

CUSTOM CRAZY

The custom motorcycle scene has experienced enormous growth over the past few years. *The City Magazine's* motorcycle enthusiast **Hugh Francis Anderson** explains how it became a global phenomenon with thousands of fans



As technology and motoring advance into the world of ultra-high performance, masses of bikers are turning their backs on the new and investing tens of thousands into the customised rebirth of vintage motorcycles. With custom shops sprouting up from Tokyo to Poland and Australia to France, the movement is showing no signs of slowing.

In London, the scene has grown from a handful of humble garage builders to numerous new-age custom workshops. Although the popularity of custom bikes has skyrocketed, it remains an artisan's game. Whatever the style – from rigid-framed, extended rake choppers to single seat, dropped clip-on café-racers – there are no limits to design possibilities; the only pursuit is originality.

There has long been a pseudo-rivalry between bikers triggered by countercultural discrepancies and youth-like frustrations. What was once a social taboo, often associated with violence and the rough mumblings of a 'degenerate' class, has sprouted, organically, into the middle-class mainstream, with a fearful commercial following. ☺

The Distinguished Gentleman's Ride, ©Amy Shore

⊙ There is now an entire cultural movement based on the renewal of worn-out, broken motorcycles, jovially re-cycled, which has gripped social media and spread to encompass fashion, grooming and design. Yes we've sold out, but we've sold out for sweet rides and whole lotta fun.

As a devoted patron of the custom bike scene, I've revelled in this boom, I've followed the handful of modest guys with a passion for bikes bloom into internationally renowned builders, sought after by the likes of BMW, Yamaha and Ducati for design inspiration; and it's all great. Adam Kay, Founder of London's own Untitled Motorcycles, began working on his first bike in a small Camden garage five years ago, and now he's fully booked with back-to-back commissions. "When I started in 2010, the industry was non-existent. There were a couple of places, but in central London we're one of the only people doing what we do. Now it's 2015 and it's gone crazy."

Untitled Motorcycles specialises in the rebirth of vintage BMW boxer-twins. "We make bikes that work, that are rideable," says Kay. "Everything is bespoke." It is, in fact, this bespoke individuality that people seek above all else; why people spend upwards of £15,000 on a build, even though a brand-new bike can be bought for under £10,000. "They're completely bored, they don't want to buy off the shelf. Everybody wants something for themselves, which is a good thing for us, but when you all become individual, maybe you're not individual any more; you become part of the same thing."

I agree. The scene continues to move all too gratefully in the mainstream, but again it stumps me with another saving grace; the joy of practical creation to relieve boredom and stress, another reason Kay attributes to the on-going inner-city growth. "One of our customers just looked at a computer screen all day; there's no joy in that. He would come in on Saturdays and do welding and grinding, he really wanted to get involved. Getting your hands dirty, chopping metal, making sparks fly, the smell of petrol and oil, it's a real he-man-type thing; getting back to basics."

With Facebook, Instagram and throngs of blogs dedicated to the scene, everyone wants to showcase their bikes and subsequent self-perpetuated underground white-collar-style. "Without the internet we wouldn't have a successful business," says Kay. "The internet has changed everything." And it truly has; fashion has boarded the custom bike bandwagon by redefining style to suit, from perfectly sculpted beards and *Grease*-like hairstyles to bespoke tweed suits and rugged footwear, biking has become an extension of personality, which harks





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The Bike Shed Show, ©Amy Shore



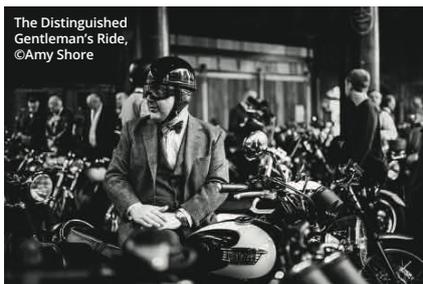
The Bike Shed Show, ©Amy Shore



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The Distinguished Gentleman's Ride, ©Amy Shore



The City Magazine's Hugh Francis Anderson

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back to the Marlon Brando, James Dean and Steve McQueen manliness of the 50s and 60s, albeit tainted with superficiality.

Nevertheless, brands such as Barbour, Edwin, Levi's, Belstaff, Deus ex Machina, Iron & Resin, etc etc, all define the 21st-century biker. Belstaff, for example, is modelled by David Beckham, whose open affiliation to the custom scene and its fashion following has become a powerful marketing tool. His recent BBC documentary *Into the Unknown*, showcases biking's most desirable quality, freedom, and all on customised Triumph Scramblers (think Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape*). Could there be a better escape after a manic week in the City? It's hard to imagine.

A by-product of all cultural movements is the mass gathering of its participants. The London scene is dominated by two such meetings: The Distinguished Gentleman's Ride, a ride around the streets of London on custom bikes, dressed like gentlemen; and The Bike Shed Show, an art-gallery-type event to admire the best in custom bikes and contemporary style. What they achieve is an answer to the inner-city zeitgeist. They propel the scene's popularity into newer avenues, encompassing the entire creative industry; from photographers to graphic designers, these gatherings give lost creatives a place to belong.

What started as a minute following has boomed in such record quick time that it's impossible to predict future developments. Nevertheless, what we'll always be left with is a movement that purveys the resurrection of vintage motorcycles, and there's little more that's as enthralling as that. **C**

*The Bike Shed Show, Tobacco Dock, Friday 22 May 7:00pm - Sunday 24 May 2015 6:00pm, thebikeshed.cc, Tickets, tickettailor.com
The Distinguished Gentleman's Ride, 27 September, gentlemansride.com
untitledmotorcycle.com*