



Mark Gonzales on Art, the Olympics, Why Street Skating Is Like the Blues

"Most Influential Skateboarder of All Time" is also a celebrated artist, collected by Donald Trump and Puff Daddy

■ BY ERIC HENDRIKX | June 21, 2016



Skateboarding legend Mark Gonzales discusses art, the Olympics and why street skating is like the blues.

Eric Hendrikx

In late 2011, Mark Gonzales was named "[Most Influential Skateboarder of All Time](#)" by *Transworld Skateboarding*. The following year he was inducted into skateboarding's [Hall of Fame](#). But accolades haven't stopped "The Gonz" from continuing to evolve, both as revolutionary skater and prolific artist.

Born in South Gate, California in 1968, Gonz entered the skateboarding world at age 13, and by 16, was featured on the 1984 cover of *Thrasher* magazine. Along with fellow Hall of Famer Natas Kaupas, Gonz was first to skate on handrails, and first to ollie the Wallenberg set, a 19-foot long span of concrete blocks in San Francisco. "I think a lot of it has to do with that adrenaline rush, that kick that makes you feel very alive in that exact

moment, and you want to do that more," says Gonz. His video parts, such as in [Blind's Video Days](#), still stand testimony to his limitless and whimsical approach that changed skateboarding forever.

Concurrent with his legendary skateboarding career, Gonz has also established himself as a contemporary artist, whose spontaneous and avant-garde visual expressions have been seen in galleries worldwide, used in Calvin Klein ad campaigns and served as graphics for his skateboard company – Krooked Skateboards. Gonz original designs have been long sought after by collectors of all walks, including Donald Trump and Sean Combs.

We met up with Gonz at his private art studio in New York City to discuss the future of skateboarding and its place in the Olympics, hear a dirty story from the filming of *Away Days* and receive a history lesson on skateboarding's beginnings.

What's your take on the addition of skateboarding in the 2020 Olympic Games?

I think a lot of times people want to get involved in skating, whether it's for money or to help it out, and they jump on board and try to get into the culture. But what they don't realize is that a lot of these kids who skate really have nothing else. Death is going to happen, but to them, it's like, "I don't give a fuck." And that's why they skateboard, because they really don't give a fuck. It's hard for some people to understand that mentality.

So I don't know about the Olympics. Skateboarding is not an answer – it's a question, a game of logic and death. It's sad, but there is a very dark side to skateboarding – there's a side of the board that never sees the light [*laughs*]. I'm being silly, but also serious.

You just released new footage in the first full-length film from Adidas Skateboarding, *Away Days*. How was it skating and filming for the project?

Well, we were out skating and shooting in New York and I tried this trick so many times that when we finally made it to the next spot, I was completely sore. The younger guys were having so much fun that I just forgot about my pain and started skating more. I became overambitious and I fell in this disgusting gutter and that really sucked. It was, like, the worst thing that's ever happened to me. I mean, those guys on *Jackass* go into the port-o-potty and get all that shit all over them. It can't be worse than that, can it? What's worse? Do you think that the port-o-potty shit is worse than the gunk on the streets of New York?
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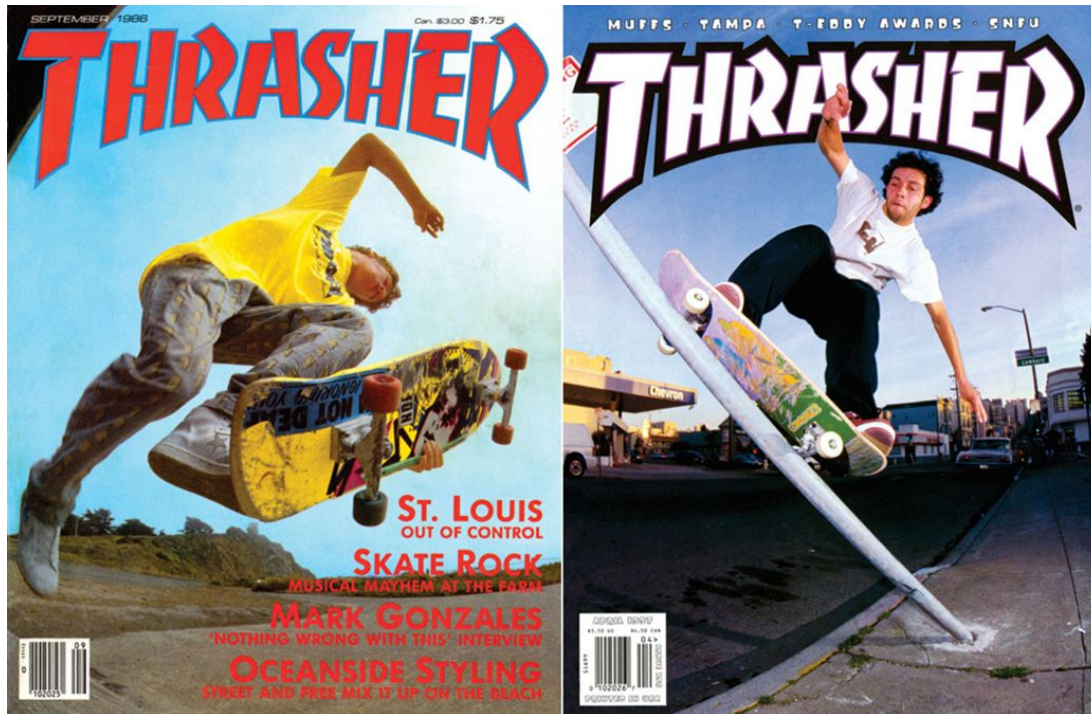
Are we splitting hairs between potentially getting E.coli or dysentery?

[*Laughs*] At first I was concerned about my board going into that crap. So I lightly and casually jogged over to save my board from the water, and then I ended up in there, too.

You've been called the "Most Influential Skateboarder of All Time." How does someone of your notoriety and achievement view skateboarding today versus back in the day?

I love it. I still get competitive. I think that when a lot of pro skateboarders get older, they post their old pictures and claim that they were better than the kids are now. They use the past to try to stay relevant. They feel like it was more glamorous back then. But I think it's most glamorous right now because even if I can't do as difficult of a trick as someone like Tyshawn Jones, when I'm watching him, I have my iPad out and I'm filming him. I'm

experiencing that moment at the same time as he is and I'm stoked on it. For me, skateboarding is still very much about what's happening right now, in this moment.



Mark Gonzales on the cover of 'Thrasher,' September 1986 (left) and April 1997 (right). Courtesy of Thrasher Magazine

Skateboarding has expanded in so many ways since you started in the early Eighties. Has your approach changed over the years when you're out filming for a new video part?

Sometimes it will take me awhile to land a trick. That day in New York City, I was getting pretty cocky. And it doesn't matter what your age is – when you're cocky, something bad happens. You break a bone, get stitches or end up in sewer crap. Overall, I'm pretty happy with the footage that I got for *Away Days*. It's a good mix of technical stuff and having fun. And for my age, there is some incredible stuff as well. For me, it's about quality. I'd rather have good footage than a lot of so-so footage.

You traveled abroad to film for *Away Days*. Where did you go?

I went to England, Russia and Spain. Madrid was my favorite city. The skateboarding was great, but I also loved the city. I really like how big the streets are and I got to visit the Museo Del Prado and the El Reina Sofia gallery. The last time I went there, they had so many [Joan] Miró pieces on display, but this time there weren't many. I was a little sad about that. Sometimes they just put them away and bring them out another time.

Speaking of art, you're also a renowned artist with your drawings and paintings in galleries and collected worldwide. How did that come about?

Before I had a pro model board, I rode for Tony Alva and did artwork for Alva Skates. I wish I had some of those old boards. I also do all of the graphics for Krooked Skateboards. It's not too often that I do graphics for other board companies, but if somebody is a really good skater, you've got to recognize that and be cool. So when Andrew Reynolds asked

me to design a graphic for his Baker deck, I did. He's so insane. There would be no reason why I wouldn't do it.

You've drawn parallels between street skating and playing the blues.

Skaters are broke and don't have cars or money to go do other things. So they just go out and skate in the streets. And eventually, if you stick with it, like the blues, skateboarding can pay off. When I used to skate demos, I always wanted to be somewhere else. You could see in the videos that I wasn't happy and I was skating aggressive. At the time, I would rather be skating around or at Tony Hawk's house. But what you like to do is what you like to do. Like, street skating in the middle of the night – that's super fun.



Gonzales in his creative studio in New York City. Eric Hendrikx

How do you think skateboarding will affect other countries as it continues to expand around the world?

Skateboarding gives people a way to use their brain more. The brain is a muscle and when you use it and find new ways to do tricks in different ways, it's the same type of creative process used to discover new ways to repurpose things and do things in different and better ways. When I went to Brazil, I noticed that the skaters are really good and the people are learning how to repurpose their garbage. Someone is going to profit from the things that others throw away.

What do you predict for the future of skateboarding?

When I was younger, there were only a small handful of people who were dictating where skateboarding was going. Now, there are so many skaters and it's going in so many

different directions. It's so cool to wonder what's going to happen next, because everybody is doing different stuff. They're combining things and ideas – it's very exciting times. The only two things I could imagine would change the direction of skateboarding would be the equipment or the purpose. If the equipment changed, that might change the way that skating is done. Or maybe the purpose of doing it will change, like if the incentive was no longer to make money. If the incentive changed, then so might the approach to riding.

You have also done some research on skateboarding and its beginnings, haven't you?

Well, yeah, I love skateboarding so I wanted to study where it came from. Skateboarding is derived from the Hawaiians – from surfing. That's why early skateboarding was called sidewalk surfing. Only Hawaiian royalty could surf though – it was exclusive. When you dig up the roots, you find that it was taboo for people to be out in the water and surf in early Hawaiian history. When James Cook landed there in the late 1700s, he saw someone surfing near his ship and thought he had stolen something from his ship and was trying to get away. But then he saw that the surfer was doing it over and over for the sole purpose of enjoyment – which was probably hard for James Cook to understand that someone would do something just for enjoyment rather than duty.