



The most important motorcycle of our time will soon go to join its ancestors, but the howl of its four cylinders will ring in our ears for eternity.

Bound for Heaven

by Frank Conner

In 1979 the Honda CB750 will bite the dust. Think about that: It's like saying they're actually going to stop production of Kleenex.

Why, then, is Honda giving the CB750 the axe?

When you stand on a street corner and watch a CB750 ride by, what's your reaction? Maybe you think, "Nice bike, but no big deal." Because wherever you look, you *expect* to see a bunch of CB750s. So now the bike is considered ordinary and a little boring—and that's the kiss of death.

But the ordinary garden-variety CB750 is easily the most important motorcycle introduced since World War II. In 1969 it blew *everybody's* mind; it generated more excitement among more riders than anything since the French first started bolting gasoline engines into bicycles. It was so influential in the world of motorcycle design that today you can glance at any street machine and tell whether that bike was designed Before or After.

The CB750 all but destroyed one national motorcycle industry, crippled another and established the Japanese beyond question as the world leaders in the design of mass-production street bikes.

The CB750 also generated its share of myths. For example, there was a lot of talk that said Honda's engineers had whipped the 750 into production within a year after

deciding that they needed a big bike. Untrue. Honda actually made the decision to build the CB750 in 1966.

Perhaps the most amazing part of the story is the design goal that Honda set for itself: to build a big street bike with the right exhaust sound. Yep. Gigantic, engineering-committee-oriented Honda was primarily interested in designing a motorcycle that would sound sexy. After all, the British motorcycle magazines were in love with the hysterical, out-of-control music made by the Grand Prix roadracers. And American bike magazines had a lot to say about that wonderful, mean, evil exhaust note produced by a big Harley.

To make sure the magazines weren't just contemplating their own navels, Honda sent out its secret weapon, Masa Suzuki. He was a one-man, worldwide market-research organization who could ease into a country, identify the handful of people in that country who really knew what was happening in motorcycling, pump them and then go back to Japan with answers. The answer he got was: exhaust sound.

Exhaust sound? Honda couldn't sit down and build another lowdown bass-voice Harley-Davidson, because one Harley-Davidson was enough. But Honda's own four-cylinder Grand Prix roadracers had made some *gorgeous* noises. Four cylinders. . . .

The last mass-production four-cylinder street bike had been the Ariel Square Four, which died in 1958. The Square Four had made beautiful music, but it was very expensive and far too slow. A fast 650 twin could run away from it.

So the new, sexy-sounding Honda would have to deliver by outrunning every other street bike on the market. Honda wanted the CB750 to be a giantkiller.

In the U.S., the giants to be killed were the British 650 twins, because BSA and Triumph were winning their arm-wrestling contest with Harley-Davidson for the American market.

When the Indian motorcycle went to meet the Great Spirit in the early Fifties, the BSA and Triumph importers had signed up many of the old Indian dealers. The British factories supplied these dealers with 650 vertical twins that would run as fast as the big Harleys, corner better, maneuver more easily and cost about half as much. By the Sixties, the British began to walk away with the market.

But the BSAs and Triumphs had problems, too. They shook a lot, they leaked oil and their electrical systems were a cussword to some riders. And they looked cobby. But the British weren't getting any serious competition from other manufacturers around the world, so they were in no hurry to fix their bikes.

This was the giantkiller— Honda's bid to shove the British aside and take over as the world leader in motorcycle design.

The Japanese, led by Honda, started infiltrating the United States in the early Sixties. Since Harley-Davidson and BSA/Triumph were not likely to welcome Honda into their own dealerships, Honda's sales manager, Jack McCormack, made a brilliant move: He bypassed existing dealer networks and began setting up the Honda line with hardware stores, sporting goods retailers and boat dealers.

At the same time, Honda undertook a massive advertising campaign that announced, "You meet the nicest people on a Honda." Nowhere did the ads say anything about motorcycles. The Honda was evidently a new kind of sporting good. And people by the millions who would never have dreamed of riding a nasty old motorcycle were buying Hondas.

Now that Honda had caught the attention of Americans long enough to plant them aboard 90-cc machines, it was time to design some bigger bikes for all those new riders. Along came the Benly, the Dream, the Hawk and the Super Hawk. The rest of the Japanese manufacturers promptly followed Honda's lead.

The British sneered. So maybe the Japanese *had* taken away their lightweight market; who cared? The British had never been all that interested in building little Cubs and Starfires, anyhow. The big profits came from the big bikes. By building all those Dreams, the Japanese were simply creating a tremendous downstream market for the BSA and Triumph 650s.

Then Honda introduced the CB450. *That* jolted the British right down to their bootsoles. Edward Turner of BSA/Triumph saw fit to disparage the CB450 to the press as "an interesting bag of tricks."

In a way, Turner was right. The glamour of a DOHC vertical twin with torsion-bar valve springs was largely offset by lumpy, awkward styling. And the new bike was badly overweight, at least by British standards. It had inferior steering and suspension, and it suffered some initial reliability problems. And somehow, the CB450 managed to vibrate even worse than the notorious British twins.

But in another way, Turner was very, very wrong. The CB450 said "Honda" on the gas tank, and in those days Honda riders were fiercely loyal to their brand.

Too, the CB that followed the CB450 would undoubtedly carry a bigger number—like maybe CB650. The way things were going, maybe the British wouldn't get to sell their motorcycles to all those Dream owners, after all.

Things got worse. In 1966, the year Honda began designing the CB750, the British ran into serious problems with their top-of-the-line BSA 650 twin. The Meriden plant had been boring the cylinders for those bikes with a twin-spindle machine they'd bought during World War I. With the passage of many, many years, the machine wore so badly that the indexing marks became meaningless. Only one man in the plant could set up the machine to manufacture cylinders within tolerance, and he used intuition more than anything else. But in 1966 that man finally retired, and disaster struck. The 1967 model-year BSA 650s came off the line with crooked cylinder-bores, and many of them seized their engines. The prestige of British bikes was struck a heavy blow.

At the end of that year, everybody doing motorcycle business in the American market found themselves in deep trouble. Almost all the riders who had wanted a motorcycle already owned one, and the bottom dropped out of the market. The industry didn't finally get well again for another three years.

The British decided that it was time to do something. They would finally put their long-talked-about 750 triple into production. By hurrying things, they could get it on the market in the fall of 1969, for the 1970 model-year. The new triple would restore British prestige and centerpunch anything that the Japanese might hope to offer in retaliation.

While all this was unfolding, the managements of the Japanese motorcycle factories were deeply worried about the sales downturn in the United States. The Japanese consider it *very* bad form to lay off production line workers simply because their products aren't selling. If their market turns sour, they move mountains to design products that *will* sell.

Yamaha decided to develop a 750 vertical twin that would out-British the British.

Suzuki, married to two-strokes, had a 500-cc two-stroke twin on the way that would sell for rock-bottom cheap.

Kawasaki wanted to be all things to all people. It planned to introduce a bomb of a 500-cc two-stroke triple for the 1970 model year and follow it the next year with a king motorcycle—a 750-cc DOHC four-cylinder street bike that would give Kawasaki the leadership in bike design.

As 1969 clicked into place, rumors were ricocheting wildly within the motorcycle industry. Whatever happened, the 1970

model year promised to be pure dynamite.

Then, at the Tokyo motorcycle show early in 1969, Honda set off an atomic bomb by taking the wraps off the CB750. It blew everybody away. Rumors and drawing-board bikes were one thing: The reality gleaming beneath the lights in the Honda booth was quite another thing.

Here it was. A reliable, comfortable, four-cylinder street machine that would run an honest 125 mph. Hydraulic front disc brake. And a retail price of \$1295—no higher than the British twins. This was the giantkiller; this was Honda's bid to shove the British aside and take over as the world leader in motorcycle design.

Spring popped up, and so did a handful of preproduction CB750s for the American motorcycle magazine roadtests. At *Cycle* magazine in New York, Gordon Jennings (Editor) selected Jess Thomas (Technical Editor) as the staffer who would conduct *Cycle's* roadtest of the CB750.

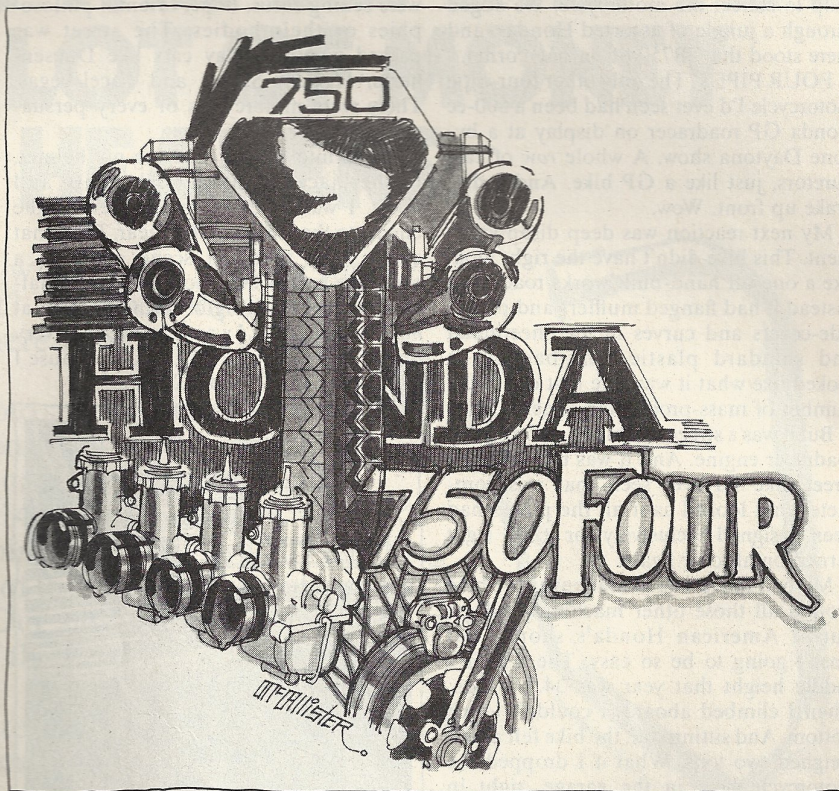
Jess, one of the inside legends of the motorcycle world, was the logical choice. He had a heavy background in racing, motorcycle design and maintenance; he was widely respected by the racers and the industry people; and best of all, Jess was a mature individual who knew when to race and when to wrench—he never confused the two. So Jess climbed on an airplane and flew to California to do the test.

When the CB750 roadtest appeared in *Cycle*, it was solid and businesslike. I studied every word of it, for a couple of reasons. First, Jess and I were old friends, and I had a great deal of respect for his judgment. Second, I was dying to find out all I could about the CB750.

As it happened, I went to work for *Cycle* just after the roadtest appeared. But before I had a chance to talk with Jess about the CB750, Gil Brown—*Cycle's* western advertising salesman—told me what had really happened during that roadtest, and his story floored me.

Jess had gone absolutely berserk. He had collected his CB750, and Gil Brown, and a totally crazy guy named Byron Black. (If you ever read one of his inimitable articles from way back then, you'll know who I'm talking about.) Those three then held a flat-out roadrace from Los Angeles to San Francisco to Yosemite to Los Angeles. Gil said that he rode harder than he had ever ridden in his life, and he was sucking hind tit all the way.

They took the Pacific Coast Highway, north of San Simeon, at ten-tenths, drifting those blind corners carved into the mountain cliffs. Showering sparks, they'd slide right out to the place where the asphalt ends and the air begins, hanging suspended 300 feet above the ocean. And then, without letting off the throttle, they'd



haul their machines back into line for the next corner.

At Big Sur, Gil totally missed a curve, but as luck would have it he ran into a filling station instead of a cliff. So he brushed a gas pump at 90 mph, invented a new line back to the road and cranked it on again. Meanwhile, Jess was way out front, hooking—just as if he were racing in the lead at Daytona.

Gil said that their trip through San Francisco could have served as the screenplay material for *Bullitt*. The Law there didn't believe what they were seeing, so the Law didn't react.

At Yosemite, they tore into a blind corner and met a car passing a bus. The motorcycles scattered like a covey of quail flushed by a bird dog. Somehow, each rider identified a three-foot-wide path not occupied by car or bus, but for about five seconds things were as busy as they ever get on pavement.

Heading home on Interstate 5, they topped a hill at some terrible speed and passed a CHP in a bubble-gum car. That's against the rules, so they grabbed their binders and hauled the bikes down to 60 mph. A few minutes later the CHP pulled up alongside Jess, stared at the four pipes and bellowed, "Speedometer check!"

Jess nodded, tucked in on the tank, caught fourth, got it all and wound it up in

fifth gear. A few miles later the CHP eased up behind him and together they motored down I-5 for five or ten miles.

Jess slowed to 60. The CHP pulled up alongside him and with a happy grin shouted, "A hundred an' twenty-five. ALL RIGHT!" Then he goosed his bubble-gum car and disappeared into the distance.

After a discreet pause, Jess and Gil and Byron Black resumed their roadrace and made it back to El Lay alive. No word about any of that ever got into the roadtest article. I asked Jess about Gil Brown's strange story. Jess said, "Well, you know . . ." and, "Yeah, uhuh."

I was intrigued. The whole thing was so totally out of character for Jess. Granted, the CB750 had to be some kind of neat motorcycle, but why did it make Jess blow his cool so thoroughly? There had to be something powerful good about that bike that wasn't getting translated into print. (I still hadn't seen a CB750—they weren't due to reach the dealers for weeks.)

The next day I was standing in Gordon Jennings' office, staring down at the usual traffic jam happening far below on Park Avenue: It was depressing. Gordon, who was leaning back in his chair with his feet propped up on the desk, said, "How'd you like to fly out to Los Angeles and ride a CB750 back here to New York?"

The taxi deposited me and my crash