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Motorcycle Magazine

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# BILLY JOEL

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# RIDING RETRO — WITH —

# JOBILLY JOE

The "Piano Man," as he is better known, is an international music icon having sold over 150 million records worldwide. He is also a six-time Grammy Award winner and member of both the Songwriter's Hall of Fame and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Not as well known is that he is an **AVID MOTORCYCLIST** and has been accumulating and customizing bikes since the 1970s.

TEXT: DON ARGENTO and RICHARD J. ATKINS, ED.D.  
PHOTOS: HOLLYCARLYLEPHOTOGRAPHY.COM



n “a town known as Oyster Bay, Long Island” (as the lyrics go in Billy Joel’s “The Ballad of Billy the Kid”), stands a storefront recently opened called 20th Century Cycles, owned by the music legend himself. His showroom houses more than 60 motorcycles, old and new, all plated and ready to ride. Reminiscent of post-war America, it embodies an aesthetic showcasing his passion and love for well-designed bikes.

Billy Joel says sharing his love for motorcycles is one way of giving back to the community and thanking them for his incredible success. His shop is open to the public, admission is free—and *nothing* is sold there. It exists for people “to have a look around” and for real motorcycle enthusiasts to enjoy a very eclectic display of unique, original, and custom machines. If he happens to be on hand when you visit and you want to strike up a conversation, don’t talk about music or his personal life. Talk motorcycles: you may not get him to stop.

#### **What first drew you to motorcycles?**

**Billy Joel:** It started when I was a kid. There’s a Stevan Dohanos painting [“Tex’s Motorcycle” appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1951—ed.] with a bunch of kids out on the street standing around a full-dress Harley-Davidson. I don’t think you can see the motor but you see the fringe hanging from the saddle, a big chrome rail, and a big buddy seat. And these kids are looking at it like he’s the cowboy with the white hat. You don’t even see the guy who’s riding the bike, just the kids standing around it.

Now I remember when I was a kid doing the

same thing. When I first saw a big American motorcycle, it stayed with me, just like that painting. 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.” That started me thinking about riding.

#### **When did motorcycling start for you?**

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. Those British bikes back in the sixties were fun, fast bikes. They were state-of-the-art back then.

He went off to Vietnam and let me take care of it for him. It was in his garage. My Mom never really knew about it. She would have flipped out if she knew I was riding a motorcycle! But I went to his house and cleaned the bike, oiled it, checked the tire pressure and chain tension... a little wrenching here and there... a carburetor adjustment now and then. Then he came back from ‘Nam and took the bike back.

#### **What was your first motorcycle?**

The first bike I actually owned was an old Triumph Tiger, an early ‘60s model. I was 16 or 17 and didn’t have a license or insurance. I was completely





It's easy to forget you are face-to-face with a legend when you hear the enthusiasm of a true motorcycle aficionado.



illegal. Oh yeah, it was a wreck, but it was *mine*. The oil system leaked; the Lucas electric lights never worked, and it vibrated you to pieces! I probably got my hip dysplasia from it [laughs]. But it was fun. They were fast bikes for the time.

I only had it for a few months. I was in a band and I started to go on tour. That was it for motorcycles for me. I left bikes behind for a long time because I was busy working and traveling. Then I rediscovered bikes in the late '70s when I had a little money.

**What bike did you buy then?**

I got myself a little Yamaha 400 Special. It looked like a nice, simple, straight-ahead parallel twin—like a smaller British bike, but it had the American setup. So I relearned the American universal setup and I've never been able to go back to the British setup again. You can't! When you get to an intersection, you just stop!

**So you started collecting at that point?**

I wouldn't say I was collecting. I started with the Yamaha 400 in about '77, then I went to a Virago 750. Then I got a Sportster. That's when it was a



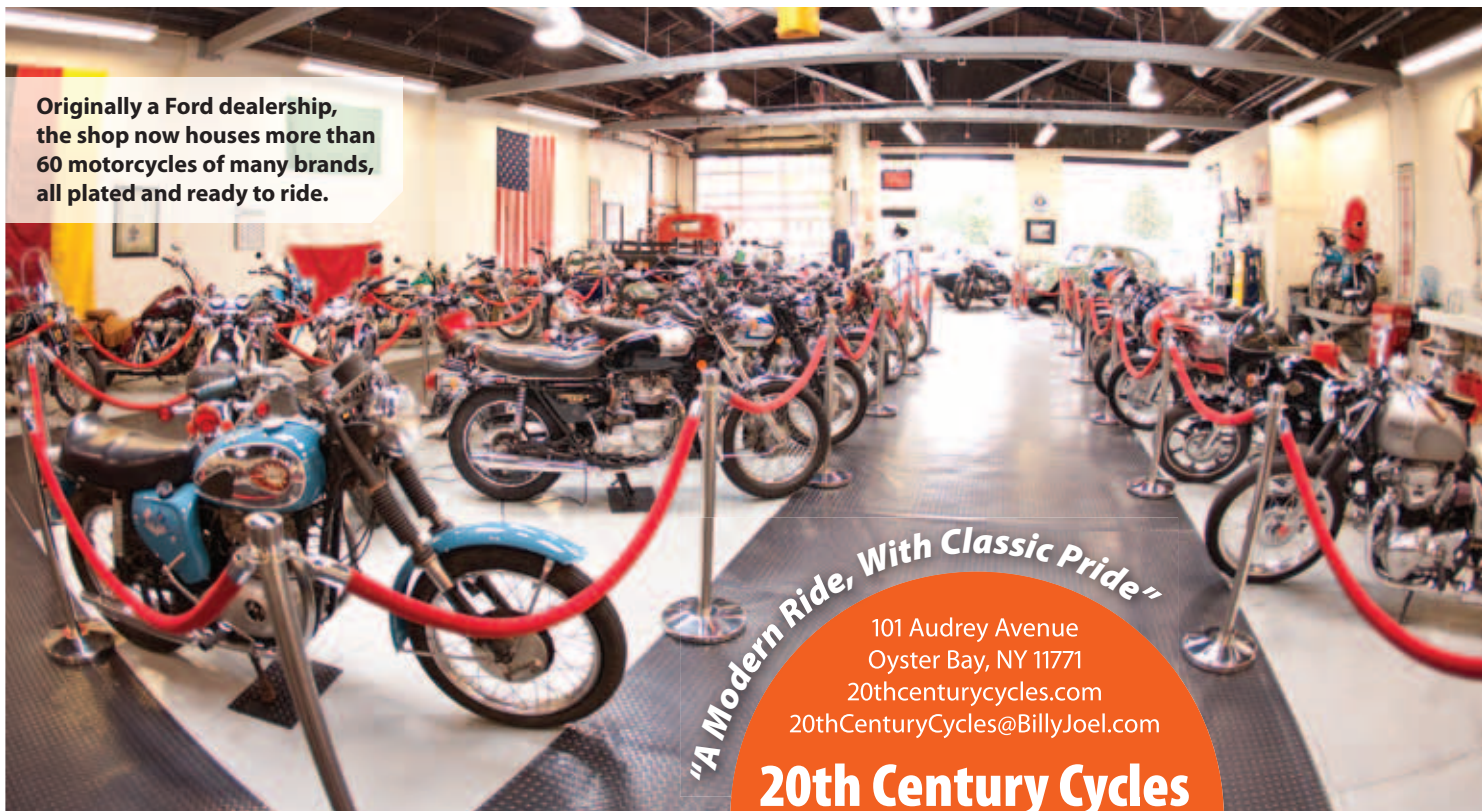
1000cc and still made by AMF, before the Harley guys bought it back. It was a fun, but very crude bike. From there I graduated pretty quickly. I went to a 1340cc FLHS, basically a stripped-down Electra Glide, and started dressing that out. I wanted it to look like a late-'40s era Harley, like in the Stevan Dohanos painting. I didn't know what I was doing. *That's not the right bag. That's not the right windshield...* I really got into the detail of things. That's when I started customizing the bikes, and it grew into this.

By 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, and some 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, but I regretted it as the years went on. You can't find them now, or their price has gone up.

#### **What impact did motorcycling have on you?**

It wasn't rebellion for me. After *Easy Rider*, Marlon Brando and Steve McQueen... they wrote the book, you know? I wasn't riding a motorcycle to be bad, or *look at how cool I am*. Although it is fun having a girl put her arms around you when you're going on a motorcycle. It's nice. So girlfriends came and went depending on how ride-friendly they were [laughs]. 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, feel temperature changes. You notice a lot more detail. Shade and light make a big difference. You're very focused

Originally a Ford dealership, the shop now houses more than 60 motorcycles of many brands, all plated and ready to ride.



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when you're on a motorcycle—if you're serious, or if you've had an accident.

### **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.

### **What is the aesthetic you're going for here at 20th Century Cycles?**

This whole thing started back in the late '90s when I began gathering more bikes together. I don't like to call it a collection because I actually ride most of them. But I have no place to store them at my house so I needed to rent a storage facility. This was an old Ford dealership and I thought, *Why not 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 sleek, modern, bubble forward—I'm not a fan of that stuff. I like the older designs. That's the whole premise of this place, 20th Century Cycles. Even the new bikes, we make them look like old bikes. There are no new Beemers here; they're all vintage motorcycles.

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The new bikes don't identify themselves as much as they used to. Back then, you could tell by the tank and the configuration of the engine if it was a transverse twin, or a parallel twin, or even air- or water-cooled. Now you can't see. Take the fiberglass off! I can't tell what's what anymore!

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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.

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### **Yet you like mixing old and new? Why?**

Yes, I like the convenience of new technology. See, I like the way old things look, but I like the way new things work. So I'm trying to combine that. It's "*A Modern Ride, With Classic Pride*," that's our 20th Century Cycles motto.

The new bikes now are so fast. 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; its feeling like you're going fast.

We just built a bobber for Bruce Springsteen: a Kawasaki W650 that looks like an old Triumph. We may be building one for Peter Fonda, who's doing another bike movie. We may use some of them for advertising. People like Ralph Lauren like to use old props and vintage stuff for window-shopping displays.

Personally, I like bobbers. Basically they were Harleys, 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. These pre-dated choppers, but it's a much better look. It's actually a hot rod. You'll notice we have a bunch of bobbers here.

We're doing one with a BMW, as a matter of fact: it's a 1976 R90. We're making it a café racer. I would like to get a new BMW and customize it, but it's almost impossible to retro style. The frames are very radical and there's so much fiberglass.

### **Do you feel you have to ride to have an appreciation for the art of motorcycle design?**

It's almost a form of sculpture. People recognize the era just by looking at the machine. And people are really hungry for character. I have a Royal Enfield—actually it's not even that old—but it looks like a military bike from World War II. It's a little 500cc air-cooled, single-cylinder bike. It looks like an army bike from the Rommel *Afrika Korps* campaign. I'll pull up next to a line of shiny chromed-to-the-max Harley-Davidsons, and everyone comes over to this little Royal Enfield. It's got 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. It's like having a cute dog on a leash. »



## What's your experience with BMWs?

### Your likes/dislikes?

In the scuttlebutt, BMWs were always the superior motorcycle. German engineering: *Bayerische Motoren Werke!* They were smoother, more reliable, fewer problems, but they were more expensive. The opposed-cylinder configuration in that airhead layout is a little bit off-putting to American riders. They're used to the inline v-twins, or Japanese motorcycles' vertical cylinders. Then they see these things sticking out: "What are those?" Then you ride one and you realize, *this is very efficient.* I didn't realize until I was older how good they were. I went out and started getting them again.

I had an off-road BMW, an R100GS. It was a 1000cc. It's heavy! I drove a power line 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 in the woods by yourself! BMWs are so well thought out, so well engineered. I just wish I were taller.

Unless they were in an accident, a BMW pretty much lasts a *lot* of miles. I'm not familiar with the K models. I started to lose interest in the newer bikes around the late '80s. Once in a while they'll come out with a retro model, but I'm waiting for BMW, *please*, to make a retro-style bike.

They have the greatest reputation. You talk to

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A guy who goes out and buys a Lamborghini to try to impress women, man forget it! Get yourself a clunky old Volkswagen Beetle. It's like having a cute dog on a leash.

”

riders and they all talk respectfully about BMW, but they don't buy them because they don't like the way they're styled. I think they're missing a huge market that wants a retro-looking motorcycle.

### Tell us about the BMWs you ride.

**1979 R65:** This is my daily rider. It's pretty much a stock bike I bought used. 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! Last winter, I was riding 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's great. 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 they are well engineered, smooth, reliable, and how well they handled.

**"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. It's a fun bike because I can take Sabrina, my little pug, out in the sidecar. She loves it.

**1973 R60/5:** 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.

**1977 R100RS:** I always liked the R100RS. I had one, sold it in the early '80s, and kicked myself for selling it! I found this one on Craigslist. There's a high seat on the bike, though. I'm short, 5' 7", and I like to be able to put my feet flat, especially when I'm riding with a passenger. The BMWs are built with very high seats. Most of them are 30-plus inches and it can be difficult. A lot of Harley's success is because they're so low.

I understand why they have the height. They want the clearance to be able to lean the bike. That's a good idea for engineering, but for shorter people ... [he adds in a German accent:] *"You little people are just s#\$@ out of luck!"* ▀

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*Don Argento is a freelance journalist and brand-marketing consultant based in Columbus, Ohio. He is the author of "Brand Force: A Nonprofit's Guide For Building A Magnetic Organization." Rich Atkins is the Managing Director of Improving Communications and rides an R1150R. Holly Carlyle is a professional photographer based in San Diego, California who freelances around the world for various magazine and news publications specializing in editorial, commercial photography, and portraits.*





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