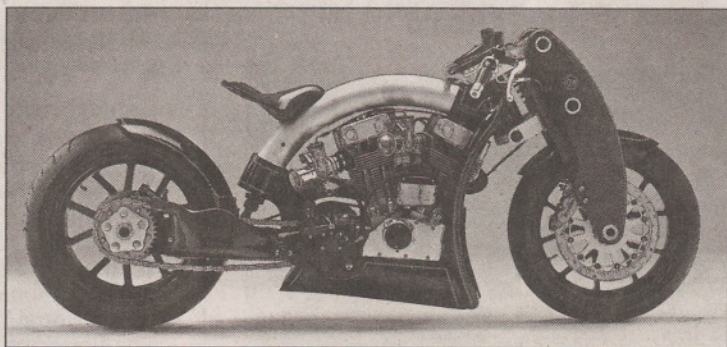


Cyclists have it their way

By Chuck Green
Special to the Tribune



The Confederate Motor Co. designs its Wraith to fit the company's mold of "fast practicality."

In Andy Warhol's world, a Coke bottle was art.

And that's how some motorcyclists look at custom bikes, particularly those on the high end.

"[High-end custom motorcycle owners] almost look at the bikes as fashion statements; sort of accessories to their lifestyles," said David Edwards, editor in chief of Cycle World magazine.

This, along with the Discovery Channel, has helped turn customizers such as Jesse James, founder of West Coast Choppers in Long Beach, Calif., into household names.

"Jesse hand-builds lots of very unique, one-off bikes," said Bruce Mullins, a custom builder who fabricates bikes, paints and provides graphics in his shop, Skunkworx, in Columbus, Ohio.

In one-off fabrications, each part is built "the way someone wants it built," Mullins said. "We in the business can look at a bike and say 'yeah, that's a West Coast Choppers bike' because Jesse puts his signature on it."

And Baby Boomers are driving the demand.

"There's a niche market within [Baby Boomers] that used to be primarily Harley[-Davidson] buyers who have grown addicted to the idea of the custom motorcycle," said industry analyst Don Brown, president of DJB Associates in Irvine, Calif. "They want their own design, like gas tanks, special ignitions and exhaust pipes, and finally, high-end paint jobs. I think the industry's customer base is growing older and as it does, this kind of niche market is growing."

Brown is talking about people 45 and older "because these guys are the ones with the money, and they've probably owned other types of bikes and gravitated toward custom motorcycles." He estimated that around 10,000 custom bikes are sold a year—with price tags of \$45,000 to \$100,000 and more.

Edwards said less-expensive options are available.

"Just like some of these shops buy their parts from a catalog, [a consumer] can too. [But the customer has] to be willing to do a lot of the sweat equity; that is,

bolt the parts on and arrange for the paint and chrome. Basically be your own subcontractor."

High-end builders who go the off-the-shelf route can keep the bike from being a do-it-yourself project, Edwards said. They "go to a catalog, pick a frame, a gas tank, a fender and a wheel, and all those parts are Fed Ex-ed to their build facility. [From there] the bike is put together, sent out for paint and chrome and really not much except assembly is done right in their shop."

But for \$40,000 to \$100,000 for Edwards said the buyer should expect something hand-built.

"When you get into the \$40,000-\$50,000-\$100,000 range, if that bike isn't hand built, you're getting taken. At that level, you should have an extensive talk with the builder about the parameters of the bike, and you should get exactly what you want. You're paying for the build quality. You're paying for the ability to specify your custom bike as you want it."

That's what Jerry Staggenborg of Melbourne, Fla., does with Billy Lane of Choppers Inc. in Melbourne.

"I've gotten a couple of bikes from Billy. I give him an idea what I want, bring him some magazines and he gives me some ideas. The next thing you know, bam!, he comes up with some real creative stuff," said the 40-year-old.

When Staggenborg and Lane haven't seen eye to eye on a design, Staggenborg usually acquiesces—and he's glad. "When I've had questions, he's always been glad to talk to me about them. If he doesn't agree with you, he'll argue a little. But it's for the better, because when he's done, you're glad you let him do what he thought was right."

And that makes it worth the fi-

nancial commitment, said Staggenborg. "His bikes get so much attention because they're so cool. If there are 50 bikes in a parking lot, you know which one is yours."

For about \$45,000, Lane provides a basic chopper. The typical customer pays \$50,000-\$60,000 "for something more creative," noted spokeswoman Jennifer Schneider.

Matt Chambers, founder and chief executive of Confederate Motor Co., breaks from the custom of custom bikes.

"We're a little different than traditional custom bikes because we build a series of bikes," said Chambers, who also builds by hand at his shop in New Orleans. "We don't use paint. It's all carbon and dark surfacing, so the machine draws you in. But it's quite effective as a street handling motorcycle; it's a little more of a street fighter style than traditional American custom choppers."

According to a spokesman for Chambers, "They're very luxurious, like road-going machines. High-end, high performance power cruiser. We're all about fast practicality."

Mullins said it can be difficult to find shops like Chambers' that "do most everything under one roof."

"Jesse James is famous for building almost everything on his bike, basically the only thing he doesn't do is paint chrome," Edwards said.

Well, Warhol probably didn't either.

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