



# Jeff Grosso

Interview by Michael Burnett

**Do you remember that moment as a little kid when you were shocked by the behavior of the older guys?**

Yeah. Daryl Miller smoking cigarettes. We were 10 or 12 and Daryl Miller was the resident pro of Skate City. He was like a man to us. "That man rips!" He had a mustache. It was probably a dirtstache, but to us it was a full man's mustache. He'd do a stand-up grind four blocks long, and then roll around to the tool bench, sit down on it, and light up a Marlboro Red. We thought, "Whoa! He's smoking! Smoking is evil!" We were just tripped out by that. My first skate trip was the Kona/Jacksonville contest. I went out with Lucero and he was a couple years older. We met Lance out there and all the Variflex guys shared a room. Gator and Mike Smith were at the hotel, and they were rip-roaring drunk. I'd never seen anyone drunk before besides my dad. I didn't know kids could do it, too! They had pretty much destroyed their room, and they had all these empty bottles and they had this game where they set their boards inside the room and then

**You were one of the best amateurs when you rode for Powell Peralta. What was the course of events going from there to turning pro for Schmitt Stix?**

I was 17 years old and I had what I thought was a problematic home life. It was actually Ozzie and Harriet, but I was having trouble coping. I was having trouble in school and I was having trouble finding my identity. I was having trouble, basically. I'd gotten in a fight with my stepdad and I got kicked out of the house. Then I got kicked out of my dad's house because I didn't do the dishes, but basically because he didn't want me there and was kind of scared to have me there. I was staying with Steve Keenan and Eric Castro, and they were trying to help me graduate high school. I was having trouble showing up because school was 20 minutes away by bus and my parents had taken my car away. I was still an amateur so I had no money 'cause amateurs didn't get paid back then. My mother had gotten ahold of Stacy Peralta because she knew he had a magic

**"At 39 years old I decided to finally grow up"**

they'd stand outside and throw bottles at their boards and try and break them on the trucks. If it didn't break you had to drink or whatever. Smith's games always ended up with everybody having to drink. I was thinking, "They're messing up their room!" I couldn't believe it. I was probably asking myself if I was supposed to make the bed in the morning or something. They were having a gay old time, there was glass everywhere, and then eventually Gator had his split personality deal and got all violent. He broke the lamp and burned Smith with the hot bulb. Smith had this big burn mark on his chest. He had to cut holes in all of his shirts to skate to not cover up the big blister. We saw black prostitutes for the first time. I had no idea what they wanted. Why were these ladies talking to us? I was 15. We were scared of them. Chris Baucum shit in the pool. He had no business even being in our hotel. He lived in Jacksonville! He just came to our pool and shit in it.

spell over us. She thought maybe I'd listen to Stacy. So he called me up, and said, "Okay, this is what we're going to do. We're not going to send you anywhere until you graduate from high school." I wanted to go to the first Texas contest and turn pro—and he said that wasn't going to happen. I knew Lance had gotten on the team as a pro without a model and I thought I could do the same thing, kick a bunch of ass, and then get a board. I was real delusional. Everybody was sick of seeing me in amateur contests. I was starting to get beat purely because the judges wanted to see me get beat. They were sick of seeing my runs. They were sick of me. Even the contest people were asking, "When are you going to turn pro? Get out of here already!" So I was really angry and smoking pot and not going to school. Stacy wanted me to finish school and stay amateur another year, and that would have been the smart thing to do, but instead I said, "Fuck you. I don't need you guys. I'm never going to be pro."

The truly sad thing is that this maneuver will one day become extinct

## The Interview Issue: Jeff Grosso

I'm never going to be on the Bones Brigade. I'm not Ray Underhill. I'm not Adrian Demain. I'm out of here." I thought I knew what I was doing. It was stupid. I was immature. So Lucero and I hung out a bunch. We used to go to Del Mar every weekend because that was the only game in town, and sleep in cars and camp out and skate the park all weekend. Paul Schmitt from Florida rolled up with a U-Haul truck with a couple of wood presses in the back. He was coming out here to hook up with Brad Dorfman in Newport Beach to start up his wood shop; try and make something of Schmitt Stix. We happened to be in the parking lot when he pulled in and he was real excited. He gave us some rails. He was always giving everybody rails. He was showing us his boards and they looked amazing—10 times better than what anybody else made. I think John said it first; he's all, "Put us on your team and we'll make your company the best. Jeff will turn pro and we'll be your team." He kind of laughed; he's all, "Yeah, yeah. Take your rails and get lost," 'cause I don't think he really wanted us on his team. John lived in Huntington Beach, and a little while later he set up a meeting with us and Dorfman. John had this plan that I would turn pro for Schmitt Stix. I'd be the talent along with who they already had, and he'd do the graphics and create the whole company's image and we'd have the best skateboard company on the lot. So we went and talked to Dorfman and it kind of rolled from there. He wanted to put John on Sims but we told him it was a package deal. It worked out great. We met with Paul and made some shapes. He was hesitant but excited. Our boards looked totally awesome. Paul shot a picture of us standing in a pile of cutout Gator boards and the ad had "Okay. Get Ready," at the top. The Big Boys had a song called "Okay, We Got Your Money," and in the beginning Biscuit said, "Okay! Get ready!" The song starts, "I want to be a problem/ I want to make a scene." That song was what we were all about. Like, "Here we come. Give us your money." The boards came out and we sold a mint. I went to my first pro contest in Huntsville, Alabama and I got eighth place straight out of the gate. I don't think I could have done any better. Ramp skating was at its peak and I was going for it.

### So you never finished high school?

No, I dropped out. I had a month to go and I was going to be a half-credit short. So it was travel the world or go to summer school to finish a government class. I went and I talked to

## “I'd hang out with people that I despised just to get high”

my philosophy teacher, and she's all, "How much money are you making with this?" And I said, "Well, my first check was \$7,000." She's all, "You make more than I do. Quit school, go see the world, but promise me you'll finish." Her name was Mrs Rasmussen. She was super cool. I haven't finished so I owe Mrs Rasmussen a high school diploma. I quit on my 18th birthday. I probably could have done it, but the school didn't understand skateboarding so they wouldn't work with me. If anything they made it harder for me to get my requirements done. So I went into school and signed myself out. And as I'm walking out of the school I see that they've got this little shrine to me built in one of the glass trophy cases. They've got my pro model in there and my pictures in *Thrasher*, as if they were so proud of my accomplishments. There's a shrine to me, and in my mind they were kicking me out.

### Nowadays you'd get set up with some sort of bullshit home school and you'd be the prom king. You'd be Tosh Townend.

Exactly. Whatever. It was my fault. I should have been a better student. I should have taken responsibility. That sort of set the pace for how I would conduct my life. I still can barely finish anything. I had to learn the hard way.

### My main knowledge of you as a kid came from the part in the *Speed Freaks* video where you're hanging around on the couch. As strange as it sounds, that was the first time the kids saw what a pro's house looked like. What was your situation at that time?

My parents had kicked my stepbrother and me out of the house again and I had rented my first apartment in Azusa, which was basically a crack-smoking den. I ended up trading my apartment to my coke dealer. I used to play this video game, "Zaxon," with my coke dealer. We'd play for an eight ball, which was then about \$220. I could beat him all the time, so I was getting all this free coke. I went to a contest in Toronto, and while I was gone I guess he stayed up non-stop and practiced "Zaxon." When I got back he was better than me, and I got \$1,000 in debt to him right off the bat. My money was starting to wane and I was living way beyond my means. I had a \$500-a-day cocaine habit. Basically I just traded my apartment to the coke dealer and let him move in there. I decided to get away, and Salba had gotten a little side job as NHS's team manager. I think they put him on the payroll to sort of reel me in. You'd have to ask him, though. So I moved to his house out in Montclair. They had a pool and little mini-ramp, and I was supposed to be cleaning my act up. They came down to film that thing for *Speed Freaks*, and I wasn't cleaning my act up at all.

### How old were you then?

I'm not sure. I was only a pro for like four years. My career was really short—1986 to 1990—and then street skating took it all away. It was just for that boom. That upswing only lasted a few years, and then it dropped off.

### In that clip you're bragging about lying around and waiting for the paychecks to arrive, but realistically the checks stopped less than two years later.

Yeah. You've really got to watch what you say on video. That clip really shows how delusional some of us were. Life was one big party. I was pissed off if my checks dipped below \$5,000. I was all, "You're not selling enough of my boards!" I was really cocky and really arrogant, and it was never going to end. I had no concept of paying taxes, paying bills. What? I had no thought of that. If I got \$8,000 at the beginning of the month—it was all gone by the end of the month. I was living under Lucero's card table making \$9,000 a month. That was my room. I didn't even have the common sense to buy a bed.

### What kind of girls were hanging around?

There were a lot of cool girls around. I wasn't too good with them, however. I didn't have much success, but all my friends did. Lucero always did really well. Mike Smith always had girls—and Hosoi, his girl stuff was legendary, I guess. I'm sure the dynamic is still the same. You go on tour and the girls are real excited and kind of naive. I don't know what exactly they think they're getting out of the deal. They generally just got abused. There was a lot of ugly stuff that happened back then. I'm sure the same kind of stuff happens now. I'm sure there are women out there who would say they got raped at a skateboard contest. You get all these out-of-town boys and all these girls and add in alcohol and a lot of ugly stuff ends up happening. There was some really ugly, sad behavior. At the same time there were also some really awesome girls. There were these awesome girls up in San Jose. One of them was Corey O'Brien's girlfriend. They called themselves the Sunnyvale Harley Bitches. They were just a bunch of young girls who liked to party. They were so much fun. They were so cool. We'd go up there just to see them. They'd take us around, take us to skate spots, screw us. For me those were my first sexual experiences and stuff, so I have real fond memories of the few girls I did hook up with. They were all really sweet.



There's only one person who can make the roast beef grab look good, and it sure ain't that kid at the park trying to fly out over the cone



**“If my checks dipped below \$5,000, I was all,**

**‘You’re not selling enough of my boards!’”**

Slide and roll from hip to hip

The Texas girls were nuts back then. You’d get off the plane and they’d be all, “Hi. I’m Cindy. We’ve got coke, ‘shrooms, pot. We’ve got a case of beer in the car, mescaline. Where do you guys want to go first?” They’d be all, “I want you! Come with me!” They were just these hellion punker chicks and they were down to party. One side of it was sweet and innocent, and the other was ugly and evil. Probably the same as it is now.

**How’d you deal with the transition from being a pro to the real world?**

I’m still dealing with that transition. I’ve been dealing with it ever since.

**What did you do after Santa Cruz?**

John started Lucero skateboards, and then it became Black Label. We went to Europe and Japan and I was skating okay, I thought. In my

mind I’m thinking, “This is a new beginning. We’re starting our skateboard company.” In reality John was doing everything. All I was doing was drinking his beer. He’d give me \$200 at the beginning of the month because that’s all there was. I’d party for a day and then be back to nothing. I was supposed to be the sales guy, making sales calls, but soon I was reduced to cutting out the stickers by hand. I cut the Black Label Shazzam stickers out of giant sheets for months and months. I’d bag the wheels. But soon I was way too fucked up to be anything but a burden. Around ’91 I was visiting my parents for Thanksgiving, and I called John to tell him Happy Thanksgiving, and he told me I was going to retire. He was going to put out my retirement model. He had this whole thing about going out in a classy

way—not hanging on past your prime. I think it was his way of dulling the blow of having to kick me off. So I agreed and the board came out with the Slim Jim man tipping his hat.

**What did you do after that?**

I just sort of floated around. When you’re hanging around with the kind of people I was it’s pretty easy. You go to some town and when it gets too hot you go to the next one. In one town you’re on speed, and then the next town it’s booze, and the next one it’s heroin. You just keep shuffling the problems around. In that sort of environment it’s easy. Everybody thinks they know you or they’re fans of skateboarding or whatever. “No way! You’re Grosso! Can I have a sticker? You can totally stay at my place.” I’d hang out with people that I despised just to get high, just to

bum a cigarette. What they didn’t know was that the next morning I’d be sneaking off with their VCR to take it to the pawnshop.

**Did you do stuff like that?**

Yeah, I did. I’ve made a list. You try and make amends. You try and apologize and try and make it up to them. Some people are cool. Some people still think you’re a scumbag. It’s hard when you never learned to take personal responsibility for yourself. It seems like common sense but that concept was so foreign to me. “What? Fuck you. I’m Grosso! I wasn’t even here, man. I’m gone!” This was late ’80s, early ’90s, and it’s now 2006 and I’m still learning it. Some people make that transition easily, and some get lost in the wreckage.

**What kinds of things would you tell people to get money for drugs?**

Oh, “I got a ticket and it’s going to turn into a warrant. I need to pay this ticket today!” Or this one, “We haven’t eaten in three days.” I don’t even remember the stuff I’d say. You’re so desperate that you’ll pretty much say anything.

One time I hooked up with this kid I met in AA. He lived in Long Beach and he had this really bad gambling problem. He paid his rent and supplied his drug habit by gambling on football. I had bumped into him and he was going to “save” me. I didn’t really know this kid; he was from Wisconsin. He gave me \$1,000 cash and the keys to his apartment. It wasn’t about getting me off drugs or anything; it was about getting me off the street. He was going to support my drug habit and pay my way for some reason. So we moved in, and my wife and I pretty much ran this guy out of his

own house. We stole his apartment from him. We were like, “You need to go! This is our place now!” This guy was pretty tweaked. We got in an argument and I was all, “You better just get out of here. Leave your drugs here, but you need to get out.” I took all the guy’s drugs and money. I kicked this guy out, had his key and I thought it was totally kosher like, “We live in Long Beach now.” I hope he’s okay. Ultimately he came back, so we stole his TV and left. He’d leave me all these threatening messages on my cell phone. It was one of those little tiny TVs, like a portable TV, and he’d call me and say, “If you don’t give me my TV back I’m going to kill you!” I’m like, “I sold your TV, dude! What did you think was going to happen?” I’ve got to find that dude and make amends. That was really bizarre, strange, drugged-out behavior.

**Can you pinpoint the day when your professional skate career ended?**

I was laying a floor in Fontana. I was doing a repair. I walk into the lady's house. I was the field rep so I was there to handle complaints. I had to go out there to tear out a big section of the floor, and I was really, really angry. I'm putting the floor back together for her and I'm gluing it down, and she's standing over my back watching my work. I put a board in and it has a knot in it. It's a pine board and it has this knot in it, and I work another four feet out. The room is 30 feet wide and I put in four feet more of the floor, and the lady asks, "Is that board going to stay there?" I packed all my tools up, I put them away, and I drove home. And on the way home I realized that I was nothing more than a mediocre floor layer. That was my lot in life and that any sort of greatness I had was gone. I was going to have to go back to this lady's house the next day and tear out that four feet of floor to replace that one board. And I did. On my dime. And that was the day I realized my pro skateboarding career was over. And that was a good 10 or 15 years past the fact of my career actually being over.

**What's the story with your Charles Bukowski tattoo?**

Bukowski died and I went on a drinking binge and woke up with this Wink Martindale tattoo. It's supposed to be Bukowski, but it looks more like Larry King. Most of my tattoos are friends. I have my friends' board graphics. I have Lucero and Lance and Ben Schroeder. I've got my mom. I've borrowed so much money from her and she's stood by me through thick and then, so I figured I owed her a tattoo. I got an Alien Workshop tattoo before I got a Black Label one. John was so pissed. I was doing so much speed and I thought the aliens were coming. I thought they were onto something. The aliens were coming and we'd all be saved. They'd see my tattoo and then they wouldn't probe me. That's how stupid I was.

**Do you ever run into fans that want more out of you than you can give?**

Everybody's generally cool. I have stuff that I'm stoked on, my sycophant trip or whatever. That's human nature. But some people you literally have to say, "Hey, man, it's okay. I'm just a person." With some people they've built

***"It's supposed to be Bukowski, but it looks more like Larry King"***

it up in their heads where they are thinking, "Oh, when I meet this person I'm going to..." I got a chance to meet Elliott Smith before he died. I'm a big Elliott Smith fan. I went to Los Angeles to go see him. He was super fucked up and thrashed and I'm sitting there at the bar staring at him, and he's 10 feet away. He's drinking Johnny Walker Red, and I'm thinking, "Oh man, he's drinking Johnny Walker Red." I made him so uncomfortable. I was staring at him and he kept looking over at me. Finally he was staring back at me like he wanted to fight me, and I realized what I was doing, because I've had people do that to me before. I'm fully bumming this dude out. We watched him play; it was totally awesome. My friends that were in other bands were like, "Do you want to meet him? Do you want to meet him? Let's go backstage." And I'm thinking, I already did that shit at the bar; he's going to remember me. What do you say? "Hey, your music changed my life"? You're going to put them in an uncomfortable situation. I just told them,

"Nah. I don't think so." It's such a bizarre thing to get that kind of attention: to touch someone's youth or be a part of their childhood. My usual reaction when they say, "Oh, I bought all your boards," is to say, "Thanks for the beer." I throw that back at them as my little schtick. It sounds kind of corny, but it's touching that you meant something to someone's teenage years. I met a guy from England who wanted me to sign his arm so he could get it tattooed. The guy had never had a tattoo in his life. My friend had called me about the guy and I was thinking he would come over and I'd talk him out of it. He came over, and he was totally cool. I signed it so shitty and he went straight to the place and got it tattooed along with one of my graphics. He was really nice and totally normal—aside from wanting the tattoo.

**How did you eventually quit the drugs and get on the straight and narrow?**

The law. I got picked up. The Man picked me up on a few separate occasions. I got arrested, went to jail, and they said I could either go to prison or go to rehab. So of course I chose rehab because I'm really tough and prison sounded like a really good time. That's how I got introduced to sobriety. Once you get sober for a little while you realize it's easier and not too bad. You start to get a life and stuff.

**Did you have a moment of clarity?**

Yeah. Actually I realized I had turned into a thief. I was a lowlife scumbag. No one wanted to have anything to do with me. I was stealing from all my friends. Stealing from people I didn't know. I intentionally tried to overdose at a friend's house one night. I was that pathetic, basically. I woke up the next day and was really, really upset that I woke up. I went into the bathroom and I was staring into the mirror and didn't recognize whom I saw. I was so lost and lonely and weirded out. Lost and scrambled eggs for brains. That's not how it was supposed to go down. I'm from a good background. I didn't stop but I got picked up shortly after that, and they locked me up long enough so I could actually kick. That's when the party started. I got a couple of days between me and the dope. It's a real rough road, man. Trying to get your life back from being a real scumfuck is a really hard thing to do.

**So catch us up to speed with your life today.**

**You're traveling. You're doing the loop. What's life like now?**

I'm sitting out in front of my house smoking a cigarette and looking at the Christmas lights. Since I cleaned up my act this time I got married. I've got a cute little wife. I've got a house down by the beach. I've got a cat. I've got a really good job. I work in the skin care industry. I never thought I'd end up in the skin care industry, but I work for this company, Epicuren, for this awesome lady and she takes care of all of us. I work with a bunch of friends of mine, so going to work is fun. I skate on the weekends. I got the opportunity to go to Australia and Hawaii this year. I got the chance to go with Lance and do the loop and that was awesome. I'm just enjoying life and trying to stay out of trouble. We're talking about starting a family in a year or so. Most people figure this out at 18 or 19, but at 39 years old I decided to finally grow up. It's definitely an exciting time for me. ♠



BURNETT

Close your eyes and wait for the sound of the tail to hit