

Open Road

An Affair To Remember

TESTING BIKES IS a lot like dating. Each month, these pretty things blow into our lives, and before you really get to know one another, they're gone, leaving you with just the memories.

The difference between the way *you* own a bike and the way *we* test a bike is that we never get to have a long-term relationship. Oh sure, sometimes we will occasionally do 10,000 or even 20,000 miles, but we'll give it back before it would be out of warranty, and most of the time before it has a chance to wear out a set of tires. And that's a little bit weird. Because motorcycles are meant to be lived with, like a spouse.

We know we're pretty good at revealing the talents and quirks of the bikes we evaluate, because those of you who own them write to us and tell us so. But sometimes, it's only what *you* learn by living with the machine long-term that could make the difference in a buying decision. That's why we're happy to make space on our Letters pages for your experiences and go to the trouble of doing Owners Surveys.

By thoroughly testing, we have an objective picture of how the performance of a machine rates in terms of its competition, and we'll say so, even if the manufacturers might wish we wouldn't. But it's still the elusive "personality" of a bike that we remember long after the story is written. Like people, some bikes have great personalities, perhaps in spite of obvious flaws, and others are refined and competent, but remembered as uninspiring.

The elusive quality called "Character" has been explained in many ways. At one time I liked to imagine that it was inversely proportional to the number of cylinders in the engine. I've had several singles, and they all had loads of "Character." And I can't recall a V-twin that didn't, either. Perhaps it's the irregularities in the way an engine runs that makes it charming. As a recent example, the way the latest Triumph Daytona's exhaust changes its song as it revs out tickled us all.

The engineers who understand this phenomenon best are at Harley-Davidson. H-D's latest fuel injection, (profiled in Steve Natt's article in the July 2001 issue), was designed specifically to keep Harley's signature "burbles" and "potatoes" intact when it would have been much easier to separate the cylinders with their own intake tracts, but which would have resulted in a steady "droning" sound.

You could even say that some bikes present themselves as male or female. The massive 1800cc Honda VTX is obviously a male machine. But, some are seductive



females, especially the Italian beauties, like the 998 Ducati I track-tested at Buttonwillow this month.

Now, I don't know about you, but as far as I'm concerned, getting invited to take a 998 to a racetrack is a lot like getting the chance to take a famous supermodel to the prom. Even if she never wants to see you again, you'll make sure you get pictures for your scrapbook.

It took a while for me to realize what was happening. As if preparing myself for an important date, I'd been very concerned about my physical condition for weeks beforehand. To be at my best, I'd not only taken off 10 pounds with diet, exercise and strict self-discipline but I'd even spent a small fortune on a fancy new suit—leather of course. And, as the big day drew closer, I was getting pimples! If that wasn't just like adolescent infatuation, I don't know what is.

Of course this She Creature (please don't be offended ladies, but a Ducati is a "she" just like a Jaguar or a Ferrari; beautiful, powerful, sensual and infinitely subtle, it's a compliment) was seriously out of my league. I knew that. Why is it that the ugly overconfident guys always got the really gorgeous girls; guys like Carl Fogarty? I guess because the rest of us were too intimidated.

Anyway, at the intro, after an evening of technical briefings about our date/ride, sort of like having someone list all the accomplishments and awards your prearranged partner had won on *The Dating Game*, we retired to our motel rooms to anticipate the big day. And it wasn't just the novice racers who were excited. Even Walt Fulton,

official MCN tester, famous ex-factory racer for Harley-Davidson, Kawasaki and Suzuki and star of *On Any Sunday*, couldn't get any sleep that night, so excited was even he to have a date with Gina Lola Testastretta. (I'd allowed myself a single glass of wine with dinner, to calm my nerves without dulling my senses, so I'd gotten a little shuteye.)

Next morning, when the bikes were rolled from the garage into the early morning sun, it was like your date had come down the staircase to the foyer, dress and make up perfect, and even more beautiful than you imagined... Oh, Mercy!

And when her chaperone/mechanics handed her to you, your turn to dance, you swelled with pride and hoped you wouldn't step on her toes. And what a fabulous dance partner she was. She made me feel like Prince Charming the Masterful. Of course I noticed that her identical sisters managed to flatter some of the guys into being much more masterful than myself, and therefore much faster around the course, but still my date whispered no comparisons. She assured me she was my mine alone. Just the way a girl can sweep a guy off his feet with smiles and rapt attention, I was in love.

At the end of the prom and our group date at the track, all of us journalists lounged about the cinderblock garage area smiling, our spirits elevated, our muscles tired. No group of guys sitting in fancy leather club chairs taking brandy and cigars could have been more self-satisfied.

I'm currently trying to sell off my toys (including my Ducati Paso) so I can buy a new bike, but what do I really want? I've been dating bikes for a long time. Do I want a demanding mistress, or a dependable, thoughtful companion? It's one thing to date a Ducati supersport, but actually living with a 998 might be too much. Such a high maintenance girlfriend could easily be a strain on my marriage, even if she is a machine. And if one such bike might be too much, just ask LT Snyder what it's like to keep a harem of Italian ladies happy, or better yet, ask his wife, Suzi.

Help me! I need to come back down to earth. Enough of these analogies already. Don't write and scold me, I promise I'll keep these thoughts to myself in the future. But, hey Ducati, I still want copies of the prom pictures of me and Miss Testastretta!

DAVE SEARLE

—Dave Searle
Editor