiago, Barker Barrett, Chris Pastras, Brian Blake, Sean Sheffey, Mike Kepper, Derek Rinaldi, Mike Kelly, Big Jim, Billy Waldman, Jeff Pang, Jay Sigafoos, Rick Ibeseta, Jahmal Simmons, Wylie Singer, Petey Westra, Corky James, Chris Reilly, Bill Thomas, Harold Hunter, Billy Backer, Jim Gagne and a few others I may have missed. We had SHUT family members up and down the East Coast as well as Mid-West and California. Johnny Schillereff, Blake Hannan, Dogtown crew, Bill Danforth, Cow Skates posse, H-Street crew, and the up and coming SF skaters.

SHUT had a good, fun five years under our belts but ended up needing some real business

help. The demand was more real then ever and if we were going to keep things going we needed to do something about it. We essentially partnered up with a Mid-West distributor. Our team was excited to make the jump from Am to Pro status as well as being tempted by the West Coast brands to endorse their product. We were headed in the right direction until our third party partner went crazy with this notion we were going to leave him high and dry to partner with Vision skateboards. That was so far from the truth only his stubbornness wouldn't let himself believe us. It all smelled like sabotage from where we stood and he made motion to sue us and we sued back. Skateboarding was changing once again. Styles of decks were becoming smaller and the double kicked, nose and tail had become staple. Freestyle and vert skating was dying and a new street era was on its way in. Due to our legal issues and not being able to ship product, skateboarding left us in the dust. Most of our riders had left and gone on to skate for other companies. We had a couple younger die-hards who stuck it out. We ended up settling out of court and kept our name SHUT.

By early '92 we made one more attempt at reviving the company but it needed more care and dollars than we had so...we closed the doors and Shut

went into hibernation. By the end of 1992 Bruno shifted his attention away from skateboarding and I was planning my next attack in the skateboard industry. At that point in my life I was determined to help people to continue building on their lives as well as my own. To me, that was the most important part of SHUT. Being able to do for others, as I would hope people would do for me. I also couldn't sit around and let somebody step in our place and eat our lunch so to speak. SHUT may have only been around for seven years but the impact made was like a lifetime. My new partners and I started Zoo York soon thereafter to keep the legacy of East Coast skateboarding alive — to keep the torch burning.

Tell me about your time at Zoo York, what you did for Zoo, what role you played in the company and why you ended up leaving to resurrect SHUT?

My time at Zoo York (after we sold a majority to Ecko in 2001) was odd. Eli and Adam both experienced the same feelings. When you build and nurture anything for 10 years, especially a skateboard brand, it becomes personal. Then there are people that don't take their work home with them and I was not one of those people. All three of us were under the impression it was going to be a stronger unit of partners. How wrong we were to assume that... I played the sports crossover person and the three of us played the visual morale figureheads, amongst other things. We all felt a big responsibility to make sure our people were taken care of and put our all into the partnership, at whatever cost. As time went on we all started to experience different things and it all became a distraction and no longer constructive. Our presence was no longer really needed and the reasons (for us) for doing the company went south. Zoo York (the company) was started to preserve the legacy of NYC street culture that was built by graffiti artists, skaters, break-dancers and hip hop gurus. It was to be transcended to all the next generations of enthusiasts worldwide. All along never forgetting where it all came from — people. So in the end it was about people first and foremost. We had hopes to build the machine with our best of knowledge and support. Skateboarding was the best way to start and we eventually would drop the other aspects in as we went along. It was the skateboard crowd that we thought would understand what we were trying to say. Open-minded individuals are always willing to learn something new. Like-minded people relate to each other. I eventually lost it and needed to get back to why I even got involved in skateboarding business so many years ago. It was time to make it personal again. Some may call it a headache but I've called it life for 20 years.



PHOTO: GREGG CHAPMAN

What are your plans for SHUT, how do you see it impacting today's skate market and where do you see the brand in 5 years?

Plans for SHUT? For starters, I have been very confused about the directions of skateboarding. For me it has always been four wheels, two trucks and a deck. It all used to be categorized by size and purpose, never separated, dismissed or eliminated. Since I have always looked to my mentors to keep it all correct from the time they started it until now, I feel as if things have gone awry. Companies and people are trying to re-categorize skateboarding. In my book, there is something wrong with that. I always thought there was enough room for all types of skating. I never thought one style was better or worse than another style.

Skateboarding is one of the coolest things on the planet. Skateboarders are also one of the most accepting groups the world has to offer and to change that would be a sin. There are many out there that agree with me and many out there attempting to do what SHUT is attempting to do. The only real difference is no one company in the trend-setting skate market has stepped in and set it straight. Everyone would benefit from it kids and especially the retailers who keep it all interesting. More variety keeps the kids interested. You can't just think skating is cool because a kid jumps down 20 stairs. The simplest form of skateboarding is amazing! And always will be. If there was more variety in board style, shops could attract a larger customer base and not have to worry about why the kick flippers aren't flocking in or why their business is affected when one skater becomes more popular and his deck doesn't sell

anymore. If that skater was able to compete in different styles of skating or if he/she had more than one discipline, the shop could turn more on that rider. Or maybe they would have a larger platform to stay popular not only in one category. It all makes perfectly good sense.

Let skateboarding be as big or bigger than all of those other professional sports. It deserves it. The industry has to stop being afraid of competition. It is the nature of business that will never change. If you own a seat or place then all you have to do is own your shit and leave the crying to the people who say it doesn't have what it takes. SHUT will have a complete line of decks to cater to open-minded kids who just want to have fun! And if they want to take it further then so be it. I just want there to be more outlets for the kids and not let skateboarding become stigmatized like so many other things this planet has to offer.

If T.V. has stigmatized skateboarding then so be it. T.V. doesn't own skateboarding it just caters to it as well as makes money off of it. It's time for the skaters to make that kind of professional money. Why not? They risk their lives for people's entertainment just like football players. The market has been ready for it for a long time. That is why there is a whole movement going on outside of our trend market. It is time to wake up or get stung in the buttocks and get left shrugging your shoulders saying "not again!" Standardization is like a form of communism. A couple of smart guys figured that out a long time ago and used it against you and me. Hopefully SHUT will remain a true leader in the skateboarding movement into the new millennium. I want more skaters getting paid like Tony and P-Rod. Lets go already. **CW**