

# The New York Times

## *How New York Got a Glorious Throwback Roller-Skating Extravaganza*

By Melena Ryzik

June 21, 2022



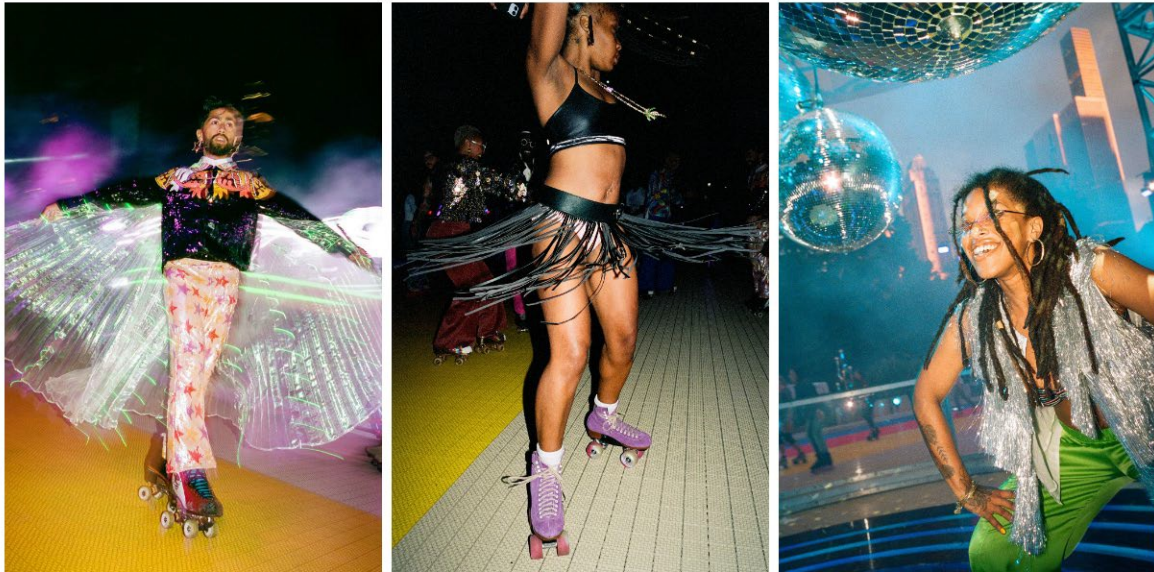
Roller-skating is having another flash of popularity, but the DiscOasis sets itself apart from New York's other rinks and pop-up events through its production value, theatricality and pedigree. Credit...OK McCausland for The New York Times

To some people, a roller rink is just a place to skim around in a circle, not even very fast, going nowhere. But to its devotees and to the creators of the DiscOasis, a new skate experience in Central Park, it is transformational, spiritual — time travel on four wheels.

On Saturday night, more than a thousand skaters packed Wollman Rink, laced up their quads and spun off into sparkling nostalgia. Spotlights shone onto the surrounding trees, as a concert-level light show bathed the space in cyan, fuschias and golds. “Good Times,” that 1970s party staple, blared from D.J. Funkmaster Flex’s booth, as the crowd — some wobblers, some more expert — parted for the pros: One roller dancer in flared jeans dropped to a split, while another flipped off her wheels, uncoiling into a headstand. For 10 minutes, it was all hot pants and acrobatics, and then regular New Yorkers — many with a style not far-off — slid back in.

Hovering over this opening night like a sequined demigod was Nile Rodgers, the Chic guitarist, funk-disco eminence and lifelong skater. He curated music for the DiscOasis, and, with voice-over introductions, provides its cultural through line from 1970s and ’80s New York, when he used to

frequent the city's now shuttered, once legendary rinks with Diana Ross and Cher. Kevin Bacon and Robert Downey Jr. too. (The '80s were wild.) With some skill on wheels, "You feel like you have special human powers," Rodgers said in a recent video interview. "You feel like you can fly."



Scenes from the opening night of the DiscOasis, which will be open through October.



Thao Nguyen from Constellation Immersive (in purple sequins) and Lynná Davis of the Central Park Dance Skaters Association (in blue sunglasses) join the set designer David Korins (second from left in back row) and more DiscOasis stakeholders at its ribbon cutting. Credit...OK McCausland for The New York Times



Roller skating is having another flash of popularity, but the DiscOasis sets itself apart from the city's other rinks and pop-up events (Rockefeller Center is temporarily hosting wheelers, too) through its production value, theatricality and pedigree. There's blossoming disco balls as big as eight feet in diameter, and a multitiered stage, created by the Tony-nominated set designer David Korins, who did "Hamilton" and shows for Lady Gaga. The cast of 13 includes legends of New York roller disco, like the long-limbed skater known as Cotto, a fixture in the city's parks for more than four decades, whose signature leg twirls and pivots have influenced scores of skaters.

"We call it jam skating," he said. the DiscOasis coaxed him out of retirement — he's had both hips replaced — for choreographed shows, five nights a week.

The energy is ecstatic, and infectious. "Being on wheels is paradise to me," said Robin Mayers Anselm, 59, who grew up going to Empire Skate, the storied Brooklyn emporium. "I feel more connected to myself and my spirit when I skate."

That's true even for the newbies, like Robin L. Dimension, an actress wearing an embellished jumpsuit and a chunky "Queen" necklace with her psychedelic-patterned skates. "I got a really nice outfit," she said, "so I look good going down."



Billed as "an immersive musical and theatrical experience," the DiscOasis began last year outside of Los Angeles. Credit...OK McCausland for The New York Times

Billed as "an immersive musical and theatrical experience," the DiscOasis began last year outside of Los Angeles, the pandemic brainchild of an events company led by a C.A.A. agent. But its foundational home was always New York, and it will be open daily through October.

“For us, DiscOasis is a movement, it’s a vibe — we want as many people to be able to experience it,” said Thao Nguyen, its executive producer, and chief executive of Constellation Immersive, its parent company, which partnered with Live Nation and Los Angeles Media Fund to stage the series.

For New York’s skate community, it is first and foremost a good floor. “You know, we’re not impressed by the accouterments of the illusion,” said Tone Rapp Fleming, a New York native and skater for 50 years, who came for a preview on Thursday. That’s mostly because ride-or-die skaters like him and his friend Lynná Davis, vice president of the Central Park Dance Skaters Association, would skate on a trash can lid, as she put it. But they praised the rink’s glidable new surface, painted in primary shades of blue, yellow and red.

The DiscOasis’s creators knew that if they won over the old-school skate crew, the world would follow; Davis, an ageless wonder in rainbow-flecked braids and custom bejeweled, be-fringed wheels, helped with casting. “Work it out, kids!” she cheered on the younger dancers, as they cartwheeled their routine, to a soundtrack that spun from Queen to “Rapper’s Delight.”



For David Korins, who created the stage for the DiscOasis, the space is a Studio 54 throwback, but fresher. Credit...OK McCausland for The New York Times

Rodgers created the playlists for the performances, which happen throughout the night, interspersed with live D.J.s. (the daytime is for more relaxed skating). A longtime New Yorker, Rodgers coined his skate style as a 12- or 13-year-old on a brief sojourn in Los Angeles, when he tore up the town with

other kids, performing little routines. “I had this wobbly leg way of skating,” he said. He still does, “even though I’m going to be 70. And it looks cool.”

His crew stood out even then: “We used to skate to jazz,” he said, recalling their grooves to the guitarist Wes Montgomery’s 1965 classic “Bumpin’ on Sunset.”

Fast forward 30 years, and Rodgers had largely hung up his skates. But he has been so energized by his association with the DiscOasis, which approached him for the Los Angeles event, that it reignited his devotion. Now on tour in Europe, he has been conjuring minirinks wherever he goes, one hotel ballroom at a time.

“They lift up the rugs for me and create a big dance floor,” he said. “I can skate in a little square. There’s nobody in there, because I skate at such weird hours — 4 or 5 in the morning.” (He doesn’t sleep much. As befits a disco-era fashion legend, he also has personalized skates — orange, green, iridescent — which got stuck in customs on their way to Europe. His favorite are a classic pair of black Riedells.)

Even for someone well-versed in skate culture, the Los Angeles version of the DiscOasis offered some lessons. Most skaters only stick to the rink for about 45 minutes, Rodgers said. The space around Wollman has a non-skate dance floor and a few Instagram-ready installations inspired by his music. The giant half-disco ball stuffed with oversize wedding bouquets, pearls and askew mannequin legs, for example, is supposed to symbolize Madonna’s “Like a Virgin,” which he produced.

For Korins, the production designer, the space is a Studio 54 throwback, but fresher. “We’re leaning into this oasis idea — if you think about mirrored balls and foliage coming together to have a child, that’s what we’re making,” he said. (Think discofied palm trees and cactuses.) And the Central Park location, with the Manhattan skyline rising above it, brings its own magic. “It takes all the best things about roller skating and disco and it literally rips the roof off,” he said.





(Left) Amateurs and pros alike fill the floor at the DiscOasis. Credit...OK McCausland for The New York Times



(Right) Some attendees (including Davis), come dressed in their skating finest. Credit...OK McCausland for The New York Times



The cast of 13 that performs at the DiscOasis includes legends of New York roller disco. Credit...OK McCausland for The New York Times

Like other skate habitués, Korins has a theory about why it remains so addictive. “It’s really hard to find an experience in life that’s both kinetic and dynamic,” he said — you can flex your solo style and also get the communion of “an organism moving around together.”

Shernita Anderson, the choreographer, saw that in action. For solos, the cast was on its own. “We were like, ‘Go off, live your best life!’” she said. “And that’s what they did.”

Pirouetting and high-kicking his way through the act was Keegan James Robataille, 20, a musical-theater-trained dancer who only began skating two years ago as a pandemic outlet. A swing in the company, this is his first professional, contracted gig. He grew up near a rink in Amsterdam, N.Y. “I remember going there all throughout middle school and being like, ‘Wow, I wish I could skate backwards and do these cool tricks,’” he said. “And here I am performing in New York City, doing what little me would have dreamed of doing.”

A closing number — set to Donna Summer’s “Last Dance,” naturally — came on and he sailed away for his cue. It had the skaters in capes dotted with LEDs, like luminescent butterflies.

“I have never seen anything like this in New York,” said Samantha O’Grady, a 24-year-old native. The rinks she started learning at all closed “by the time I was a tween,” she said, but the retro ambience of the DiscOasis gave her a flicker of how the scene looked before her time. “I sent a picture to my mother; she was so jealous.”



First-time visitors were already planning to become regulars, like Robbin Ziering, whose wedding was on wheels. “We love to work, we love to dance, we love music — but we live to skate,” she said. “And that’s what it’s all about.”



OK McCausland for The New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/21/arts/music/discoasis-roller-skating-nile-rodders.html>



# InsideCulture

THIS WEEKf ROMTHEAR.TSOE SK

OVERHEARD BY MARIE COONS



## THE QUEUE

CIA KOURLAS is the dance critic on the Culture desk. She's having one of those years when she's already missing summer during the summer. Here are five things she has been listening to, watching and reading to keep her spirit intact.

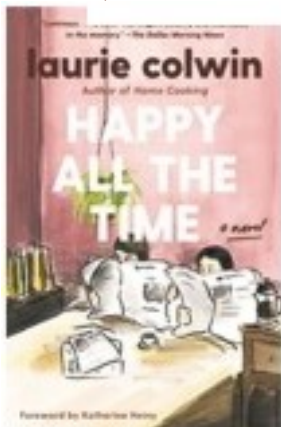
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**t** PAGEANT  
DANCE

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## t THANKSGIVING AT THE VANGUARD MUSIC

This Jason Mowl's album, "Bandcamp, coincides with the feelings summer is passing me by, but comes with the perfect Yuletide of seeing him play live: Village Vanguard in Manhattan during Thanksgiving week.



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## A Roller Disco

*On a recent Sunday evening, professional and fledgling skaters came out for DiscOasis, Central Park's Nile Rodgers-programmed summer roller rink.*

*interviews by kelsie schrader and jenna milliner-waddell*

NEW YORK  
MAGAZINE

### ALEXANDER PARIS

*Artist and witch, Bushwick*

#### What brought you to the rink?

I had a performance at the Armory. Afterward, I smoked a joint with a friend and then got paranoid, so I got off the train and went to Central Park. I heard "I Feel Love," by Donna Summer, and I looked up and saw a neon sign with big disco balls, and it said "DiscOasis." I remembered that my friend messaged me earlier asking if I could come. Then the Queens remix of Beyoncé's "Break My Soul" started playing, and I couldn't take it anymore. I got a ticket and skates even though it was \$60.

#### Was it worth the price?

Once I got inside, I was like, *Oh God, I can't even afford a locker.* I begged the people working, and they let me hide my stuff somewhere. But I don't regret it. I nailed my performance and got an email from artist Karen Finley that was like, "You're a dreamboat and a star." So I wanted to treat myself.

#### And you're also a witch?

I come from a long line of witches. My mom was a witch. My grandma was a Vodou priestess. I don't cast spells, but I'm a master manifester. When I dream of something happening, it ends up working out.

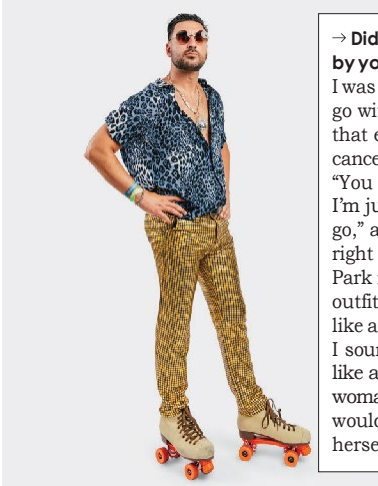




the look book: central park roller skaters



**ASHLEY NEWENLE**  
*Sales associate, Hell's Kitchen*

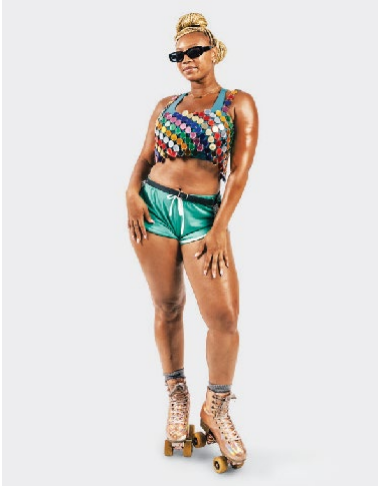


**JEREMY ECOCK**  
*Engineer, Old Bridge, New Jersey*

→ **Did you come by yourself?**  
I was supposed to go with a group that ended up canceling. I said, "You know what? I'm just going to go," and drove right to Central Park in this crazy outfit. Do I sound like a loser? Or do I sound gutsy, like a New York woman who would go by herself anywhere?



**LINDA RAPPAPORT**  
*Real-estate broker, Floral Park*



**SYDNEY BLAYLOCK**  
*DiscOasis performer, Bedford-Stuyvesant*



**JILLIAN LUCERO**  
*Creative-production coordinator, East Harlem*

↙ **Where'd you get your outfit?**  
Mostly from Buffalo Exchange. My headwrap is actually a tankini top. I found the bell-bottoms in the Pride section, and they're technically assless. I was like, *Can't do that*, so I wore black leggings over them and then added a wraparound skirt to give it more glitzy glam.



**SARAH CORBETT**  
*Human-resources partner, Brooklyn Heights*



**TROY LANDRY**  
*DiscOasis performer, Prospect-Lefferts Gardens*

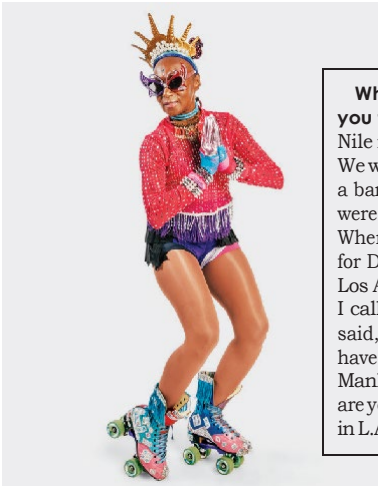
**What made you want to come tonight?** I love disco. I literally have a disco-ball tattoo that I got in Amsterdam. There are a lot of reasons and memories attached to it, which, now that I'm thinking about it, that's what disco balls do: They reflect light in so many different ways.



**CAROLINE PACE**  
*Production secretary, Park Slope*



**IZAESHA NORMAN**  
*Paraprofessional, Crown Heights*



**LYNNA DAVIS**  
*DiscOasis performer, Hell's Kitchen*

**What brought you to the rink?**  
Nile invited me. We were in a band when we were teenagers. When I saw signs for DiscOasis in Los Angeles, I called him and said, "We don't have any rinks in Manhattan. What are you doing in L.A.?"



**JOCELYN MARIE GOODE**  
*Roller-skate-museum founder, East Harlem*



**NICHOLAS BROWN**  
*Fitness instructor, Harlem*



**CHASI ANNEXY**  
*Freelance photographer, Brooklyn Heights*



**ASHLEY CRUZ**  
*Chiropractor, Park Slope*

← **How was your night?** I'm here for a birthday. First we had a few drinks to loosen up. Then we started skating and we fell and fell. My friends made a Reel that's basically a compilation of all of us falling.



**JASON ACOSTA**  
*DiscOasis performer, Bushwick*



**DANIELA LEGUISAMO**  
*Social-media marketer, Jackson Heights*



**ONNI "OXENFREE" ADAMS**  
*DiscOasis performer, East New York*

← **Do you have a signature move?** I do this thing called an Oxenfree Matrix. It's like a backbend all the way back, like in *The Matrix*, and then I come back up. It's the move people know me for—basically playing limbo on skates.



**SEBEEY CHI**  
*DiscOasis performer, Washington Heights*