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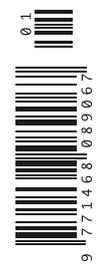
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Speed Weevil, all the way from Swindon to Las Vegas and going home a winner.



WORDS & PHOTOS: BLUE

ARTISTRY IN IRON

FREMONT STREET, LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

You either love Las Vegas or you hate it. Being a curmudgeonly sort not given to gambling or crowds, I'm in the latter camp. I try to avoid Vegas as much as possible. But then, earlier this year, Pete Pearson of Rocket Bobs Cycles was invited to be one of the builders in the illustrious Artistry in Iron show, held as part of the Las Vegas Bike Fest

This was quite a big deal. Artistry in Iron invites the cream of custom builders and, in its thirteen year history, it had never extended that invitation to a British builder (in fact, the number of customisers from outside the North American continent could be counted on the fingers of one hand). The fact that I immediately overcame my natural antipathy and started emptying my piggy bank and selling things on eBay to raise the air fare indicates just how big a deal. (Okay, I have to admit that I didn't actually commit to an air ticket until I was pretty sure that Pete would actually finish the bike he was building for the contest... Mrs Miller didn't raise no fools.)

As I reported last year, Las Vegas Bike Fest has moved from the sterile and remote setting of a convention centre to downtown, just south of the Fremont Street Experience. Believe me, this was

not a selling point for me. Fremont Street is the tacky, cheesy side of Vegas. It's like Great Yarmouth without the charm or the class or the dignity. Or the sea. It is an area with a surprising amount of history—the first hotel in Vegas was on Fremont Street; it boasted the city's first telephone, first paved street, first traffic light and Nevada's first gaming licence. But nowadays it's a honey trap for tourists, attracted by the light shows, the zipline and the street entertainers (I'm sure that punching a living statue can't be a crime).

By the time I arrived, the Rocket Bobs contingent had swelled to include not only Pete and his wife Lisa, but Mark and Lisa Nadin (whose own V-Max was featured in 100% Biker #212) and Steve and Tina Tawton. eBay had been red hot. Pete's bike, 'Speed Weevil', had arrived just in time and he and Mark had assembled it in the Artistry in Iron hall. I hadn't seen it in its finished state—in fact, I had banned Pete from ◀

Absolutely gorgeous Triumph from Anthony Robinson at Gasoline & Coffee in California.



DO NOT SIT ON BIKE

Robinson
Coffee



Pete Pearson thrown to the floor by Aki Sakamoto of Hog Killers. Aki's not a sore loser, honest!

Kyle Shorey of Speed Foundry, Texas, with leading bike journalist Marilyn Stemp, former editor of Ironworks magazine and now heading up the online Iron Trader News.



Built for Geico by Paul Jr, Designs in 2013 to honour the Armed Forces, there is very little on this bike I like. Sorry.



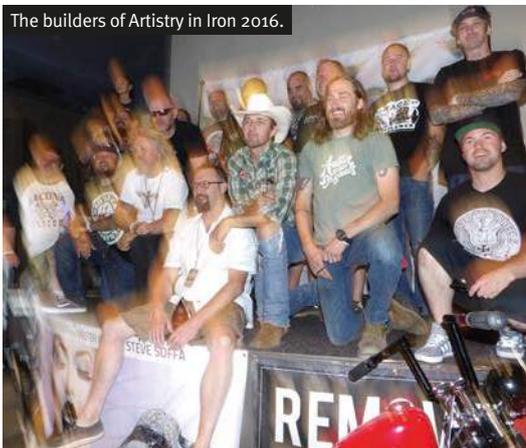
FREMONT STREET IS LIKE GREAT YARMOUTH WITHOUT THE CHARM OR THE CLASS OR THE DIGNITY. OR THE SEA

sending me photos some weeks previously because I like to get a clean first impression of a build—and that first impression was just how very tiny it was. To be honest, between us we could have probably brought it across the Atlantic in our hand luggage. You will be seeing more of Speed Weevil in a future issue, but suffice to say, it's very small, it has a 1935 Triumph race engine and it's as intricate and fascinating as a piece of fine jewellery. Mind you, this is no mere bauble. When it's been seen at a few shows, Pete intends on taking it to Bonneville next year for a crack at a land speed record. I've already started saving.

There were seventeen bikes in all in the show, although Cristian Sosa arrived too late to be included in the judging, which was undertaken by the builders themselves and just the builders—no journalists, no VIP extras, no input from the organisers. If anything

this made it more difficult to judge a possible result than usual. Putting Speed Weevil to one side, I really don't know what I personally would have put as the top bike in the hall. I really liked Austin Andrella's Yamaha XS650, but then Anthony Robinson from Gasoline & Coffee had built a stunning little Triumph T100. Anthony isn't even what we would class as a professional builder—he actually makes his living installing garage doors—but his bike would stand among the best at any show across the world. I particularly liked Mark Shell of Bonneville Customs' Harley; it was a build that shouldn't have worked on paper—springer front end, lots of chrome and brass, hand change, there was an awful lot going on. But it had been executed with such style and precision that the result was stunning and it would go on to win a deserved second place in the competition.

We argued over Johnny Branch's chopper; I was the one dissenting voice, I admit. Why build a sit up and beg chop and then put wheely bars on it? While I appreciated the engineering, it was neither fish nor fowl for me. I too was possibly the only one of us who really liked Andrew Ursich's Panther. It was so ludicrously over the top with its surfeit of engraving



The builders of Artistry in Iron 2016.



Winners of the Bagger Show. Yes, a Bagger Show. I was in heaven...



Matey on the left must have been certain he had the most radical bike in the show, Until this, um, happened...



No, no idea about the llamas...



The Brits who came to support Rocket Bobs. Except the bloke on the far right, he's only an honorary Brit.



Jon MacDowell from Bonneville Customs won the outside show and an invite to participate in Artistry in Iron 2017.

and gold plating that you couldn't help but smile. It was the Lily Savage of custom bikes and, were this 1971 and not 2016, it would have wiped the floor with the competition.

One bike in particular made me muse on how the custom scene does vary country by country. Adam Gaspic's raw Honda street/café racer would have been lapped up at a show in the UK and probably given its own VIP plinth at the Bike Shed, but here it seemed oddly out of place. That's not because this was a Harley-dominated show; as with elsewhere, the days of Harley-and-nothing-but-Harleys seem to be gone.

With the first day under our belts and having managed to get at least half of us in the same place at one time (by now we had collected our friends Kirk and Lisa of Custom Design Studio—our third Lisa and we had a Luci, too), we went off to eat and listen to Pete gently worrying that no-one would like or understand Speed Weevil. This was the soundtrack for the next four days, but one that will be familiar to anyone who has invested their soul in a build.

However, the next morning I had friends to meet, although I hadn't told anyone else just who. I am a

I WANDERED OUT ON SATURDAY MORNING AND STRAIGHT INTO THE BAGGER SHOW ... I CANNOT LIE, I PANICKED AND RAN BACK INTO THE HALL.



The somewhat ostentatious winner's bracelet.



Police work is dangerous. This poor officer hasn't noticed the tiger about to pounce on him.

One of my favourites from Mark Shell at Bonneville Customs which was runner-up.



Jason Wilson of TV's 'Sacred Steel Bikes', sporting bandages after a recent spill.



Steve Iacona of Iacona Customs' lovely race-inspired Triumph T120.



The mighty Speedbuggy USA in action.



big kid, I get a kick out of introducing John Reed to people and watching their jaws drop. It had taken me a month to persuade John to fly into Vegas for the weekend (aided and abetted by Marilyn Stemp of Iron Trader News), but it was worth it just to see Mark and Pete speechless when he walked in. He then walked around Speed Weevil and pointed out everything Pete had done wrong. Well, no, he didn't, although Pete was convinced that was what he was doing.

I should say that there was a lot more to Las Vegas Bike Fest than just the Artistry in Iron display (although, at times over the weekend, it did seem like our world had contracted to that one hall) even if it was a bit scary. I wandered out on Saturday morning and straight into the Bagger show. Long-time readers will know that, in the American parlance, I don't get baggers. Sorry folks, that's how it is. Now I was suddenly plunged into wheels that belong on farm carts and acres of chrome. I cannot lie, I panicked and ran back into the hall. I did venture back out because, of the many bands playing, one was a particular favourite of mine and even my baggerophobia wasn't going to stop me seeing Speedbuggy USA. Very good they were too, although perhaps music always sounds better when the sun is shining and it's t-shirt weather.

By the time the prizegiving came around at 7pm on Saturday night, it felt like we had been in Vegas forever. An hour before that, the British contingent was mostly in meltdown. It had been a long slog to get Speed Weevil to this competition, hours of hard work and late nights and the final rush to the line had had many of us holding our breath that the bike would actually make it to America. And, of course, the prizegiving seemed to take forever. Third place was awarded to Steve Iacona of Iacona Custom Cycles in Brooklyn, New York, for his super sweet Triumph racer. As you know, second place was won by Bonneville Customs and then it was time for the

Crazy Horse 100ci V-twin, 12.9 litre Peterbilt.



"And the 'bars need to be up here..." Freddie Hernandez's Fred's Frames, still building radical front ends.



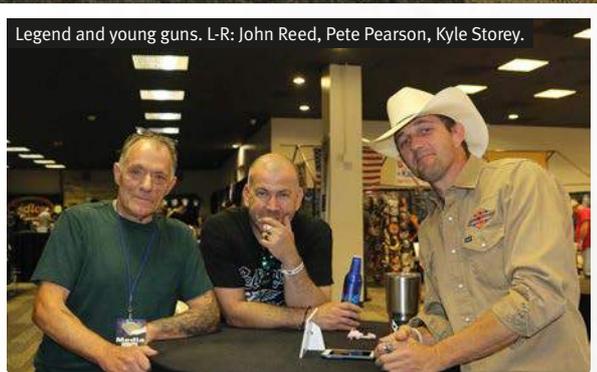
It was like the last 40 years had never happened when Andrew Ursich rolled in this Panther show bike.



Adam Gaspic's Honda would have been loved at any European show; here it was a little overlooked.



Bagger. Diamante. This is Vegas, after all.



Legend and young guns. L-R: John Reed, Pete Pearson, Kyle Storey.

FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE JOHN REED WON THE OAKLAND SHOW, A BRITISH-BUILT BIKE HAD WON A MAJOR AMERICAN SHOW

top award.

Las Vegas Bike Fest organiser Mindi Cherry began to read out the biography of the winner. Mark and I looked at each other and shook our heads, mouthing 'It's not Pete'. Clearly it was an exciting version of his life story that Pete had written himself because the next minute she had announced the winner as 'Pete Pearson of Rocket Bobs'!

The next few moments are a bit of a blur. I believe there was shouting and whooping and whistling and running around and one or two people (John Reed, I am looking at you) had to leave the hall because that running around had kicked up dust that had got in their eyes. Speed Weevil was Pete's work, but so many of us had been caught up in the adventure, directly or indirectly. Gil and Mark who'd been

involved in the build, Lisa Pearson who had to put up with Pete when the rest of us could put the phone down, Lisa Nadin who donated her husband to Rocket Bobs in the run up to Vegas, Tony Reynolds, Steve and Tina, Nick, Damage, who were always there with not so helpful comments, Steve Bucaro, the Artistry in Iron show wrangler who put up with the British wanting this, that and the other and had adopted us by the weekend's end, John Reed, Kirk and Lisa, everyone who had followed the build on social media—so many people were part of this and not everyone could be in Vegas to see how it all panned out. And you know what? It went pretty good. For possibly the first time since John Reed himself won the Oakland Roadster Show in 1982 with the Gold Yamaha, a British built bike had won a major American West Coast show. Now, who's coming to Bonneville? ☒