

MOUNTAIN LIFE

COAST MOUNTAINS

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BRUCE ROWLES

The art of a ski life

words :: Feet Banks

Bruce Rowles got hooked on skiing the old fashioned way—by sneaking around and lying to his mom.

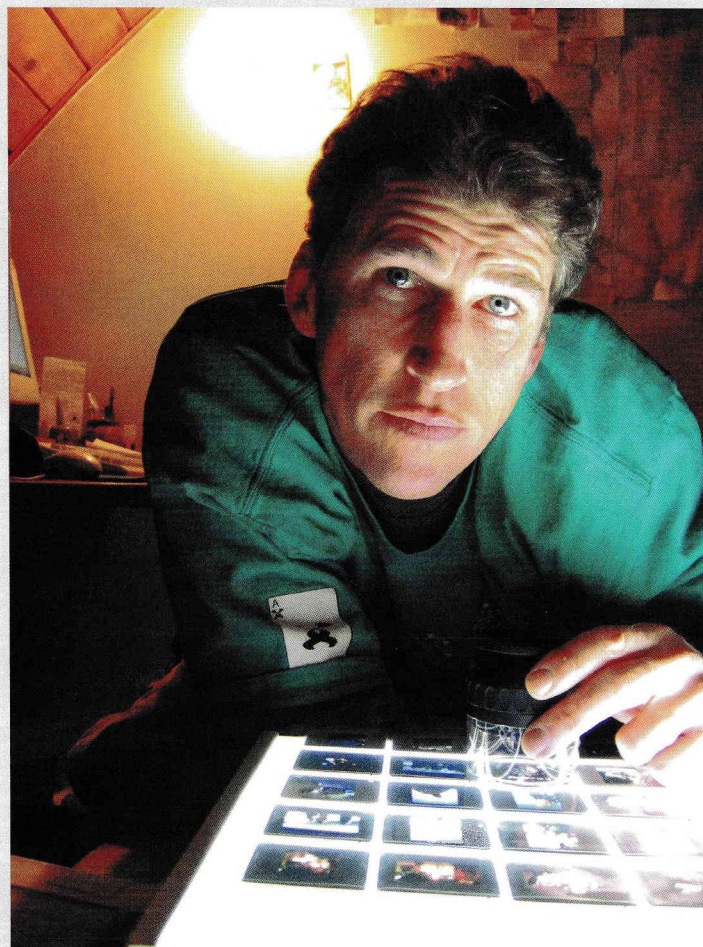
"I used to pretend we were all studying at my buddy Rick's," Rowles explains. "But Rick's mom was a 'bad' mom and she would take us skiing up Grouse Mountain. I was in high school and I skied 78 times that year, all nights."

Born in England and raised in West Vancouver in the 1960s and 70s, 'Rowlesy' grew up on the North Shore with his buddies, rope-swinging over creeks or bootskiing down the sand piles being used to build the Upper Levels Highway. The rest of his free time was spent exploring southern British Columbia with his parents.

"We went to great spots," Rowles remembers. "Up the Squamish Chief, to Cape Scott, Cathedral Lakes, Long Beach... I remember standing in the rain at Long Beach holding my sleeping bag over a fire and cursing my dad's existence. We slept under tarps and were soaked the whole time. But years later, when I'd go touring and winter camping in Whistler and people would whine about the cold I would think, 'thanks dad.'"

But Rowles' parents didn't ski, so his first time on the slopes was with his Grade 4 class trip to Mount Seymour. "We went up and one kid broke his leg on the rope tow right away," he recalls. "So everyone was standing around watching that and I thought I would go for it—straight-lined all the way down and launched past the bottom of the tow and into the trees. The liftie had to pull me out."

And with that, young Rowlesy was hooked. He logged four days of skiing that season, and six the next. "I got my first pass at Grouse Mountain



LEFT PAGE A fistful of small plastic cards looped together with cord. For Rowles, the best times of his life—and some of the worst, are contained along that single tether. ABOVE The lightboard and the loup. Self-portrait.

in 1973," he says, thumbing through a huge flapping bundle of old passes—a lifetime laminated. "After that it was game on."

But Rowles remembers another skier from high school who was even more dedicated to the sport. "There was an empty desk behind me," he recalls. "One day I walked in and the seat was taken—there was a new girl in class... but it was actually Trevor Petersen with his long blond hair. The teacher said, 'It's nice to see you again Trevor, and it looks like you are feeling much better.' Petersen was so tanned—he wasn't getting his ski days in at night. And a couple days later that desk was empty again."

Petersen ended up in Whistler and became one of Canada's premiere ski mountaineers. Rowles, a talented painter and illustrator, enrolled at Capilano College after high school and didn't migrate to the mountains until a few years later, after string of bad events—including

the death of two friends in a mudslide in Lions Bay—convinced him to drop out of art school and run to the hills.

"I'd been to Whistler before," Rowles says. "With my buddy Andy Fulton and his dad. Andy and I went to Toni Sailer Summer in Whistler in Grade 8. We stayed at Adventures West in #6 and our cabin boss was [freestyle ski legend] Wayne Wong, who would hustle the campers each night at poker. He'd never let anyone else deal."

According to his ski passes, Rowles' first full Whistler winter was 1981. He secured a job as a liftie on newly-opened Blackcomb Mountain (also known as "the dark side" by traditionalists who preferred the original ski hill in ►

town.) Returning the next winter, he knew he wanted to be able to ski tour from both hills. "I got a job at the dual mountain ski tuning shop under the Longhorn," he says smiling. "It was the best. You got a dual mountain pass, parties and perks. And when it was slow, I would draw."

Over the next few years, Rowles used his art skills to supplement his income—illustrating ads and posters for both ski hills, painting custom helmets, and airbrushing t-shirts for Toad Hall Studios' legendary Whistler shop Santini Designs. "They were these hand-painted airbrush shirts that said stuff like: *And on the 7th Day, God went for Sushi*. And I'd have to paint 250 of them."

It wasn't very long before Rowles' artistic sensibilities found a way to mesh with his adventurous ones. He was already spending his days skiing and touring with the athletes that would come to define the hard-charging, big fun, freewheeling Whistler style of riding. Why not try to capture some of that feeling?

"I straight-lined all the way down and launched past the bottom of the tow and into the trees. The liftie had to pull me out."

Rowles bummed some hand-me-down camera gear from his parents and started teaching himself ski photography. "It took a while," he admits. "This is before digital, so every time you clicked that button it was 25 cents."

Skiing and shooting big lines with strong technical skiers like Johnny Foon, Jeff Holden, and Chris 'Beeker' Romeskie—it didn't take long for Rowles to capture shots well worth that 25-cent click.

"I started sending slides to Dave Reddick at *Powder*," he says. "And he would respond with thoughts and pointers. I kept shooting. I got better. I was hooked."

And his timing was good. In the mid 90s Rowles' boss, Spicy Sports owner Steve 'Cuz' Cousins, brought him to the SIA show in Las Vegas to look at new tuning machines. "But he also made sure I had time to go show my images to the magazines and gear sponsors. I would have never gotten that exposure otherwise. Cuz helped me a great deal."

Cuz was also letting a young Whistler skier crash on their hotel room floor. Rowles remembers the kid "kept talking about twin tip skis and about doing snowboard tricks but on skis, saying 'its kinda like freestyle, but not.'"

That kid was Whistler skier Shane Szocs, who was ushering in the 'new school' ski revolution with Mike Douglas and a trio of freestyle rebels from Quebec.

"I saw Szocs and Douglas again a few months later at Cuz's season kickoff party and they had a video of all these tricks—Lincoln Loops and rodeos and whatnot. Szocs said, 'Yeah these French guys are coming and we're gonna go build a jump. Come shoot it.'"

Rowles joined them and helped build that jump out on the edge of what is now the Harmony Zone on Whistler. A lightning storm prevented them from finishing, "but we went back the next day and there was a big crew ►



Old-school 80s airbrushed-photo artwork



TOP LEFT "Rex Thomas was one of my favourite athletes to shoot. He understood the work."
 BOTTOM LEFT Chilling on the dark side aka: Blackcomb Mountain. © LEIF ZAPP-GILJE
 ABOVE Ski all day, work all night...almost.

up there—Trennan Paynter, Dan Treadway, a bunch of guys—and we had a huge session. I got my first shot of JP Auclair that day."

By 1998, with more magazines and companies catching on to the new hot thing in skiing, Rowles found himself entrenched in a revolution, and shooting every minute of it. He couldn't afford to pay the athletes he shot with, but he could teach them backcountry skills and show them new spots.

"I'd shoot all day, breaking trail and skiing these big lines with a 25-pound pack worth \$10k on my back. When the sun went down, I'd tune skis until the early hours, then get up the next day and do it all over again. I always tried to shoot a feeling, kind of like how I painted. So many of my favourite shots are ones nobody else liked."

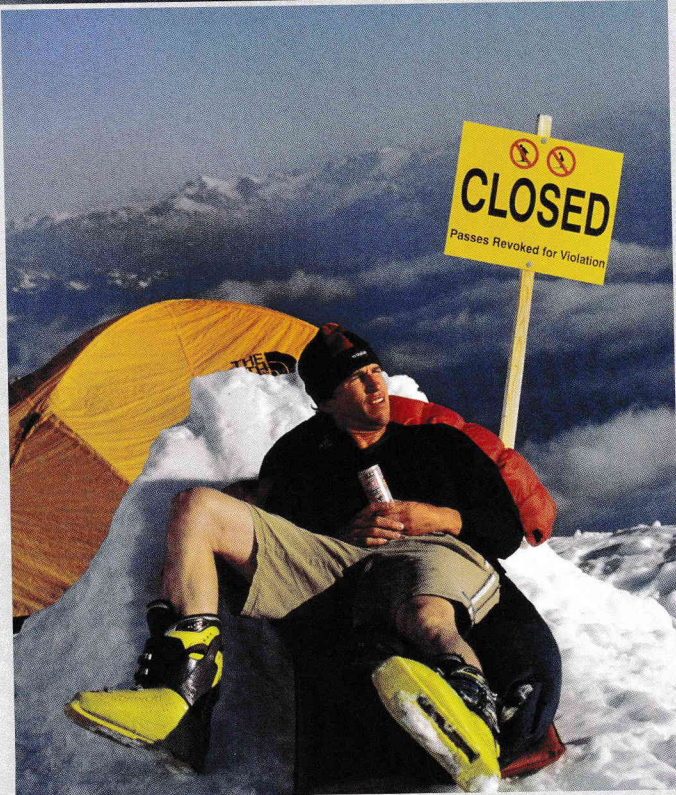
Regardless, Rowles published photos around the world, in all the big magazines, for the top brands and with every film company that came to town. "And you'd still see your shots in real estate ads, or scanned and re-used somewhere else," he says, the disappointment that an industry would disrespect someone's art still very apparent even years later.

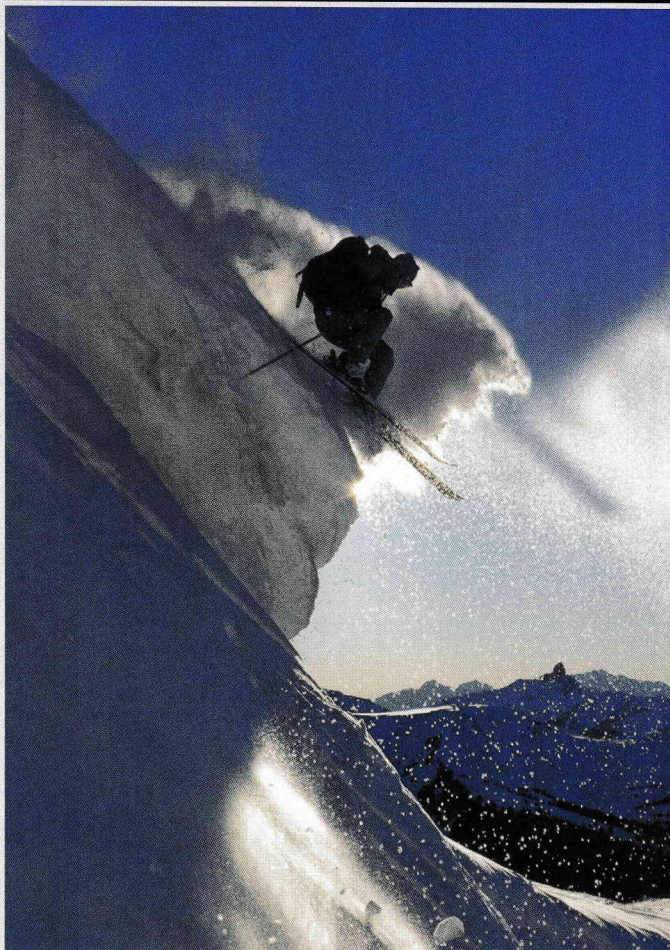
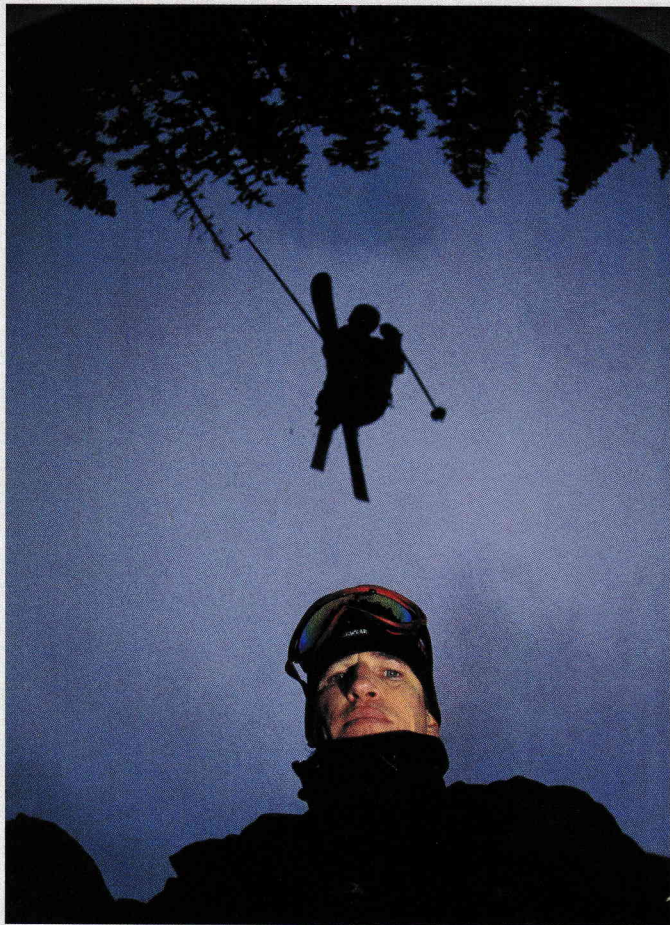
And of course, life in the mountains is not all bluebird days and patio sessions. Over the years Rowles, like anyone who lives at elevation, has lost a number of friends to the very mountains he loves.

"We lost Steve Smaridge in 1993," he remembers. "And then Trevor—that was a shocker, I couldn't believe it. And then Brett. And then Sheets died that day. Beeker, Lumpy, Jack, Lisa ... acts of God. I don't know, up here you just aren't expecting these amazing people to die."

But in the mountains, that is the game we all play. And the only way to stay sane is to find a way to accept loss and honour the fallen by celebrating life every day. And for Rowles, that meant doing his best to help the next generation of Whistler skiers, kids like Sean and Callum Pettit and Kye Petersen.

"Some people gave me a hard time," he recalls. "They'd say, 'Why are you taking Kye out there?' But they didn't realize he was already going out there with his friends. I felt obligated to help show him the right skills and knowledge, out of my respect for my friendship with Trevor. And I knew Kye would be a role model for other young kids." ►





TOP LEFT Self-portrait. BOTTOM LEFT Jack Hannan in the good old days. 📷 BRUCE ROWLES
ABOVE Rowles in his element. 📷 JOHN JERVIS

But every revolution comes to an end. Freeskiing went Hollywood and with the rise of digital photography, Rowles found the on-mountain shooting scene a little more frantic than he preferred, and the marketplace for photos a lot more saturated. “Someone, a local, accused me of being a ‘money hungry Whistler photographer’ and it really hurt. Like this dude thinks I am doing this for the money? That was one of the times I really got discouraged.”

Around this time, Rowles father passed away and he began to withdraw from ski photography to focus on other artistic endeavours. In 2009 he sold his house, for substantially more than he bought it, and rented a suite down the road so he could refocus on drawing, painting and spending time with his teenage son.

“Selling the house gave me a chance to get back to what matters without the financial weight,” he says. “I still shoot photos, I draw. I know I am here on this earth to be an artist, and now I can do it just for me.”

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Rowles’ son grew up and moved to Vancouver Island, but Rowles is still here—skiing, biking, paddling, and creating. He’s making one-off ski graphics for Foon Skis, run by his old buddy Johnny Foon. If the weather is no good he’s happy to stay home with a sketchbook. “I love drawing,” Rowles explains, “because you can see the time and effort. The patience. Too many people like immediate satisfaction these days. I think kids these days need to find ways to use their minds, because a lot of these mindless jobs aren’t gonna be around in a few years. The only jobs left will be ones where you have to think or imagine.”

While he admits he’s thought about moving along, he says “All the things that brought me here are still right outside the door. There are good people here, bike trails two minutes away, and I can see the ski conditions on Crystal Ridge right from my window. After the life I’ve had in these mountains... it’s hard to find somewhere else to go.” 🏔️