

WORLD EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

BILLY JOEL ON BIKES

'YOUR PERCEPTION IS INCREDIBLE WHEN YOU'RE ON A MOTORCYCLE'

He divorced a supermodel and wrote some cheesy hits... but you forgive it all when he talks about bikes

By Don Argento/Richard J. Atkins

What drew you to bikes?

Levittown, where I grew up, was a real blue-collar area. It was the first housing development in America built for returning veterans, so it was a boon for our parents – but nobody had any money. So what kids used to do was make motorbikes. They'd take a Briggs & Stratton motor off a lawnmower and put it on a Schwinn and 'rig it up'. It was completely illegal. Kids were smashing themselves up all over the place! But when you're a kid, you're bullet proof – made out of rubber. That started me thinking about riding.

When did you start riding?

There was a guy who lived down the road who had a BSA. It was an A50, which is the Royal Star – 500cc air-cooled twin. He taught me how to ride. I learned on the British setup, with the brake on the left and the shifter on the right-hand side. Everything's the opposite, and that's how I learned. They were fun, fast bikes, those British bikes back in the '60s. That was state-of-the-art.

He went off to Vietnam and let me use the bike. He wanted me to take care of it for him. My Mom never really knew about it. But I went to his house and cleaned the bike, oiled it, and checked the tyre pressure and chain tension... a little wrenching here and there... a carburettor adjustment now and then. There was an instruction manual that came with it and I actually read it. Then he came back from 'Nam and took the bike again.

The first bike I actually owned was an old Triumph Tiger, an early '60s model. I was 16 or 17. I didn't have a licence or insurance. I was completely illegal. It was a wreck, but it was mine. It was a total loss: the oil system leaked; the Lucas electric lights never worked. It vibrated you to pieces! I probably got my hip dysplasia from it [laughs]. It was fun. They were fast bikes for the time.

I only had it for a few months before I was in a band and I started to go on tour. I left bikes behind for a long time because I was busy working and travelling. Then I rediscovered bikes in the late '70s. All of a sudden I had a little bit of money.



His fans may know him as the Piano Man but Joel is a keen rider with a fine collection of classics

Did you start collecting then?

I wouldn't say I was collecting. I started with a Yamaha 400 Special. That was in about 1977 or '78. Then I went to a Virago 750. That was about '79 or '80. Then I got a Sportster. That's when it was a 1000cc, and was still made by AMF, before the Harley guys bought it back. It was a fun, but very crude bike. I went on to a 1340cc FLHS, basically a stripped down Electra Glide, and started dressing that out. I wanted it to look like a late-'40s era Harley.

In the early '80s, I had about 20 motorcycles: Ducatis, Moto Guzzis, Harleys, some Japanese bikes, and a couple of Triumphs. I had a Mike Hailwood Replica, a 750 SuperSport, a couple of BMWs—they were all airheads: R65, R80, R100RT, R100RS. Then, little by little, I decided which ones I wasn't using enough and started selling them off, and I regretted it as the years went on. Why did I get rid of that Ducati 750 SuperSport? Why did I get rid of that BMW R100RS? You can't find them now, or their price has gone up.

Was riding just for fun?

Well, I never had a regular job, so I never had to get anywhere. For me it was a way of getting around. I had to watch

WHAT'S THE STORY?

■ In a town known as Oyster Bay, Long Island stands a storefront called 20th Century Cycles, owned by Billy Joel. He's sold over 150 million records worldwide, but despite accumulating and customising motorcycles since the seventies he's never sold a bike. Joel's showroom, open to the public, is simply there to share his love for well-designed motorcycles.

myself because, as I said, I didn't have insurance or a licence. But it wasn't a rebellious thing. I wasn't riding a motorcycle to be bad. Although it's fun having a girl put her arms around you when you're riding on a motorcycle. Girlfriends came and went depending on how ride-friendly they were! My girlfriend now loves to ride. That's a big plus. It's the feeling of hurtling through space with nothing, no cage around you. You see so much more. Your perception is incredible when you're

on a motorcycle. You smell things. You feel temperature changes. You notice a lot more detail. You're very focused when you're on a motorcycle – if you're serious. Or if you've had an accident.

Do you ride on tour?

We take about a half-dozen different types of motorcycles. We have a truck that just trucks the bikes from gig to gig. We did the West Coast like that. We did a run down to Big Sur from San Francisco, the Monterey Peninsula, Los Angeles. California is great for riding. Back in the early '70s, I lived there for three years and I didn't ride. I didn't have a bike. I had a car and I'd drive up to the Malibu mountains. It's pretty. I didn't realise until the last few times I went how good it is for motorcycling, carving up those canyons.

I take bikes with me wherever I go. I have a boat – it's a cargo ship, and I can fit six motorcycles in the hold. So we'll take the ship up to New England: Cape Ann, the Maine coast. We'll off-load the bikes and just go! That's fun.

Do songs come to you when you're riding?

Not lyrics, music does. When I'm on a motorcycle I'm hearing the pattering

of the engine. It's like when you're on a Harley and you hear potato, potato, potato, banana, banana, banana. On Italian motorcycles I start hearing Rossini, classical music. I usually give myself a classical theme on a bike. There's a lot of Beethoven on the internal jukebox when I'm riding.

I tried to write songs about motorcycling. It's a hard word to rhyme: Cycle, fykle, Michael, that's about it. Arlo Guthrie did it with pickle and motorcycle. It's a hard thing to do. I wrote a song once called "The Motorcycle Song," and it ended up having nothing to do with motorcycling. [Sings:] "Now, I'm ridin' down that road and I'm on my motorcycle." And then it became a slower song called "All About Soul." First it was called "The Jericho Road." Nah, it just wasn't going to work!

Ever crashed?

I was 'given' an accident back in '82. A woman ran a red light and I ran my Harley XLCR café bike into her car. There she was right in front of me! I had the right of way, but she decided to run the red light. So my bike hit her and I flipped over. It crushed my left thumb. There's no bone in this thumb. The other hand got pulled out of the wrist socket because the front wheel was turned so suddenly and violently.

I think of motorcycle riding as a chess game. I'm totally focused. There's a Zen to it, which I actually enjoy. Everything else goes away except concentrating on the ride-at-hand: thinking ahead and defensive driving. What's the next bad thing that can possibly happen? There's a street coming out from the right... If there's a car that I can see coming up, he's probably going to pull out in front of me... It's always a little war, actually. I always have a hand on the brake and a finger on the horn when I'm riding. And I'm ready to stop. I've had my accident. You never know when you're going to be given another one.

So what's with this bike 'shop'?

I have all these motorcycles and I have no place to store them at my house. I have a couple of houses, but ran out of garage space, so I needed to rent a storage facility. This was an old Ford dealership, here, back in the 1920s, and

Continued over



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I've been really fortunate. Why don't I share my good fortune with people who like bikes? Let them come look around

BILLY JOEL

With no room left in his two houses, Joel found this shop – a Ford dealership building from the 1920s – to house his bike collection

the space looked good. I said, You know what? I've been a really fortunate guy. Why don't I share my good fortune with people who like bikes? Let them come in and take a look around.

There's something about each one of the motorcycles in here that I like aesthetically. You won't find any choppers in here. The newest super-fast Japanese bike in here is an '82 Suzuki Katana, which was the first one Hans Muth designed, after he worked with BMW. That euro, sleek, modern, bubble - I'm not a fan of that stuff. I like the older designs. In fact, that R65 I came on, which is a 1979, is a modern bike. That's how contemporary I am.

I tend to like the retro kind of bikes: '60s-style café racers with the British setup, '70s-era Japanese bikes. I like bobbers, which were the original choppers, but I hate choppers. They're stupid bikes. They're ugly and hard to ride. If you look on eBay, see how many choppers are on there. It's usually a middle-aged guy that says "I'm finally going to get my Easy-Rider bike," and he drives it once and says "This sucks!" Then he puts it on the market and takes a beating.

My favourites now are the smaller-displacement bikes. I did the big bike thing for a while. If I'm going to take my girlfriend on a long cruise, I'll take a touring bike. I have a Honda Aero 1100 that I like. And I have a Moto Guzzi California Vintage that I like a lot.

Why do you prefer older bikes?

The new bikes now are so fast. They're made ergonomically to perform better at higher speeds. Going slow on a newer bike is sometimes problematic. They don't hold up as well and may be top-heavy. They're high-performance bikes. They want to go. The older bikes, if you went like 100 miles per hour, it felt like you were going 500 miles per hour. It's not necessarily going fast; it's feeling like you're going fast.

Plus it's the character. Girls like that. A guy who goes out and buys a Lamborghini to try to impress women, man forget it! Get yourself a clunky old Volkswagen Beetle and you'll meet a girl a lot quicker than you will in that Lamborghini: "That's so cute." It's like having a cute dog on a leash. Don't buy an expensive greyhound; get a little pug: "That's so cute." It's character I'm looking for.

Billy's Beemers

Forget crude Harleys or modern Japanese 'crotch-rockets', Billy Joel's love of bikes centres around old, but perfectly functioning air-cooled Bavarian BMWs



Joel's daily ride is a 1979 BMW R65 that he loves for its unbelievably smooth ride quality

1979 R65

The bike I ride as a daily rider is a '79 R65. That's pretty much a stock bike. I bought it used. And it's a really good motorcycle. Now, I realise how smooth, trouble-free, and effortless it is to ride this bike, and it's a pleasure; it's a joy. It's got an extra set of small illuminating lights on the down tubes on the front of the frame, and it's got hand warmers on it. I don't know if that was an aftermarket item that they offered in that particular model, but last winter, I was using it and I hit the switch: What does this do? I'm riding along and my hands started getting hot! I said, Oh, that's what this is, and it was great. As I said, I've grown to appreciate the lighter-displacement motorcycles. Maybe their demographic market was a little bit older than other motorcycles, because it was all about how well-engineered, smooth, reliable, and how well they rode and handled.

1973 R60/5

There's the one I took just to do the photos, which is the /5. We did a little custom work and made it kind of a street rod. Not a complete café racer, but I wanted to modify a standard /5 and make it more of a sporty rod. I like the combination of a café racer and a bobber. I like to mix them up, which is what we did with that bike. It's a great bike. That thing just runs sweet. Everything works great. That's a sportier model. Then we're doing a full-out café racer, which we have on the lift here. That's a whole other cult.

1977 R100RS

I always liked that R100RS. I had one, sold it in the early '80s, and kicked myself for selling it! I found this one on Craigslist. Alex Puls [20th Century Cycles mechanic] checked it out and said, "Get this one." That's a high seat on that bike. I'm short - 5' 7" - and I like to be able to put my feet flat, especially when I'm riding with a passenger. Riding two-up, you've got to be able to balance that bike at a light. The R100RS is a great bike for me solo, but unfortunately, I can't take it on a trip with another person because it's just too high. The BMWs are built with very high seats. Most of them are 30-plus

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'People get a little scared in Miami when I'm riding it around. I yell, "It's okay, I'm Jewish!" Most people think it's a WWII bike. It's not'

BILLY JOEL

inches, and it can be difficult. They're top-heavy. A lot of Harley's success is because they're so low. They're huge motorcycles, extremely heavy, chromed to the deck, but they're so low to the ground you can hold them up. Gold Wings do a good job with that, too.

"Frankenbike"

I wanted a bike that looked like what they call a *Wehrmachtsgespann*. The motorcycle has a Russian sidecar, which looks exactly like the old-style sidecars they used in the Second World War. The bike is actually a combination of a '50s frame, a '60s tank, and a '70s motor. It's a whole bunch of bikes put together to look like a World War II Luftwaffe military bike. People get a little scared down in Miami when I'm riding it around. I yell, "It's okay; I'm Jewish!" Most people who see it think it's a World War II-era bike. It's not.



Joel uses his 'Frankenbike' to transport his seven-year-old pug, Sabrina, around in. "Everywhere we go, the kids point: "Ooh, look at the doggie in the motorcycle!"

What other customs do you like?

There are a couple of Japanese guys; I think it's Yoshi's Garage. The Japanese really know how to do that. They make a religion out of the '50s-era hot rod look. That's what I like, bobbers. Basically they were Harleys, or Indians, or big American bikes that they started knocking parts off to make them go faster or do hill climbing. When the British bikes came in, they started doing it with them. Then, when they started stretching things out—the droopy melted tank look—all that California custom stuff, I didn't like that. You'll notice we have a bunch of bobbers here. I use Japanese motors.

Is this a creative outlet to rival music?

I enjoy the designing and building process as much as the riding. I get excited thinking about what I'm going to do, like: I've got a Moto Guzzi and how am I going to make it look like a bobber? It'd make a great café bike, but I haven't seen a good bobber. And BMW, same thing: How do I make it more of a street rod – more tough American hot rod with a BMW? You can do it. You've got to get the wheels spinning. That's what turns me on – that aesthetic.

What is it about BMWs?

They were always smoother, more reliable. There were fewer problems with them, but they were more expensive. They just run so well, even the old ones. I had a '52, an R-something. It just ran smoother than any of my new bikes.

Everything worked so well. The balance of the bike was good; the way it leaned, accelerated, and braked. I didn't have to worry about the bike. As a matter of fact, in the early '80s I had an RT and an R100RS that were so smooth, I actually got bored. It was so good; there was no identifying with nuances in the bike. It was so well engineered; you might as well not even have a motorcycle under you. You were drifting through space! I didn't realise until I was older how good they were. I went out and started getting them again.

I had an off-road BMW, a 100GS, I think it was called. It was a 1000cc. It's heavy! I went down a road in the woods. Nobody was around. I'm tearing it up, and then I dropped the bike. You can't pick that bike up by yourself! So I was in the woods all day waiting for another guy to come by, yelling, "HELP!" Somebody came by on a Honda and helped me lift the bike up.

I always want to have BMWs. They're so well thought out, so well engineered. I just wish I were taller.

I'm waiting for BMW to make a modern retro-style bike. I know that they bought into the whole modern styling of things. I wrote them a couple of letters: I want to buy a BMW, but I can't because I can't stand the way they look!

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