

# Good times!

For three spectacular years, Hollywood's A-list flocked to Santa Monica Boulevard for riotous nights at the ultimate roller disco – an art deco pleasure-drome with a vintage wine list, quail's eggs and blue suede skates on the menu. Here's how two eccentric Englishmen drove LA wild at Flipper's Roller Boogie Palace

STORY BY Sean Macaulay





# Every great city has a signature pleasure palace to sum up its golden age.

Paris in the Belle Epoque had the Moulin Rouge, with its ebullient cancan girls. Havana in the days before Castro had the Tropicana, with its sequined Flesh Goddesses. Ancient Rome under Emperor Nero had the Golden House, a citadel of depravity with a revolving banquet room ceiling hand-cranked by slaves.

Only Los Angeles, however, could have conjured up such a legendary shrine to Spandex-clad hedonism as Flipper's Roller Boogie Palace. For three fleeting, glorious years, from 1979 to 1981, this former bowling alley was the centre of Hollywood's pleasure-seeking universe: a unique – and, alas, unrepeatable – convergence of pre-Aids sex, knee-length tube socks, Seventies drugs, four-on-the-floor disco fever, roller skates and English savoir-faire.

Everyone had their first kiss at Flipper's; their first line, their first everything. The venue boasted the largest glitter ball in the world and a gold domed roof you could see from the moon. Legend has it, Quentin Tarantino worked there as a junior skate guard and the place gets an affectionate namecheck in *Jackie Brown*. (Bridget Fonda says about a photo of herself, aged 14, on roller skates: "That was taken at a place called Flipper's. Do you remember that? It was in Hollywood.")

The club was named after its flamboyant manager, Ian "Flipper" Ross, an Old Reptonian with a metal foot, who had set off for America to become the "Don Quixote of Roller Disco" after seeing a B-movie called *Drive-In*. That was only the beginning of the craziness: he later brought along his wife and five children, turning the madcap quest into a full-on Swiss Family Robinson adventure with jump-suits and blow.

I tracked down Ross, who's now 73, at his villa in Calabria, where he agreed over a wobbly Italian phone line that it was finally

time to relive the whole Flipper's saga. "It's all part of the lost mythical kingdom now," he sighs equably, settling in for a full evening's reminiscence.

Ross – as his 40-year trail of *Daily Mail* diary items can attest – is one of life's great cavaliers, with a rolling upper-class bohemian drawl and undulating résumé to match. He has been thrown out of restaurants with Jerry Lee Lewis, written comic novels with Wodehousian verve and organised nautical expeditions to the immutably landlocked Caspian Sea ("I really thought we'd found a way through"). In the mid-Sixties, he cofounded ship-bound pirate station Radio Caroline and married a stunning It girl, Roxana "Bunty" Lampson (daughter of former ambassador Lord Killearn) after seeing her picture in *Vogue*.

"Ian has always been led by his idea of the moment and pursues it to the full," says Bunty Ross, when we talk in LA. "From the first day we met, he said, 'I'm going to marry you.' I said, 'Absolutely not!' and drove off in his MG... Here we are, 50 years later, still married."

Blessed with the good looks of a young James Hunt and the impulsiveness of Keith Moon at any age, young Ross was constitutionally impelled to seek increasingly outlandish paths. Aged 16, he wangled a driving licence only to crash a Vincent Black Shadow through a



Time to split: A dancer pauses mid-roll to strike a pose for the cameras at Flipper's, 1979

## 'I REALLY THOUGHT ROLLER SKATING WAS GOING TO SAVE THE WORLD'

shop window. Aged 17, he finagled a Jensen from the motor works where his father was a senior executive. "You can imagine the effect this had back in Haslemere. My God, the girls were piling in." The fun was cut short when he collided head-on with a double-decker bus.

"It wasn't my fault – for once. I wasn't even speeding." Doctors were able to save his right leg by putting wires in each toe (hence the nickname, by which friends still call him). "It's a horrible zombie mutation of a foot," he says, with an almost gleefully grotesque pride. "It's like Francis Bacon drew a foot on a particularly bad day."

The injury meant Ross was never able to roller skate, but it does partially explain his Pentecostal reaction on seeing the skating scenes in *Drive-In*. "I really thought, 'Roller skating! This is going to save the world.'"

The year was 1977 and Ross was in the middle of an ill-fated excursion into the King's Road fashion business: "We opened up some shops. And then everything went wrong." Many of his best anecdotes turn on this last sentence. "The truth is I'm really no good at business. I can't add up. I don't like invoices. My father used to say, 'You're not a breadwinner. You're not even a crumb-winner.'"

The family, then expanded to five kids (Atticus, Milo, Holly, Mia and Liberty, with Leopold still to come), moved into a smaller house in Notting Hill ("long before it was fashionable") and things looked decidedly bleak.

"As a kid, you learn to pick up the signs," says Atticus, the eldest. "Everyone else at day school got picked up by a smart nanny. I got met by a guy called Lance in a Ford Capri with flames down the side."

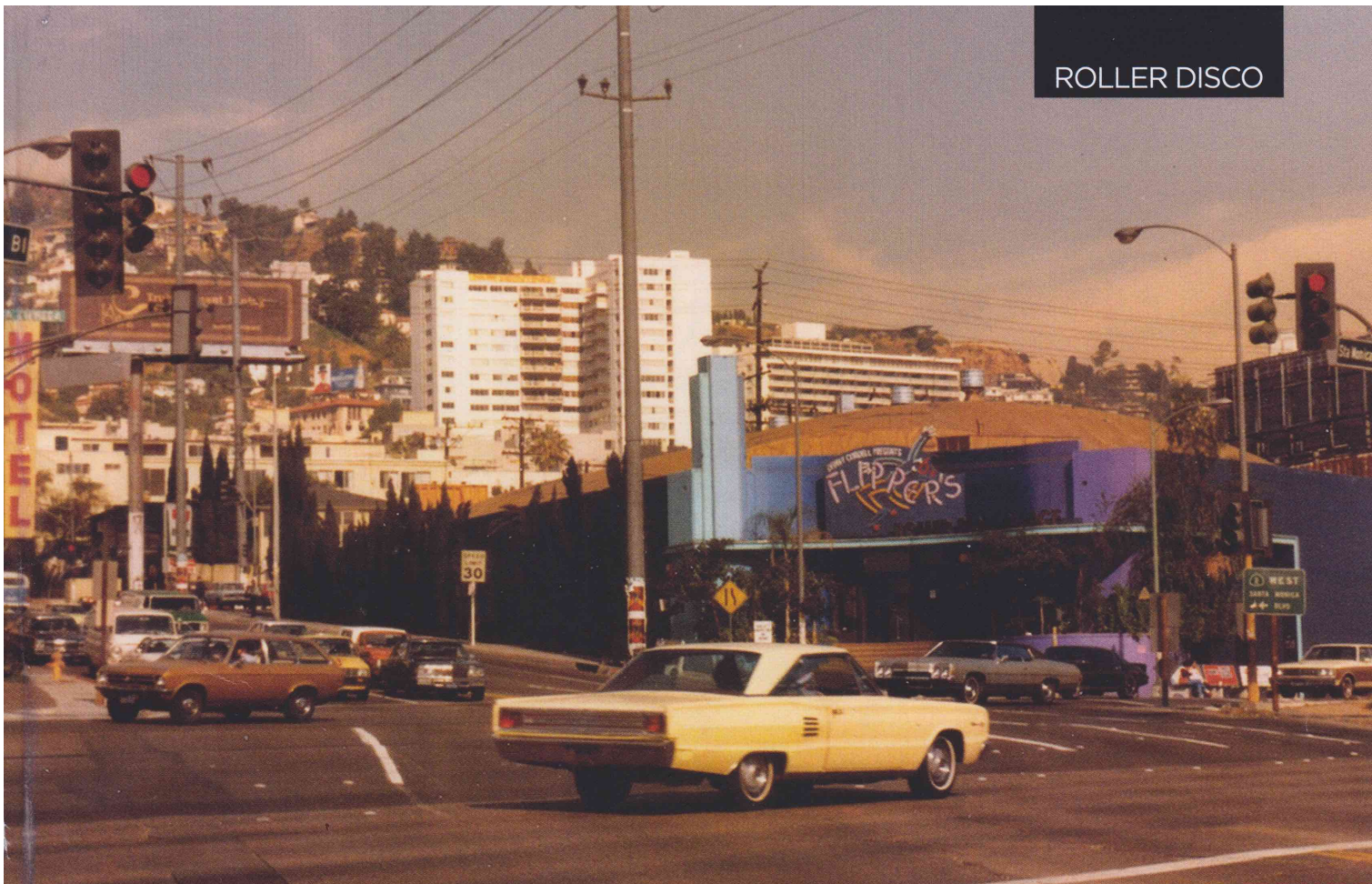
Then Ross stumbled across an article in the *Evening Standard* about "uptown girls going downtown" to the Empire Rollerdom in Brooklyn. "I thought, 'That's it, I'm getting out of here. I'm going to New York to seek my fortune.'"

**T**he Empire was an all-black roller rink that had rejuvenated itself by replacing the traditional church organ with a sound system and live DJ. Boosted by the arrival of polyurethane wheels in 1976, the club gave birth to a vigorous new free-form dance craze – roller disco.

Ross headed for the Empire with his pal, the tenth Earl of St Germans, completing the journey on foot because "the yellow cab wouldn't take us". The impact was seismic.

"I've never, ever seen or felt anything like that place," says Ross. "It was unbelievable. Seven, eight hundred people skating in unison at high speed on a wooden rink dressed to the nines. And this music, this heavy funk ☺"

ROLLER DISCO



Spin off: Patrick Swayze (second from right) and Skatetown USA co-stars line up for the premiere party, held at Flipper's in 1979; (above) outside the venue on Santa Monica Boulevard, 1980

booming out. The whole f\*\*\*ing city block was shaking. You can't believe what it was like. So cool, so beautiful: a rhythmic serpent of humanity. And we were welcomed in like brothers, the only two white guys in the place."

The core skaters at the club were a group called Vinzerelli And The Jigaboo Jammers. "Vinzerelli held court in the middle of the rink in this tacky yellow island with plastic palm trees. They wore robes and smoked these enormous doobies."

Ross was summoned to the island for a first meeting every bit as momentous as John Smith's encounter with Pocahontas' tribe, except Smith's initiation didn't include sharing a joint "the size of a Dead Sea Scroll". "By the end of the night, we were bonded," says Ross. "I became an honorary Jammer."

Ross and St Germans left The Empire determined to spread the gospel of roller disco, even though "the nearest thing we had to a coherent business plan was 'Play That Funky Music, White Boy'." Initial plans focused on trying to set up a movie. "We rustled up some video equipment to make a promo film, but it was a disaster. We switched on the camera lights and blinded all the Jigaboos. It caused a huge pile-up."

Next, they took a Hollywood producer down to the club. "But his limousine got demolished while he was inside and all his hubcaps stolen. He was not happy. 'You told me this place was 90 per cent black,' he said. 'I have to tell you that it is 100 per cent black.' That became quite a catchphrase for us: '100 per cent black.'"

**T**he crucial idea to export roller disco to Los Angeles came from rock impresario Denny Cordell, Ross' best friend, who ran Shelter Records and produced artists such as Joe Cocker and Tom Petty. Cordell was something of an enigma, alternately easygoing and creative and then ruthlessly hard-hearted, especially in business. Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, he had shaggy silver hair and wore Afghan coats or hand-tailored suits, depending on his mood.

"Denny was an Ipanema beach boy with jazz in his soul," says Ross. "And everything you can imagine in terms of street wisdom. He'd been Chet Baker's manager when he was 17 living a basement in Paris. He'd been strung out on heroin. I was frightfully impressed."

After ascending into LA's rock'n'roll royalty, Cordell took to driving a white Cadillac Eldorado convertible while affecting the air of a country squire. He also knew a good investment when he saw it (with the glaring exception of David Bowie, whom he famously dismissed with the words "The c\*\*\* can't sing", and insisted until his death that pop history had yet to prove him wrong).

Cordell flew Ross and St Germans to LA and a roundabout search began for a suitable venue. "Denny's house was literally on the beach in Malibu," says Ross. "So, my first day in LA, I wake up to see some old guy jogging by totally naked. 'Have a nice day!' Most days didn't start until we'd had lunch at Le Dome – a bit of boudin noir and some decent plonk. We also had a thing called an ET, long before the movie – an edge trimmer, which was the remnants of last night's joint rescued from the ashtray."

The perfect location was finally found at the old La Cienega Lanes bowling alley on Santa Monica Boulevard. The property was the largest piece of tropical art deco in LA ("It needed to be historic for Denny to be interested") and, crucially, still had a liquor license.

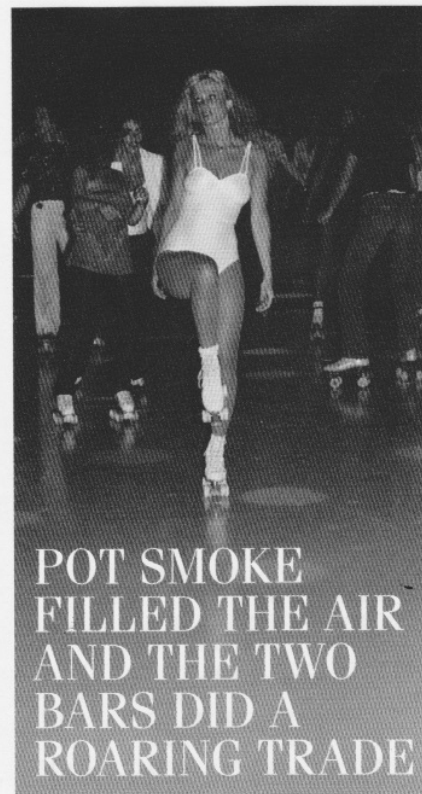
Remodelling work began and Ross called his wife, announcing, "The time has come!"

"We arrived at LA airport like a bunch of gypsies," says Bunty. "Five kids, three suitcases, going through immigration pretending we were just going on holiday."

"It was heaven," says Milo, who was eight at the time. "We had an avocado tree in the garden. If we weren't surfing at the beach, we were hanging out at the club."

The rink at Flipper's was designed to look like a tropical lagoon with a 280ft wall mural featuring a Rousseau jungle and a Carmen Miranda portrait. "Denny wanted only the

Free glide: In Flipper's heyday, roller skating dominated American visual culture, 1979



finest things in life," says Ross. "He insisted we have VIP booths and quail's eggs with Château Ausone on the menu. Very haute stuff, very haute. The boxes had to be moved three feet to the left. That was Denny."

**A** state-of-the-art sound system was installed, along with a fancy polyurethane skating floor. Above the entrance sat a neon sign featuring a skating figure and the words: "Denny Cordell Presents Flipper's Roller Boogie Palace."

Rogers & Cowan PR were hired and a stream of deluxe memberships sold, but as costs escalated under Cordell's exacting supervision the club was obliged to take on another partner in the form of Motown founder Berry Gordy. "He was actually great," says Ross. "He helped bring in stars like Smokey Robinson, because they'd all grown up skating in Detroit."

For opening night, the club commandeered a dozen search beams to light up the sky, with frantic mural painting still going on until the last moment. "We had our cocktail dresses in the car," remembers artist Carol Bennett. "There were three of us hanging off the ladder as we finished the last two feet of wall."

From then on, the celebrities came flooding in: Jane Fonda, Rick James, Jon Voight, Jim Brown, Robin Williams, Britt Ekland, OJ Simpson, Olivia Newton John. Cher had her own booth ("No1") and customised skates with wheels that folded out like aircraft landing gear. Tori Spelling held her eighth birthday party there, with a pink and white cake to match her roller skates ("an unforgettable milestone for me," she wrote in her 2012 book on party planning, *CelebraTORI*). Dustin Hoffman wasn't so lucky: the bouncers failed to recognise him and chucked him down the stairs.

Just like at the Empire, Flipper's had a central stage with palm trees, which skaters could pass underneath, and a house DJ (a towering black guy called Doctor Love). The club also had a relaxed attitude towards refreshments, despite a recent "Disco Forum" safety report warning rink owners that "skating and alcohol are a danger, not only to the skater, but to all around him". In the carefree palatial recesses of Flipper's, pot smoke filled the air and the two bars did a roaring trade.

"I just remember how f\*\*\*ing strong the drinks were," says Jeff Jourard, who played guitar with house band Leroy And The Lifters. "A single at Flipper's was like a triple anywhere else. They had tropical drinks with umbrellas. They had drinks that were on fire. At least one person a night was being carried out on a stretcher holding a bag of ice."

Skaters were obliged to sign a legal waiver, but that only seemed to add to the ☉

KODAK SAFETY FILM 5063



Skate on (above, from left): Cisco Dietz's reportage shots capture punk-era partygoers; Chuck Berry and friends; Smuffy Smith (left) of Levi And The Rockats; (below, from left) An American Werewolf In London star David Naughton; Bunty and Ian 'Flipper' Ross with Nick Cash; the Flipper's stage hosted live bands



Below, from left: Above the rink hung a giant glitter ball, which was reputed to be the largest in the world; 'Flipper' Ross, in white, with club-goers and famous LA DJ Rodney Bingenheimer; full house at the venue, 1979-1981



Below, from left: Flipper's trademark blue suede skates, available for hire only; Shannon Wilhelm and Tiffany Kennedy of death rock band Castration Squad; the club maître d' Stan Wertlieb, photographed in the signature cream tuxedo that he wore every night until Flipper's closed, 1979-1981



DAYS SAFETY FILMS 5063

⊗ devil-may-care atmosphere presided over by the two crazy Englishmen: Cordell with his cigar and white three-piece suit, Ross with his green Converse and glitter whistle on a string.

"They were like a British comedy act," says Carol Bennett; "the perfect front men for their product. They were both quick-witted, optimistic, fun-loving – and very loose."

"The drugs were just rampant there," says Jeff Jourard. "The whole band would repair to the men's room, which was like a pharmacy, get coked up, drink a pint of alcohol, then go out and jam our asses off for 45 minutes. Nobody cared. They were more wrecked than we were."

One night a very drunk John Entwistle, from The Who, joined the Lifters on stage for a version of "Louie Louie", where he played his trademark flamenco bass. "Definitely a first for that song," says Jourard.

Californian hedonism had finally rediscovered its innocence after the blood-drenched end of the Sixties, with Altamont and the Manson killings. Roller disco, with its care-free lyrics and thrilling physical freedom, was the perfect antidote to the preceding years of Watergate, stagflation, petrol shortages and 20-minute drum solos.

**F**or the next two years, Flipper's rode the wave of roller disco as it exploded from ethnic subculture to national phenomenon. Episodes of *CHiPs* and *Charlie's Angels* were filmed at the club. Skating movies were released, including *Roller Boogie*, starring Linda Blair and *Skatetown, USA* with Patrick Swayze. Novelty songs bombarded the charts such as "Bounce, Rock, Shake, Roll" and "Roller Skatin' Mate" and Cher recorded an AOR roller disco anthem, "Hell On Wheels". Even tuxedo-clad Chic had a skating reference in their hit "Good Times": "Don't be a drag, participate/Clams on the half shell and roller skates".

Flipper's all-inclusive party vibe seemed to hit the right note of Rainbow Coalition debauchery after the hard glamour era of New York's Studio 54. "Flipper's put people together who would never otherwise be under the same roof," says celebrity hairdresser Carrie White, who wrote about her nights at the club in *Upper Cut: Highlights Of My Hollywood Life*. "That was the luxury of the place. Nobody cared what religion you were, what colour, what sexuality. I would usually take home one of the gorgeous black skate instructors."

The Ross clan – now with a sixth child on the way – crammed into a two-bedroom former gay bachelor pad in the Hollywood Hills, and the kids settled into their new life as royal offspring at the rink. "We had the run of the place," says Mia Ross. "We could go to the bar and get a free Shirley Temple. Get some quarters for the arcade games."

"We used to push Liberty around the rink in her pram," says Holly. "Then the DJs would carry us around on their shoulders."

"It was a unique education," says Milo, who now manages bands such as Palma Violets. "One DJ showed me how to put a line of cocaine around a seven-inch record, then hit play and sniff it up. I tried it myself a few years later. It's a lot harder than it looks."

Ross was a natural host, conversing happily with Hollywood stars and airport workers alike, but the incessant nocturnal rhythm of the job began to take its toll, even as Bunty held things together – more than ably – on the domestic front.

"I did wake up some mornings and wonder, 'Why is my Dad still up?'" says Atticus. "And so energetic?"

"It's quite an art making sure everyone has a good time," says Bunty. "You have to be on top form seven nights a week."

"Being Flipper became this whole separate thing," explains Ross. "I felt I had to get into the role in a big way."

Ross racked up five DUIs during his time in LA, although back in those days, there was usually a way to take care of such things. "The sheriffs would lie in wait for me. 'You're not in Flipper's now, are you?' they said."

It was a portent of things to come. In 1980, roller disco got its own Sharon Tate-like

Wheel, piggy: John Voight laces up his boots in the early days of Flipper's, 1979



**'WE LET IN THE UNDERBELLY: NOT THE STARS, BUT THE PEOPLE WHO FEED OFF STARS'**

sacrificial lamb with the brutal murder of Playmate Of The Year Dorothy Stratten. Stratten, who appeared alongside Hugh Hefner in the 1979 primetime special *Playboy's Roller Disco And Pajama Party*, was the emblematic roller disco babe – blonde, sweet, optimistic and unsuspecting of her own demise. She had just commissioned some photos of herself wearing roller skates and a red swimsuit in the hope of emulating Farah Fawcett's iconic poster.

As the disco craze crumbled with costly flops such as *Xanadu* and *Can't Stop The Music*, Ross kept things going with theme nights ("Network Gay Night! Free food!") and local new wave acts such as The Go-Go's and Dead Kennedys. British rock groups invariably held parties at Flipper's because they all stayed at the nearby Tropicana Motel, legendary home to Tom Waits et al.

Nutty boys Madness were so taken with Ross they held him aloft on a chair while singing a ditty in his honour, then threw him in the pool. Even The Clash accepted an invitation to skate. "I called up to speak to Joe Strummer," says Flipper, "and got the immortal reply, 'He don't normally talk to dolphins.'"

The expedient mix of disco and punk was not without its ructions, though, even in anything-goes LA. One local band, in a "punk rock gesture", threw gravel onto the rink – necessitating thousands of dollars of repairs. And Denny Cordell was less than thrilled with the club's shift towards a more populist approach.

"We had terrible rows about it," says Ross. "But I had to keep the place filled somehow. We replaced the quail's eggs with French fries and let in more of the Hollywood underbelly; not the stars, but the people who feed off stars. Amusing lowlifes, if you will, except Denny was not amused. 'Flipper,' he said, 'you've taken a tropical aquarium and turned it into a washing machine.'"

Despite Cordell's vintage wine menu, the biggest draw at the club was the afternoon skating sessions. "Kids would come from everywhere, in all shapes and sizes, colours and hues," says Ross. "We played the same funk we played at night and they all got on fine. There's a moral in there somewhere."

But local residents and officials did not care to visit, preferring instead to campaign against the club's black-attended adult skate sessions. "Saturday nights could feel like a scary crowd if you were an uptight white person," says Atticus, who would go on to win an Oscar with Trent Reznor for scoring *The Social Network* in 2011. "But it really wasn't. That's where I first saw a DJ, Disco Danny, mixing records."

"Basically," says Milo, "the sheriffs just didn't like all these black guys coming into town to get white pussy."

The concept of “white flight” was duly explained to Ross: “Apparently, once the amount of black visitors to any neighbourhood reaches 10 per cent, then the next number is 100 per cent. But real skating requires the heavy funk disco music that inspired us in the first place. All these black kids would bus themselves in from Watts and Compton and the locals would go f\*\*\*ing crazy. It was great.”

Ross even brought in the Jigaboo Jammers from New York: “One of the few promises I’ve kept in my life. The whole insane group flew over – all 24 of them. What the accountant said was unprintable.” (The actual phrase was “Flipper, we don’t have enough n\*\*\*\*\*s in this town?”)

**B**y 1981, darker tensions were coming to the surface of LA’s social fabric. Reagan was in the White House and Aids was hovering into view. New drugs were appearing, including crack and PCP (AKA angel dust), that were worlds away from the mellow high of Quaaludes or peyote. The harsh new drugs meant a harsh new criminal element too. Walking back to his car, Cordell got a shotgun jammed in his face.

This time the police told the club to change its ways or face getting shut down. So Ross, of course, did completely the opposite. He booked in Prince for a concert during the star’s scandalous *Dirty Mind* tour and sold 2,000 tickets. Prince appeared clad only in a dirty raincoat and leather thong for a gig of legendary proportions. (“The one concert my parents wouldn’t let me go to!” says Atticus.)

The police duly raided the club, as promised, and shut it down. “Prince’s managers were delighted. We were delighted. The punters were delighted. It was sensational, a real event.” It would also prove to be the club’s turning point. (And then everything went wrong.) “Events in history tend to reach an apex then go downhill from there,” says Ross. “With Napoleon it was Tilsit, with Flipper’s it was Prince. The cops told me, ‘You can go to jail for 20 years or close on Friday – what’s it going to be, Flipper?’”

It didn’t help that the club had amassed \$60 million worth of lawsuits for skating injuries (mostly from drunken white guys, but still). Tensions between Ross and Cordell took their first meaningful turn for the worse. “Denny had a very Roman view of life, where he was the emperor. He fired me, he banned me, but we never stopped being friends.”

When the Beverly Center shopping mall opened up nearby, pushing up the club’s real estate value dramatically, Cordell and Gordy seized the opportunity to sell up. “It was pretty abrupt,” says Ross. “The accountant called me in and said, ‘It’s all over, Flipper.’” Cordell

## ‘IT WAS CRUSHING FOR DAD WHEN IT ENDED... HE WAS THE STAR OF THE SHOW’



We are family: The Ross clan, photographed at their Hollywood Hills home by son Atticus, 1980

flew off to Ireland to pursue his new interest, breeding racehorses, and the property was sold to the Esprit clothing company, leaving Flipper to preside over the club’s last night.

All the clubbers from Compton and Watts were welcomed in for a farewell of epic proportions. The sheriffs moved in so quickly they caused a mini riot in the streets. Cars were overturned and dumpsters set alight. “It was mayhem,” admits Ross, “but that’s what rock’n’roll is meant to be – rebellious and anarchic.” He watched the conflagration from a rooftop over the road with a bottle of champagne: “Fiddling while Rome burns.” The staff ransacked the fabled wine cellar, leaving nothing but a box of Bols liqueur. “The ridiculous blue kind. But I took it home anyway.”

In retrospect, regulars mostly agree it was the right time to close the doors. “It was just too intense to sustain,” says hairdresser Carrie White. “Believe me, I know. I ran off with a European princess [whom she’d met in the Flipper’s toilets] and ended up in rehab.”

“Things had become a little tawdry,” agrees Bunty Ross. “But it was still terribly sad. We were involved in all these people’s lives – the skate guards, the waitresses. They baby-sat the kids. They were part of the family. When they pulled the plug, all those relationships went, too.”

And so, the family packed up once more and moved, this time into a “glorified hovel” in the San Fernando Valley with a backyard filled with marijuana plants. Once again, things looked bleak. “We weren’t poor, but we were broke,” says Holly, who remembers eating a lot of Pioneer Take Out chicken during that time. “When Dad told me to go to my room, I said, ‘I don’t have a room to go to!’”

“It was crushing for Dad when it ended,” says Milo. “He was like a performer on stage and at Flipper’s he was the star of the show.”

And then came an opportunity too ridiculous to turn down: working as a butler in Beverly Hills for a pomegranate tycoon. Ross failed the psychological evaluation, but got the job after the two men bonded over a shared love of Napoleon. “Ian’s employers were worried it was a great step down because my father had a title,” says Bunty. “But I told them, ‘No, it’s the biggest step up. He’s never had a regular paycheck in his life.’”

“Dad would always say if you lose your sense of humour, you’re f\*\*\*ed,” says Milo. “He simply found a new role for himself and played it to the hilt.”

“I used to go to bed early,” says Bunty, “so I could wake up when he got back and hear all the outrageous things he’d had to do. Ian can barely tie a shoelace and suddenly he had to fold napkins into fans. I’ve never laughed so much in my entire life.”

It would be another 20 years before Ross returned to LA. Visiting the corner of Santa Monica and La Cienega Boulevards today, one can understand why. The Tropicana Motel is long gone and Flipper’s is now a pharmacy – a real one – made of dull grey concrete. Orthopaedic sandals are the only fancy footwear on offer and the powdered stimulants for sale are Epsom salts and stool softener. The one hint of a Seventies heyday is the piped sound of Blondie’s “Heart Of Glass”.

All is not lost, though. Liberty Ross, who recently married music producer Jimmy Iovine, is producing a US cable drama based on the Flipper’s saga; plus, a number of social media fan sites have sprung up, where hitherto gentrified citizens can relive their wild youth. “The first time I had sex standing up was in the alley behind Flipper’s,” declared one Beverly Hills real estate agent. “There isn’t a summer that goes by where I don’t stop and think about that place.”

“Let’s face it,” says Ross, the man who presided over all the mayhem: “Flipper’s was the last hurrah. I was still in my thirties, so I could push the envelope a bit before having to grow up, but we were the last gasp of the golden age of rock that started with Radio Caroline. I just happened to be there at the beginning and I happened to be there at the end.”



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