



BANK ROBBER

Look back at the history of customising and you will see bikes styled after the machines that captured the imagination of their builders as kids, either through magazines, movies or ... something else beginning with 'm': can't get the hang of this alliteration.



And so, while Harley, Triumph and Honda were pumping out swing-arm frames, custom builders swapped them for hardtails and rode with Billy and Captain America across a virtual USA that either manifested itself on the A66 or a plinth in a custom show. And it was a self-perpetuating style, because those builders inspired the next generation of custom riders through magazines, movies and ... no, still haven't got it.

We could kid ourselves that it was the elegant simplicity of the rigid frame that drew us but then Harley-Davidson rewrote the rule book with the Softail and all of a sudden it was acceptable to swap a sprung seat or an impacted spine for the comfort of rear suspension.



But, of course, that only worked if the first bike that grabbed your attention was a chopper.

What if it was a 4-speed FXS Low Rider?

If you've ever wondered why Rocket Bobs' Pete Pearson has made a name for himself by modifying Harley's Dyna models, now you know.

Riding off-road since he was ten, on early Fantics and TSs, he first saw a Harley-Davidson on a TV programme when on a summer holiday in Cornwall when he was about fourteen and was smitten. It was nothing like the bikes he knew, and he knew he had to have one ... once he found out what it actually was. So lasting an impression did it create that he can still bring that TV show to mind, but it's >>



anyone's guess what it was because he glazes over and goes all wistful before he reaches the closing credits.

Luckily a family member knew enough to tell him it was a Harley-Davidson, and it took him several months to find what passed for an address in those pre-internet days, eventually sending a letter to Mr Harley-Davidson, Milwaukee, USA.

It turned out that it was an FXS Low Rider, and he's pretty sure it will have been the 1340cc Shovelhead Low Rider, known as the FXS-80 to differentiate it from the concurrent FXS-1200. It was the sickest bike he'd ever seen – thankfully history didn't record the late seventies equivalent of 'sick', because it would have been something like 'boss' – from a manufacturer with the coolest name in the world, and he's wanted one ever since ... and not 'just' a 4-speed Low Rider but the earliest possible 80-inch Low Rider it was possible to get, if not THE first.

Not enough to actually go out and get one, obviously, because he got side-tracked by surf, skateboards, hot rods and bike racing. He also dabbled in business with very little success before realising that while he was a good designer and engineer, he was also a misanthropist and had neither a head for business or the desire to acquire one: he was too engaged in increasing the sum of his engineering knowledge.

Fortuitously, Pete discovered that there's truth to the adage that behind every successful man is a woman, and Lisa proved to be his salvation being much more than 'just' the one who looks after the paperwork but the real brains and the driving force behind Fat Dog Inc ... no, Torpedo Bobs ... no, Rocket Bobs Cycle Works. Li's background is in structural engineering but she has a fierce artistic streak that manifests itself in a range of wallet chains and skull rings, and she is also credited with sorting out troublesome design issues that can have Pete scratching his head for hours, shares the credit on the Zombi bars and designed the hidden front catch on the Weeli seat. But equally importantly, she deals with Pete, acting as his sounding board, keeping him focussed and putting him straight ... much to his chagrin.

And with the business side of things in the capable hands of a kindred spirit, Pete had the opportunity and support to project his beloved Low Rider's style onto its natural heir and current custodian of the



twin shock FX, Harley's Dyna Glide, which bears more than a passing resemblance to the 4-speed Shovel.

Pete's passion for Street Bob borders on an obsession, and Rocket Bobs partly exists to manufacture cool parts for the Dyna range from the 1991 Sturgis on, figuring – correctly – that the Street Bob heralded a change of fortune for Harley's twin shock big twin street bike, but ironically, we first met Pete at Oxford Harley-Davidson through an FXCW Rocker that was in the showroom, but he was riding the prototype Pintail Street Bob that inspired our sporadic run of 'Street Bob of the Issue' features.

It was about the same time that Rocket Bobs started producing their Voodoo Fender Kit for 2006-on Dyna models, and fielding requests for a version to fit earlier 5-speed Twin Cam and Evolution models with a polite but firm 'no', because with a skinnier tyre and a different frame

it would require more than a simple tweak and they weren't ready yet ... but then a request came through that he couldn't just brush-off.

It was an email from Tony Kriz in Denver, and he wanted a Voodoo Fender Kit for a 1979 FXS. Thirty-three years disappeared, the TV was on and he was watching that Low Rider again as if for the first time. How could he not fab it as a one-off ... apart from it being thousands of miles away, and being for a frame that was technically very different to the Dyna?

Over the next eighteen months, he did increasingly more for Tony's FXS, rewarded by regular photographic updates of the bike that he almost came to regard as his own FXS by proxy in a strangely unhealthy, extra-marital postal romance.

Luckily Tony's Low Rider wasn't the only bike that he had a serious interest in: another Rocker – Blackbird – was starting to grab some attention on the show circuit.

Determined to conquer the then-new Modified Harley Class, he made the mistake of asking my opinion about his next bike, the as-yet unfinished Pressure Drop, and I suggested that the bike he was describing would be too subtle to take the populist Modified Harley class, where people vote instinctively rather than looking deeper into the build. He needed to be in AMD's Freestyle class, voted on by a jury of his peers who would be more intimately acquainted with the motor and frame, and who would see things that the rest of us wouldn't spot without a big line and an arrow pointing at it, with the words "this is clever" and a picture of the original next to it.

With the planned frame and engine mods, he was always going to be



pushing the definition of Modified Harley anyway, but with a completely free hand he set his brain to eleven and decided he was taking it to AMD World Championship Finals in Sturgis, even if they had to pay its way. And if he was going to be in Sturgis, he could drop in on Tony – or Tony could meet him in Sturgis and he could see his mistress in the metal.

Asked whether he could take Tony's Low Rider out for a blast when he was over, Tony said yes, but was Tony aware that he might not bring it back? Errr ...

The full story came out, and realising that the FXS probably meant more to Pete than to himself, Tony decided to 'give' Pete the bike in exchange for a "Pressure Drop"-style

build ... well, a simpler version.

It's a fairly safe bet that everyone on Facebook knows what happened next, as Pete "I've got a Shovel" Pearson tracked every stage from it being packaged up and sent to Charleston for US Customs to work out what to do with it, and every single nautical mile from 22nd December 2011 to the 9th January 2012 monitored on a phone app; then we were treated to the ceremonial unveiling of the bike on the 10th as it briefly glimpsed English daylight, on its way from the crate into the workshop: the geeky kid who'd always wanted the first ever 80-inch FXS finally had the closest thing he was ever likely to get his hands on, and he was going to ride, ride and ride some more, at least until Pressure Drop was finished.

And then he rolled it into the workshop and tore it down. Ahem. Well, he wouldn't have turned Pressure Drop round in the time for LICCS, and they felt it was important to be represented at the show.

Six weeks later he rolled it back onto the van, drove it to Ally Pally and >>

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took Best in Show and the AMD Sturgis ticket! He would go to the ball, but would now be taking the Low Rider with him ... I wonder if Tony will be allowed to take it round the block ... and whether he'll return? As if Pete won't have installed a tracking device: Tony has dropped in to see him at his Swindon workshop since and 'was blown away' by the 95% finished bike.

Pete would have you know that as a factory faux-pas in early 1979 – when someone thought it would be a good idea to give the engines a completely different number to the bike's VIN – that it's all the more desirable and doesn't make it look like it was stolen, which was apparently the VIN people's concern.

What isn't debatable is that he's realised his ambition to create his own custom FXS-80, although there's not a lot of the original bike left that hasn't been hit in some way.

In place of the 3.5-gallon fat bobs, that tank is a modified, de-seamed Super Glide's from 1976. It's sitting high on a decluttered frame that is now devoid of any extraneous brackets, its trailing edge notched to give a clear view of the rear rocker box. It was already fitted with a screw thread filler neck, which has allowed Pete to use one of Rocket Bobs' CNC milled brass caps, and that is matched up to a brass fuel tap that Wade from Sickboyz got from the pages of Custom Chrome.

You can't fail to have noticed the windowed headstock which brings back memories of the Voodoo Bob's headbone, but which Pete appropriately refers to as a Pane in the Neck: he's referring to the amount of work involved with a 10mm carbide burr to grind it out, but the rest of us know it's in recognition of the evangelical zeal that has gripped him since he did it. I don't think he's forgiven me yet for not loving it ... or maybe it's the suggestion that it could become the biggest, certainly the heaviest recorded 'Prince Albert' if he got within six feet of my FXS with anything more powerful than an egg whisk.



Pete likes his bikes to run low, reckoning that 20mm of suspension travel is enough for anyone, and those oh-so-skinny and shaved 35mm fork legs in their cleaned-up narrow glide yokes have been lowered by 65mm – which goes some way towards stiffening them up, while billet caps give them a modern appearance. They're topped off by a pair of Rocket Bobs' Zombi 'bars for narrow glides, finished off with Joker Machine's hand controls and Rocket Bobs billet grips, while a Motogadget speedo nestles in the clamp, in the shadow of a one off billet headlamp shell fronted by a Joker Machine bezel.

While we're talking suspension, taking up the rear is a Duo Glide's 'Arrowhead' swing-arm, which he reckons offers a more elegant line compared to the box-section affair that replaced it, and the full 20mm of suspension travel will only ever be realised

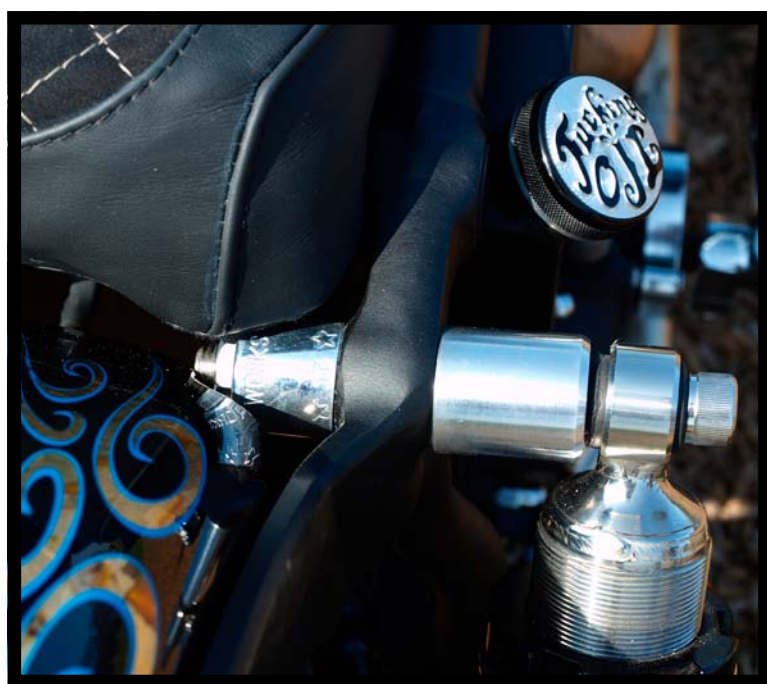
by the White Helmet performing an inverted pyramid manoeuvre with the specially prepared set of Hagon's Nitro shocks. It breaks with Pete's minimalist vision, having added a couple of brackets to keep his purpose-built brake hose in check; and he's moved the original chain guard bracket onto the opposite rail where it serves as an anchor for the underslung banana caliper's torque arm, which gives him a warm feeling inside.

It's running on an uncharacteristically simple set of laced, ally-rimmed wheels for now, the rear obviously beneath a Voodoo Fender but not the original one that he supplied to Tony. He's built new Voodoo struts from scratch, welded them to the frame and blended them in to match the old steel of the original frame. And with the super clean back end, he fabbed a side-mount bracket that currently serves as home for the out-of-state plate.

It wouldn't be a Rocket Bobs build without the smallest of seats, and this Shovel 'kicker' seat is a gel-foam pad covered in leather and

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Alcantara faux suede. It sits above a horseshoe oil tank that Pete is less than happy with, but until he's worked out what to replace it with, he has fitted tunnels from the battery tray to the motor to take the leads from a Crane single fire coil, which shares that space with a Rocket Pack: Rocket Bobs' new Lithium Ion battery.

In truth, he misses the invisibility of the Dyna's oil tank tucked beneath the transmission, not least because it has already sumped once. Ah, the immortal struggle between gravity and an oil-pump's check valve.

At the heart of the bike is a 98-inch big bore stroker motor with big cams and a taste for starter bendix drives, which Pete can't claim responsibility for beyond the exhaust system. He has got plans for an open primary into the future, but there's no hurry because the keys to this bike are the ones that will need to be prised from his cold dead fingers. Having waited for the whole of his adult life to get

his FXS-80, nothing short of THE original 80-inch Low Rider will wrestle this from his grip.

As you'd expect of such a treasure, he put a massive amount of thought into the paint scheme for the bike that he'd never sell: it was exact, it was perfect, it cost him a day on the road heading to 8-Ball's icicle works so he could get across exactly what he wanted to the boss, Joe Black ... and Joe ignored everything. Indeed he rang him to tell him so "rambling incoherently about playing cards and gold leaf", 'clearly' high on a cocktail of recreational drugs and paint fumes. It got worse when Paul texted him some days later, throwing a colour scheme into the mix of red, green, teal, blue, white, black and gold leaf, leaving Pete convinced they were going to ruin his pride and joy, and to add insult to injury, it was due to land on the Monday before Ally Pally. Then Wednesday, Thursday and finally a "can you come and pick it up on Friday morning?"

Finally the Shovel was finished on Friday morning and Paul turned up with the paint at 1pm, mistakenly expecting to be offered a brew before the big reveal ... which Pete was already dreading: he'd been sending Paul angry text messages for a week.

A huge sigh of relief was breathed as the T-shirt was pulled off the rear fender: it was nothing like Pete had asked for, but by the same token it was nothing like Pete could have imagined, and still struggles to describe. And the tank was even better! Exceptional quality, and above and beyond all Pete's expectations – as indeed it should have been, bearing in mind that Rocket Bobs is an agent for 8-Ball in the south of England. It was a risky strategy even having worked with him for a year or so and getting a feel for his tastes, but it paid off and Pete describes them as the finest painters he's dealt with ... well, he does now: Paul still has the text messages.

I'll leave the last word to Pete, for a change:

To me this is as close to the start of the run of the 80" Shovels that you can honestly hope to achieve, and its a life long dream come true for me: unbelievable and my perfect and ultimate bike. It could stand up and kill my dog and I would still love it. It could be the biggest pig in the world and never run right, and yet I would still never look at another bike: it's everything that I have ever got excited about, and everything I have ever been into in my life. It's a bike that fills me with adrenaline every time I look at her and I fully, totally and completely love it and feel sad at the thought that one day I will croak and we'll be separated! Call it an obsession, but to me its my life in a tidy nutshell, so scoff and mock all you want: I don't give a damn because I'm made up!

Words and Pics: Andy Hornsby >>





Shovel Day

The cast:

Twink:	Pete Pearson
BGH:	Wade Poulson
Special Guest Star:	"Bob the Wog"
Transport and Catering:	Shovel Kev
Animal Handler:	Wee Li
Grip:	The Other Stig
Best Boy:	Bunt Er
Physiotherapist:	Flea
Epsom Race Course:	Itself
Sexual advisors:	Jane Wheeler and Amanda Wright
DOP:	The Horny Wizard