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BETTER

During 2010, I can say this if nothing else—a lot went on, miles were travelled, and time flew by. No big news there, no outstanding revelations, no mystical insights. You, our reader, more than anyone see what we've been up to with the issues you've held in your hands—we've been working.

But I am a nostalgic person and I like to look back time-to-time, not so much to retrace my steps but to sift through the dust for an overlooked nugget. And just yesterday I had an experience that made me think on something I've been ruminating on for a while, the term "better."

I try a lot of new stuff, buy a lot of gear, am kind of adventurous that way. And so people often ask me about a thing: "Which is better?" It's kind of funny, for someone like me who has an answer for everything (true or not) I have trouble answering that question sometimes. For instance, for someone who's never had a rainsuit, a plastic bag and some gaffer tape is better than nothing. For someone who's never enjoyed the comfort of hiding behind a fairing or windshield when the weather turns irksome, a bedroll, rolled up jacket or bikini fairing is better than nothing. I realized that *better* is a relative term and it is wrapped up in the complexity of context.

Anyway, I was visiting Rosa's Motorcycle Shop, dropping off a BAKER DD7 transmission for an upcoming tech article install. As is my habit, I decided to ride my Street Glide down to Long Island—where the shop is located—and had strapped the DD7, box and all, to the back of my bike. The box was big and heavy and I'd used a few tie downs to secure it—and it worked. It was a little more bulk than I like transporting, but it was better and less crippling than taking the trans out of the box, stuffing it in a daypack and riding my FXR. I only had to pull over and adjust the load twice in the 45 miles of NYC rough road highway to the shop. Not so bad.

As usual, upon arrival I interrupted the work going on in the shop, and pointed to a sweet, super clean, bone stock, 1968-era slab side Shovel with a pogo seat and asked about it. Andrew relayed that he had just done a ground up rebuild for the



customer, and I do mean ground up, and that I should grab my helmet. Huh? "Grab your helmet, I want you to take this bike for a ride." OK, I said, kind of surprised. I got my gear on and met him outside where the bike was sitting in the sun, completely fresh except for the tins, which were going out that next week for paint.

He turned the dash-mounted switch to ignition, hit the button (this was an electric start year) and the sweet 74 purred to life, confident as the finest Ferrari, as strong as a 327, as precision as the finest sewing machine Singer ever made. Oh man, what a nice machine.... I am not worthy! I don't get to ride older machines very often, unless you consider my 1986 FXR an older machine, which I don't.

So I hopped on the tiny machine (compared to today's behemoths), immediately comforted by the solo saddle/pogo seat set up. The throttle is internal with kind of a deadman's feel to it so you need to really feel the machine and listen to it to maintain composure. Very interactive, that's how I'd describe the experience of riding an older machine. You are not busy fidgeting with the songs on your stereo and dialing in your GPS. Nope. You are busy operating it, just as you would a dangerous industrial tool or machine. No screwing around.

I pulled away from the curb to the tight sound of the engine's putt-putt-putt and worked my way through the gears to the first intersection, becoming acquainted with the brakes. I laughed to myself as I came to a stop. I took the bike on a ride around some of the nicer roads in the area and it was a sweet pleasure. I don't know exactly what magic Andrew has performed on this machine but it accelerates, it stops, and it has very little vibration. I'd bet that it rides better than new in every regard.

So as I headed back to the shop, I thought to myself, here is a 1968 vintage motorcycle. It will probably never be worth (from a fiscal perspective) the time and effort required to get it to this state of tune and rideability. But does it matter? You don't save a bike like this with an eye towards fiscal reward. Rather you save it and bring it back to health because it has earned it. It has lasted this long and it deserves respect. Some might say these machines are better, that they have heart, unlike the appliance-like road missiles we ride today.

Obviously a machine like this for most of us would be relegated to part-time duty, as it wouldn't be able to do the things we ask our modern machines to do such as carry tons of gear at high speeds for hours on end without exhibiting any symptoms of strain. But then, when this machine was a new beast on the streets, we lived in simpler times, we carried less stuff, our machines were simpler and we repaired them on our own because we could (and had to). We were simpler. Nostalgia's rose-colored glasses were strapped tight like a pair of vintage Balarama's. Ah yes, the good old days; they were better. They were...then

But we live in the now.

Leaving my Shiny Penny at his shop, I got on Andrew's 107" 100+hp road-gobbling TC Ultra and honked home the hour and a half at full tilt with the Ramones reminding me as they had a thousand times before that, "Jackie is a punk and Judy is a runt." I laughed, ummm, yeah, better times—indeed!

Happy Holidays. See you in the New Year.

Stephen Berner
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