

FIRST ASCENT

JIM SURETTE | ILLUSTRATION by JEREMY COLLINS

LIQUID SKY

CATHEDRAL LEDGE
NEW HAMPSHIRE

“AREN’T THOSE LOVELY TIGHTS?” MY MOM SAID in her cheerful voice. I followed her gaze toward the red and black polka dots that decorated my friend Hugh Herr’s limbs.

“Actually, those are my legs,” Hugh said gently.

A mortified look came over my mom’s face.

It was 1984: The Clash was falling apart and the Sex Pistols had long since broken up, but punk was not dead in New Hampshire.

Two years before, Hugh had lost both his legs below the knee from frostbite on Mt. Washington. He moved to North Conway after the accident, bringing with him a taste in painted fingernails and wild outfits, styles he’d adopted from Australian climber Mike Law. Hugh also shared Mike’s predilection for lines that appeared impossible to everyone else, for freeing old aid climbs with small wires or with no protection at all. Hugh was nineteen and I was sixteen; he had a quiet, understanding voice that belied his love of shocking our elders, along with a modest demeanor that seemed to let him get away with any act of rebellion. We immediately became like brothers, and I embraced his vision: painter’s pants, swami belts and old-school rules like lowering to the ground after every fall (or to at least a no-hands rest) were confining the route potential at Cathedral and Whitehorse Ledges; RPs, sticky rubber and a bit of cleaning on rappel would unlock the harder-to-imagine climbs. As far as Lycra went, Hugh actually needed the pants to help hold on his artificial legs, although painting the prostheses the same colors and patterns had added a purely aesthetic touch.

LIQUID SKY WAS THE SORT OF TWISTED, low-budget sci-fi movie that appealed to Hugh’s sense of humor: space aliens; a German scientist; a drug-addicted, sex-crazed fashion model; and lots of victims getting vaporized. The climb that he and John Bouchard picked out on Cathedral Ledge and named after the movie at first glance appeared just as absurd. An old aid route called the Yellow Brick Road made its almost-invisible way up the central buttress, one of the steepest and tallest parts of the wall. From the ground it was hard to tell if there were features or cracks you could hold on to, or whether the marks on the smooth stone were only water streaks and lichen.

Nonetheless John cleaned and bolted on lead the first pitch: a runout friction slab. From there, he freed the steeper bolt ladder up a series of overlapping flakes. Hugh then pushed the route higher, hanging from a teetering skyhook to place one bolt on the next pitch: an overhanging face traversing up and left with ledge-fall potential. That was as far as he got before he moved out of the valley in 1985. No one made any headway on the top crux: a thin, overhanging crack with lots of air beneath. You could tell just by looking at it that it was harder than anything that had been climbed at Cathedral.

My junior year in high school I kept such a low profile in my classes that I could just leave and no one would notice. I’d take off a few hours early and ride my bike to Cathedral to climb until dark. Quite often no



one else would be there, and I'd go soloing or work on various projects alone. There seemed to be an endless supply of aid routes to be freed. Climbing was a world that made more sense than school did: you could do as you liked, whenever you wanted to, without some coach telling you who could and could not play. I started ticking off first free ascents as fast as I could. I even convinced my parents to let me take off the last month of school to go on a climber's exchange to Europe with Lynn Hill and Neil Cannon.

In Malham Cove, England, and Buoux, France, I saw climbers bolting on rappel, hanging to work out moves, training both on and off the rock, and pushing technical difficulties light-years ahead of what we were doing in New Hampshire. I became convinced that people should be able to climb as they wished as long as it didn't infringe upon others.

When I returned, I rappelled down Liquid Sky and drove three pitons into the bottoming seam on the crux pitch. I no longer cared what the old guard thought.

During my first try, as I dangled a few hundred feet in the air, a small crowd gathered on the road below. I imagined them slandering me for using such poor style. But the moves were so cool: low-angle to overhanging face climbing, hand and finger cracks, a well-protected intricate crux and dicey moves in between.

Placing a few pins on rappel was one thing. So was a little hangdogging. Full-on top roping a route prior to leading it was still considered unacceptable for a legitimate ascent. To work the crux pitch, I had to convince belayers to sit at a cramped, hanging anchor. I thought that if I could make the belay more comfortable I might have an easier time getting people to go up there. So I rigged up one of my dad's four-foot-by-four-foot pallets, portaledge style, and left it fixed complete with a folding metal chair. It was practically a tourist attraction. I soon had belayers lining up to check out the "Space Station."

But I also had another problem to contend with: the two black water steaks right at the crux seam that would seep long after a rainstorm. I learned this the hard way with local Scotsman Jerry Handren.

Trying to save time, I had omitted placing the RPs right above the belay. As I deadpointed into the seam, my fingertips only touched slime. I pitched off, falling around the corner and down past the belay.

"Bloody hell!" Jerry said. "Try putting some gear in next time!"

BY THE FALL OF 1986, I'd figured out the tricky, undercling crux moves and had the upper crack wired, but I still hadn't linked the sequence. The climbing season was rapidly coming to an end. Finally, late in September, we got a beautiful weekend. Randy Rackcliff agreed to second what he could and jumar the rest.

Above the leaf-covered ground, I made my way up the runout slab and stepped left into a small corner to place a cam. I padded my feet up faint little scoops with the sensation that I could stick to anything in the cool, dry temperatures. By this time, the bolt-ladder pitch felt like a warm-up and I easily cranked up the thin flakes. Soon I was standing on a small ledge below the steep yellow wall.

The next pitch was never a gimmie. I did the reachy, fingertip traverse to the bucket in a state of heightened awareness and tried not to think about the ledge I'd hit if I fell. I high-stepped and liebacked into a small corner, fiddled in the only piece of gear I could fit—a homemade half-Friend—then launched up the final, pumpy moves to the Space Station.

As Randy lowered out to clean the traverse, I sat on the platform, staring out across the river valley. Like my hero Jimmy Dunn, I wanted



to complete a full-length testpiece to the top of Cathedral, a modern-day version of his route, The Prow. I knew that this was it: it was Sunday; I had school all week; soon it would probably be raining. If I didn't finish the crux pitch now, it might take until June before the rock was climbable again. Randy reached the belay and we exchanged gear in our habitual silence.

I climbed up to the crux, but I was too rushed, too anxious. I whipped off, then lowered down to regroup. I could feel in my fingers the three pitches it had taken to get to this point. I didn't have many attempts in me.

More silence. Finally, I launched off again, liebacking up the initial arête and deadpointing the seam. A few finger locks, then a high step: I smeared my feet on a faint bulge and changed the lieback into an undercling. Facing left, downhill, I reached up and right to a little pod. As I matched on the pod, I started to think I might stick the sequence. Next thing I knew I was punching it up the sharp, overhanging crack that leads to a small stance above the difficulties.

When I reached the stance, I let out a scream of jubilation, but oddly enough I didn't have the overwhelming sense of excitement that I had expected. I just felt kind of numb. Perhaps after so much work it was simply more of a relief to have it over.

I shook out and continued past fixed bashies on 5.11 terrain all the way to the top. Anchored to the guard fence, I faced the tourists who had driven up the road to view the autumn colors.

"How long did that take?" I was immediately asked.

"About five months," I replied.

Though more accurately, the journey had begun with Hugh and John, more than two years before. ■

[Photo] Jim Surette on Liquid Sky (III 5.13, 500'), Cathedral Ledge, New Hampshire, in 1986, prior to the first ascent (Ruthann Brown and Randy Rackcliff belay from the Space Station platform). Hugh Herr and John Bouchard began working the aid line Yellow

Brick Road in 1984, but it took Surette's rebellious youth, a departure from traditional tactics and the Space Station—a fixed portaledge belay—to make the route happen. Today it is considered a Cathedral Ledge classic. S. Peter Lewis