

Chapter

The Motorcycle Mystique

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Perhaps one word best sums up the appeal of motorcycles: *fun*. Fun is what I had the first time I rode my neighbor's minibike nearly three decades ago. It's what I had this morning when I took my bike out for a ride.

But it's a complex fun, composed of many facets. Part of the pleasure of riding comes from the freedom and mobility the machine gives you. The exhilaration you feel as you power effortlessly up to cruising speed provides a portion of the fun. Part of your enjoyment comes from developing your riding skills—your ability to control the beast.

In this chapter, I'll show you why motorcycle riding can be such a rewarding, exhilarating, and liberating experience.

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The Thrill of the Open Road

The sun creeps over the treetops, its warm rays driving the chill from your limbs as you open the garage door and wheel your motorcycle out onto the driveway. You prop up the bike and check to make certain everything is okay, which it will be because you take good care of your machine. You don your helmet and jacket and pull on your gloves, and then start your engine. The beast jumps to life and then settles into a lumpy, powerful idle. You look over the bike one last time, and then mount up and ride away. Now the fun begins.

At about the same time, your neighbor, co-worker, friend, or family member is unloading his—or her—dirtbike at a local off-road park. He goes through the same rituals, giving the machine a thorough preflight inspection, donning protective gear, and then mounting up, snicking the machine into gear, and riding away. Now the fun begins.

You take it easy at first, waiting for your tires to warm. You shift through the gears, feeling the satisfying mesh of the cogs, and breathe in the cool, clean morning air. The vibration through the handlebars and footpegs feels reassuring, making you aware of your machine's mechanical presence.

As you ease out onto the practice track, looking for oncoming riders, you do a warm-up lap. With each lap, you increase your speed, getting air over the jumps. The bike responds perfectly to every weight shift, to every control input.

As your tires warm, you start accelerating harder through each curve. You snake through a series of S-curves, settling into a rhythm among you, the road, and your bike, engaged in a dance as elegant as any ballet. This is what it's all about.

As your muscles warm, you start riding harder, hitting the triple section perfectly, and taking inside lines where others are taking the longer, slower outside one. You and your bike find the track's rhythm, one that's less of a ballet and more of a break dance. This is what it's all about.

It doesn't matter whether you're riding a cutting-edge sportbike, a heavyweight cruiser, a big touring bike, or a powerful but agile dirtbike; the thrill of the ride is what draws you out again and again. Whatever emotional baggage you may have accumulated, you leave behind on the open road. When you're participating in a dance with your bike and the road, it doesn't matter that your boss is a pointy-headed sociopath, that your spouse shouts at you, or that your kids act like juvenile delinquents. There's no room for such worries on a bike because the activity at hand requires your total, undivided attention.

Bikes Are Beautiful

Most of us find motorcycles themselves gratifying—objects of art with an innate beauty that fills some need within us.

Motorcyclists tend to be *gearheads*. We love looking at our motorcycles almost as much as we love riding them. (In fact, some folks seem to be more enamored of viewing their machines than they are of riding them; legions of people trailer their motorcycles to different events around the country instead of riding them.)

Motorcycles possess a raw mechanical beauty. You'll be seeing all kinds of beautiful bikes throughout this book, but for starters, I think no bike better illustrates this visceral look than Harley-Davidson's Sportster. While Sportsters are Harley's smallest bikes, they are by no means small. They're midsize bikes, weighing around 525 pounds with a full tank of gas. Visually, the 1998 model is little changed from the original Sportster introduced in 1957, and many people agree that that's a good thing.



Cycle Babble

While it's not exactly a technical term, often you will hear the word **gearhead** used when describing a motorcyclist. Gearhead refers to a person with a strong interest in all things mechanical.



Harley's Sportsters, such as this XL 1200R Roadster, represent the elemental motorcycle. They consist of an engine, a couple of tires, and a gas tank—you'll find virtually nothing superfluous here.

(Photograph by Kevin Wing)

Until 2004, Sportsters were practically dinosaurs in every respect: They weren't very powerful, they were uncomfortable, they didn't handle exceptionally well, and they shook like unbalanced washing machines. Yet Harley sold as many of them as it could build. The latest Sportsters, with their rubber-mounted engines, belong firmly in the

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present. Yet they retain what I believe is an honest, brutal appearance that, to many eyes, is how a motorcycle should look. But now riders no longer have to overlook or correct a Sportster's flaws just to ride the archetypal motorcycle.

The looks of most Harleys, not just Sportsters, elicit strong, mostly favorable responses from motorcyclists and nonmotorcyclists alike. No other motorcycle company has had its products elevated to near-art status the way Harley-Davidson has.

As you'll see in Chapter 18, the customized machines of such builders as Arlen Ness, Mallard Teal, and Donnie Smith often resemble metallic sculptures more than motorcycles. A visit to any custom-bike show can take on the trappings of a visit to a museum.

All of this provides a good example of how important the look of a motorcycle is. That's as true of a Yamaha, Triumph, Laverda, or BMW as it is of a Harley. Motorcyclists love the way bikes look, and for every bike, there is someone who loves its appearance.

I learned this the hard way. A while back, in an article on motorcycle style, I poked fun at a bike that was generally accepted as being one of the uglier machines to have been produced during the past 20 years. I wrote that these motorcycles were probably very nice bikes, but they were so butt-ugly that no one ever found out because no one would be seen on one. I thought this was a fair assessment, since the bike had been a sales disaster.



Motorcycology

The demise of an entire motorcycle company can partly be traced to its producing one motorcycle that the public found visually unappealing. BSA attempted to enter the modern motorcycle market by producing a three-cylinder motorcycle, the BSA Rocket 3. The bike showed promise, but its styling, created by an industrial design firm with no experience in the motorcycle market, received such a dismal public reception that the resulting low sales caused BSA to implode.

Fair or not, at least one reader took issue with my critique and wrote in suggesting that my head was deeply embedded in a place that defied all laws of physics. The man owned one such “ugly motorcycle,” and it had given him more than 100,000 miles of enjoyment. I felt bad about that situation, not because the reader questioned my hygienic habits and insulted my ancestors, but because I had belittled a motorcycle that obviously meant a great deal to him.

The Tao of Two Wheels

Some time ago, a colleague of mine, a reporter who covered religious topics at a newspaper, asked me why I didn't go to church. I told her I did go to church every day I went out riding my motorcycle.

For many motorcyclists, the ceremony of going for a ride provides the same spiritual sustenance other people find through the ceremonies conducted by organized religions. The similarities are striking. We wear our leathers and riding suits as vestments, we have a prescribed ritual for starting our engines, and our favorite roads compose our liturgy.

The very nature of riding a motorcycle forces the rider into a spiritual state. Think of it this way: most religious systems encourage some form of meditative technique. Christians have prayer. Some Native Americans meditate inside sweat lodges, and Eastern spiritual systems advocate elaborate chanting techniques. All these methods have as their common general goal the transcendence of the self or ego in order to get in touch with some greater force.

Motorcycling forces riders to transcend their egos—to empty themselves and exist in the world around them. The consequences of not being totally aware of their actions and environment, of becoming distracted by the baggage of their everyday lives, are too great. When you're out in the world on a bike, you must be completely in the moment, completely aware of your surroundings, or you may find yourself meeting your concept of God earlier than you might have hoped.

But when everything is working, when you and your bike are totally in sync and the road rushing under your feet feels like an extension of your body—at those times, you get in touch with divinity.

Biker Chic

Not all that long ago, motorcycles were considered the domain of leather-clad hoodlums—guys you didn't want your daughter to be seen with. But that stereotype has always been inaccurate, and most people now realize that.

Motorcycling began to gain social acceptance in the 1960s, when the Japanese began exporting small, unimimidating motorcycles to the United States, but only in recent years has motorcycling been elevated to the status of high fashion.

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Motorcycle Moments

Although most people realize that motorcyclists are respected members of society, a few holdouts still cling to the image of the outlaw biker. During the summer of 1997, the BMW Riders Association held a rally at Fontana Village in Graham County, North Carolina. Citing Graham County Sheriff's Office reports that 14,000 outlaw bikers were about to invade the county, law-enforcement agencies from across the state descended on the rally. They set up road blocks, searched motorcycles for drugs and weapons, and generally harassed rally-goers. Apparently, intelligence gatherers failed to inform officials that BMW riders tend to be the most conservative segment of the motorcycling community and that there probably aren't 14,000 outlaw bikers left in the entire country.

Celebrities have always ridden motorcycles. Clark Gable terrorized Los Angeles on his Ariel Square Four. Marlon Brando used his own personal motorcycle in the film *The Wild One*. James Dean rode bikes from the time he was in high school. Steve McQueen's real-life racing antics made the jump scene in *The Great Escape* look feeble.

But these were Hollywood's bad boys—sexy rebels who knew no fear. You wouldn't find a nice woman like Donna Reed or a respectable fellow like Jimmy Stewart straddling a motorcycle.

Sometime during the 1980s, that changed. This shift in our collective perception began slowly. Photos of celebrity CEO Malcolm Forbes touring the world on his Harley-Davidson appeared in mainstream magazines, and Juan Carlos, the King of Spain, could be found touring his domain on a Harley. And, of course, Hollywood's latest string of bad boys—people such as Mickey Rourke, Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis, and Arnold Schwarzenegger—came out of the closet and proclaimed themselves bikers.

But it didn't stop there. Nice, respectable folks such as Jay Leno and Mary Hart let the world know they were motorcyclists. Country boy Lyle Lovett began appearing on magazine covers aboard his hot-rod Ducati. Rosie O'Donnell seldom appeared in the tabloids without her Suzuki Intruder. Ewen "Obi-Wan" McGregor took months off from his lucrative film career to take the trip-of-a-lifetime adventure tour. Mark-Paul Gosselaar of *NYPD Blue* likes to ride motocross. And Anthony Quinn's son Francesco has been riding since the tender age of 4.

Now motorcycles are must-have fashion accessories for celebrities and celebrity wannabes, much like nipple rings were *de rigueur* for Seattle grunge rockers in the early 1990s.

The Art of Motorcycles

Although the motorcycle-as-nipple-ring is a fairly recent development, bikes have always had a strong influence on popular culture. In turn, popular culture has played a strong role in developing the motorcycle community.

The appeal of motorcycles to actors is no coincidence. Because riding a bike is a high-profile activity, motorcycles have always been an excellent method for studios to showcase and draw attention to their stars.

The history of motorcycles in film is as old as the history of motion pictures itself. Motorcycles appeared in some of the earliest silent films, including *Mabel at the Wheel* (1914), in which Charlie Chaplin drops Mabel off the back of his motorcycle and into a mud puddle.

Films about motorcycle riders appeared early on, including in *No Limit* (1935), in which English actor George Formby played a motorcycle-riding hero battling a gang of biker toughs.

While motorcycles played many roles in Hollywood films, the medium of film played an even more influential role in shaping motorcycle culture. As motorcycle films became more popular, increasing numbers of riders tried to emulate their screen heroes. When Marlon Brando portrayed Johnny in *The Wild One*, he portrayed a very atypical motorcyclist. After a generation of bikers grew up with Brando's Johnny as a role model, though, the image of the leather-clad motorcycle-riding hood, while still an aberration, became much more common.

Because of the influence of films, portrayals of motorcyclists became self-fulfilling prophecies. The myriad outlaw biker B-movies Hollywood cranked out during the 1960s and 1970s spawned a subculture of motorcyclists who modeled themselves on the bikers in those films. When Peter Fonda portrayed the philosophical Wyatt in *Easy Rider*, he gave birth to the real-life hippie poet-biker stereotype. When Arnold Schwarzenegger came back as promised in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, he did so on a Harley Fat Boy. Soon a Harley and a cigar were the fashion accessories of the 1990s.

From a Wild One to an Easy Rider

The films *The Wild One* and *Easy Rider* marked the beginning and the end of Hollywood's most influential period on motorcycling and are the two most important motorcycle films ever made.

The Wild One became the archetypal biker flick because it was the first to portray the unique breed of bikers that sprang up in post-World War II America.

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Motorcycle Moments

The event that inspired the film *The Wild One*, the so-called Hollister Invasion, was actually more of a nonevent. On the Fourth of July of 1947, about 3,500 motorcyclists rode to Hollister, California (a town of about 4,500), to attend an American Motorcycle Association (AMA) race meeting. Another 500 or so riders showed up just to have a little fun. A few bikers got a bit out of hand, and by noon the next day, 29 of them had been cited for drunkenness, indecent exposure, and traffic violations. The real importance of the event involved its press coverage: Newspapers ran hyperbolic tales of anarchy and debauchery as thousands of bikers ran amuck, and *Life* magazine printed an infamous photo of a beer-guzzling rider stretched out on his customized Harley amid a pile of beer bottles. (The photo was staged by the *Life* photographer.) The myth of the outlaw biker was born.

According to legend, the term *onepercenter*, used to describe outlaw bikers, was created after the Hollister Invasion, when an AMA official blamed the trouble on the 1 percent of motorcyclists who belonged to the outlaw contingent.

This film initiated a decades-long period of mistrust between motorcyclists and the general public. Johnny and his buddies seem pretty tame by today's standards; compared to bikers portrayed in later flicks, they're about as nice a bunch of boys as you'll ever meet. But back in 1953, Johnny represented the antichrist to Middle America.

The Wild One gave birth to a new genre: the B biker movie. In the 1950s and 1960s, Hollywood cranked out a pile of low-budget biker flicks. Each of these films tried to outdo the others in portraying the wild outlaw biker. *Easy Rider*, starring Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, and Jack Nicholson (in his first major film role), shattered that stereotype. Directed by Dennis Hopper, the movie changed everything. No longer was the antihero biker a confused Neanderthal, mindlessly lashing out at whatever got in his way. Instead, *Easy Rider* presented the biker as a sensitive, thoughtful enigma.

With the film Easy Rider, actors Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda turned the Hollywood biker image upside down.

(Photo courtesy Motorcyclist™ magazine)



The financial success of *Easy Rider* ensured another host of imitators, but the biker-flick genre's success was short-lived. The problem seemed to be that there was no new ground to break: *Easy Rider* was such an encompassing film that all following flicks were pale imitations by comparison.

Motorcycle Moments

Although Peter Fonda was an accomplished motorcyclist before he filmed *Easy Rider*, co-star Dennis Hopper was anything but. Before he made the film, Hopper's motorcycle experience was confined to a scooter he had owned in the 1950s—and he had crashed that machine in a rather spectacular fashion. After finishing the film, Hopper admitted to having been scared silly by his Harley.

Easy Rider: The Convenience of Bikes

Given the influence motorcycles have had on film and on our general culture, it's easy to argue the more esoteric appeal of motorcycling, but the sport has some practical benefits as well.

The relatively low price of motorcycles makes them attractive as practical transportation. While prices have risen dramatically during the past couple of decades, for the most part, bikes are still much less expensive than cars. You can buy a motorcycle in “like-new” condition in the \$2,500 price range. For that money, you can pick up a bike that will deliver years or even decades of trouble-free transportation. Try finding a car for the same amount that isn't ready for the crusher.

In congested urban areas, the small size and mobility of a motorcycle provide real advantages over a car. An experienced rider can zip through traffic, and in places where the practice is legal (such as California), you can ride between lanes on the freeways (a practice known as *lane splitting*).

And with a motorcycle, you will never have to worry about a parking spot. You can always find a space to back into because you'll require only a fraction of the space a car requires.



Cycle Babble

Lane splitting refers to the practice of riding between lanes of traffic on a freeway. While this practice may sound dangerous, studies indicate that it might actually be safer than idling along in a traffic jam.

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Another practical benefit of motorcycles is their fuel efficiency. Even the biggest touring bike or fastest sportbike gets as many miles to the gallon as most econocars, and when ridden prudently, a smaller motorcycle can get 60 miles to the gallon or better. My wife once got 79 miles to the gallon on a small motorcycle she rode through the mountains of Colorado.

If global climate change really is caused by the burning of fossil fuels, as the majority of respected scientists believe it is, we may soon be facing the prospect of ever more dramatically increased fuel prices. While this does not bode well for motorsports in general, because of the fuel-efficient nature of motorcycles, we could be poised for a new boom of motorcycles as a form of practical transportation. This has been the case for years in Europe.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ You get from motorcycling what you put into it.
- ◆ Like meditation, motorcycling requires your undivided attention.
- ◆ Biker flicks have shaped motorcycle culture as much as motorcycle culture has shaped biker flicks.
- ◆ Motorcycles can be practical as well as fun.