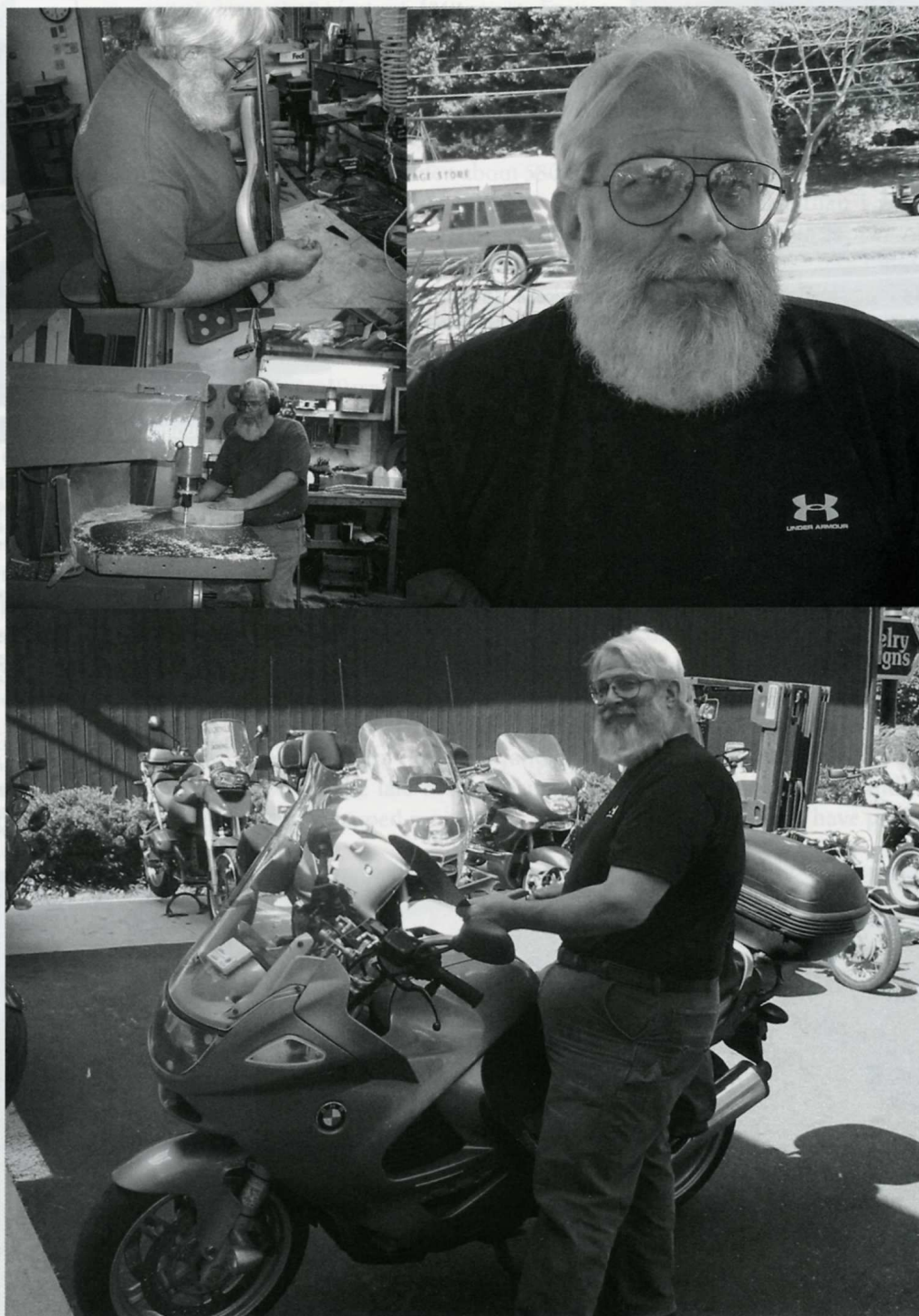


Member Profile

# Building Guitars *and* Riding Motorcycles



**M**ichael Tobias started to build guitars in 1974. His first enterprise, Tobias Guitars, ended up being absorbed by a major corporate entity, Gibson Guitars. Currently, Michael manufactures instruments under the name of MTD (Michael Tobias Design—www.mtdbass.com). *Bass Player* magazine's summation of his contribution to the music world, some 3,200 guitars later, is "when it comes to finding the right combination of ingredients, Mike Tobias is one of the master chefs."

Michael Tobias' basses are played by: Jimmy Haslip (The Yellow Jackets), Andrew Gouche (premier gospel bassist), Gail Ann Dorsey (David Bowie, Gwen Stefani), Lynn Keller (Diana Ross, Little Shop of Horrors), Norm Stockton (clinician, teacher), and David Dyson (Bob James, Shell N'degeocello... and me).

As famous as he is in music circles, Tobias balances his guitar making with family life and riding his motorcycle, currently his BMW K1200GT. He is also a fellow BMW MOA member (#107888). He and I agreed to meet on a sunny September morning at Cliff's BMW in Danbury, Connecticut. While Michael's bike was receiving attention, we talked about some of his riding experiences.

#### **Can you give a brief history of Michael Tobias?**

I was born in Orlando Florida in 1949. I haven't grown up yet, so I can't say I grew up there. I lived there until I was 17, roughly, and went off to college. I bought my first motorcycle over the objections of my parents who said, "over my dead body or you'll move out of the house." So I moved out. I started on a 350 Kawasaki and, after getting run over by some yutz in a Ford Fairlane, I graduated to a Moto Guzzi. I put 40,000 miles on that over the next few years. I've been riding, basically, since 1968.

After not completing college, I went to Washington D.C. and got a job as an

apprentice carpenter and then talked my way into a job in a guitar shop and it was downhill from there. Between guitars, the motorcycles, it seems to be a fairly twisted little road.

#### **How does motorcycling tie in with your professional life?**

I rode before I built guitars. Building is like riding. I get the same sort of concentration and the same sort of emotional lift by zipping down the road or carving a neck on a guitar. It's just something that I like to do.

#### **Do you have a favorite motorcycle?**

That's really tough. There are only a few I don't like and only because I don't fit on them! Possibly, an old Vincent—either the Black Shadow or the Black Lightning. There was an article in, it might have been *Cycle World*, a few years back where somebody bought the rights to the name and was going to bring them back out again and did a beautiful job re-creating what the bike looked like but using a Honda motor instead of the original. I rode one original 25 years ago and, in typical British fashion, it was a bone-jarring, tooth-rattling, thrilling motorcycle. But I don't know that I would want to ride it across the country. It's a cool sort of nostalgic bike. I had a friend who had a 1968 R69S with a Steib sidecar. That was just an amazing motorcycle. There are a bunch of different good ones.

#### **What are you riding now?**

I have one motorcycle now—a K1200GT. I got that in June 2003. I've got about 20,000 miles on it so far.

#### **What drew you to BMW?**

The technology. I had ridden a Harley for 10 years before that and, while I liked the bike, it was just time for something different. I wanted something with better rider protection and I wanted a water-cooled engine. I drove a bunch of different bikes looking for something that felt good. I rode an RT. I rode an RS. I rode Cliff's GT. I tried an LT. The LT was too

big and clumsy for me. I'm a large person but it's still too big a bike. I couldn't ride a Gold Wing either. I tried an Honda ST1100, that wasn't too bad. My Road King was a great bike, but it also was too big and I never really warmed up to it even after 34,000 miles. I ride roughly 10 to 12,000 miles per year. I came off an FXR to the Road King and I'm sorry that sold the FXR. That was a nicer bike for me than the Road King. After having the Road King and riding in the rain and cold, and turning 50, it was like, I need better protection than this. So then I started checking out Honda and BMW. The Honda is nice, but it has no fire. It's mechanically perfect, technologically fine, but there just isn't any soul. And the Japanese make amazing stuff. The bikes are just cold. I didn't get any thrill from riding it.

When I got on the GT, it made my eyes light up. So, regardless of everything else I rode, I came back and bought the GT. It's not, physically, the best bike for me, but it's the one that made my eyes wide. I think the only thing I'm not comfortable with on the GT, still, is leaning forward so far. It's not bad. I've gotten pretty used to it. It handles amazingly well.

On the way back from the South during my first trip, I came running through a debris field from an accident on I-75 and missed everything but what I thought was a chunk of rubber. It caught the wheel rim, pulled the rim up off the tire, tore the rim in half, flattened the front tire and ripped the front brake line off. I was going down the road at 80mph. Then it bounced under the bike, broke the center stand and took a gouge out of the rear tire, denting the rear wheel as well. And I stopped standing straight up in less than 200 yards from 80mph. Had that been the Harley, I wouldn't be here talking to you. There's no way I could have held the bike up.

The GT is 200 pounds lighter, and has offset braking and ABS. In hindsight, this is the essence of why I went to BMW. I don't think any other bike would have stood up to that. When I finally

# An Interview With Michael Tobias

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did come to a stop, we couldn't actually roll the bike forward because the wheel was split so wide open that it wouldn't pass through the fork. How I didn't do a front-end end-over, I don't know. I think physically and technologically, the bike is just pretty amazing. The bike does almost everything you need, gracefully.

### **What are some of your favorite roads and rides?**

The Smokies are always good. Also Deal's Gap and the Cherohala Skyway. There are some areas out towards Hot Springs outside of Asheville, I think the route number is 208. It's an incredible road—very technical. And I'm not a great technical rider so it's quite a challenge. Nowhere near the kind of traffic Deal's Gap has, which is great. Go through Maggie Valley and out toward Asheville. There is a cool motorcycle Museum in Maggie Valley, too. It's very neat. I do that ride almost every year.

I think my favorite long solo ride, though, is riding up Highway 61. I left Nashville, went to Memphis across the river and got on Highway 61 and just rode Highway 61 north at 35mph for several hundred miles, actually until it split off in Missouri, I guess, north of Hannibal. I ended up going up and around the Great Lakes and then back home. I kept hearing Bob Dylan singing "Highway 61" all the way up this road. It's definitely a trip back in time because it runs right along the Mississippi. And in some areas very little has changed. You can still see people picking cotton. It's just a bizarre little road—two-lane highway, big signs that say the Great River Road posted every now and then. And there are at least a dozen little towns with less than 100 people in them—"Longtown, population 76." All these little things going, it's a great ride.

There are some great rides up here in the Catskills. I have been up into the Adirondacks twice. That's always nice. And the Natchez Trace is an incredible and beautiful ride, especially coming out of Nashville. California is full. I haven't ridden there in ages. I can't even tell you what I remember of those roads.

### **What would you teach in *Motorcycling 101*?**

I think the first thing I'd tell anybody

is you have to be willing to accept the risk. And if you're willing, intellectually, to accept the risk, you have to learn how to handle it so you reduce it as much as possible. You have to practice enough so that riding becomes second nature. You have to realize that your body is softer than the road and that people don't look out for you. And if you can sort of pull all that together, you'll probably be an okay rider.

It's not necessarily about going fast or how far you can lean over, how many wheelies or stoppies you can do; that's not perfectly critical. It isn't even about what kind of bike you ride. You need something that fits you physically, something you can handle. Basically, just be very aware of your surroundings and assume that nobody else is aware of you—as defensive a posture as you can get without freezing. You don't want to get panicky so that you can't ride, but you just have to be aware all the time.

### **What riding techniques do you use that would benefit other riders?**

Actually, there's one that I'm just learning and it's pretty interesting. When I went through the MSF course, they teach that if you want to go left, push down on the left bar and the front wheel goes to the right and the bike leans to the left. And you go through their little courses, and it all works very handsomely, and it's quick on some small things. I noticed, especially riding Deal's Gap and the Cherohala and some of the more curvy roads, that guys who follow that end up pushing down and leaning the bike way over and they're sitting up as straight as they can get. So the bike is at an angle and they're like 90 degrees to it trying to make this incredible turn.

There is a group that I think is connected to El Paseo that runs an advanced riding school for free. They have an announcement a couple of times a year and invite all riders to it. Their technique is a little different. It's something I'm just getting used to. If you want to go to the left, you bend down and try to take a bite out of your left hand, like you're going to kiss your left hand. Instead of pushing down on the bar, you use your body weight to control the bike. And I've been riding the other way so long, it takes some getting used to. But you can make a far better turn in a twisty situation by moving your body weight. It takes the

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weight off your hands, it doesn't strain you and the bike actually goes where you lean it.

On the Cherohala and Deal's Gap, I can't ride it much more technically that way than by doing the MSF classic countersteering. Basically, if you're sitting up and you want to go to the left, you've got to move your body weight on the seat. You can't keep perfectly planted. You get up on the balls of your feet, not flat-footed and you just kind of move your body into it. The bike, really, is effortless at that point, especially in big broad curves. In hairpins, it's a little different.

We went to track day at the BMW rally. My friend, Jim, had just started to show me this technique. Riding the track in mid-Ohio was kind of interesting. So, I tried it the old way, with the countersteer. It works but it was hard on my hands. You've got to push. You've got to muscle the bike. By leaning into it and trying to put your chin on your left or your right hand, made the next few laps quite a bit easier than doing it with the countersteer.

### **Any comments about the 'MOA'?**

It's a little different from the Harley organization! I enjoy the magazine. I enjoy reading about the rides and the people who are interviewed. They were very helpful when I blew both tires on the road and got towed and cleaned up. I think any organization that can promote itself intelligently and bring benefit to the people in the organization is a good one.

### **What would you like to see more of or less of from BMW?**

That's an interesting question. I think the bike selection is pretty cool. I know there are corporate restraints for some things. There are some things that I think are a little weird but then again I'm sure if they were to look at my guitars, they would think there are some things that are weird, too. The bikes are amazing—visionary in some respects. They certainly handle well.

There is one thing—better paint jobs! Most of the bikes are simply drab. Maybe this is leftover from Harley or from liking Cherry sunbursts on guitars but I like bikes with bright paint. Really, it's cosmetic. The paint doesn't make the bike go any better but I like bright things. ●