

Cycle

NOVEMBER 1975

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CAN-AM 175 MX-2: IT STILL THINKS IT'S A 250

BMW R75/6: EXPECTED LUXURY, SURPRISING PERFORMANCE

**Turbocharged
Kawasaki
903 Z-1B
103 Horsepower
The Easy Way**



**Outrageous
Custom
The Coachbuilt
590 Honda
Four**



RETAILERS: NOTICE OF DISPLAY-ALLOWANCE
PLAN IS WITHIN LAST THREE PAGES



• At a glance you know the thing is an anti-social cafe racer. It has all the essential hardware for racing, and few concessions to public sensibilities: in lieu of a side- or centerstand, a two-piece jiffy-prop keeps the static bike upright. You can't pocket the stand, nor can it be stored anywhere on the bike. So you don't roll up to your favorite hang-out, park the motorcycle and saunter away.

THE MANTLEPIECE

BY PHIL SCHILLING

for an afternoon of bench racing. Forget café affability; on the road you'll stay.

Pull off the stand, nudge the pieces away and drop into the saddle. You do drop into this bike. The saddle measures 28.5 inches from the ground; that's only fitting because the whole motorcycle is diminutive. Weighing 336 pounds wet and rising to 36.5 inches at its highest point, the 590cc four-cylinder Honda could hide behind a 250 roadster.

From the saddle, the tank stretches forward and grows narrow by the clip-ons. High pegs/low bars/small seat—you adjust. Turn the gas tap on, flip the ignition toggle-switch, keep your finger off the choke cock, and . . . kick. Pared down to the basics, the bike has no electric starter. And no turn signals, no indicator lights, no horn and no instruments.

A burst of unmuffled noise rushes through the collector system and out the open megaphone. Good grief, you choke, this thing is not only an anti-social café racer, it's your basic Jailhouse Special. You tiptoe stoplight-to-stoplight, hoping to fade into traffic. Finally, the road opens up and then, outside town, closes down into a deserted, winding path through the mountains.

The bike is exactly what you expect: light, stable and strong. It retains that harmony between engine, brakes and suspension which characterizes the CB-550. But the Jailhouse Special blends those elements at a much higher level. The 590cc engine has a ferocious willingness to rev and a generous amount of power—enough to slam the bike forward with stomach-tightening rapidity. And why not? The power-to-weight ratio falls in the

same league as a Z-1 Kawasaki.

The missing tachometer forces the rider to be conservative; the instrument's absence provides a perverse guarantee that the engine won't be over-revved by intimidated testers and borrowers. Other considerations actually led to the deletion. A rev-counter would disrupt the bike's clean appearance, and the owner, familiar with the Honda 500/550 series, shifts by feel and ear anyway.

The powerful and progressive double-disc front brake is tremendous; the rider can dial down the speed with rheostatic precision. The capability of the front brake allows the rider to apply the sensitive rear disc discreetly, steadying the bike under hard deceleration. Brake-lever adjustment with a rear disc is crucial; if your dimensions don't match the bike perfectly, then a cramped foot can exert too much pressure on the lever and chatter the rear tire.

More a racing bike than a street machine, this 590cc four-cylinder does great violence to the Spirit of Fifty-Five. One just can't ride such a motorcycle below certain speeds and maintain good mental health. Alas, none of these speeds happens to be under 55 mph, or even near it. These days the matter of speed alone will cause red-lights to flash, sirens to wail, and Bendix radios to crackle. Furthermore, the motorcycle hardly has an inconspicuous nature: if the red/yellow paint scheme doesn't give the highway patrol a scent, they'll find the open megaphone exhaust downright compelling.

Calculating the odds, no *Cycle* staffer wished to pit his public-relations merit-badge against a bookful of traffic cita-

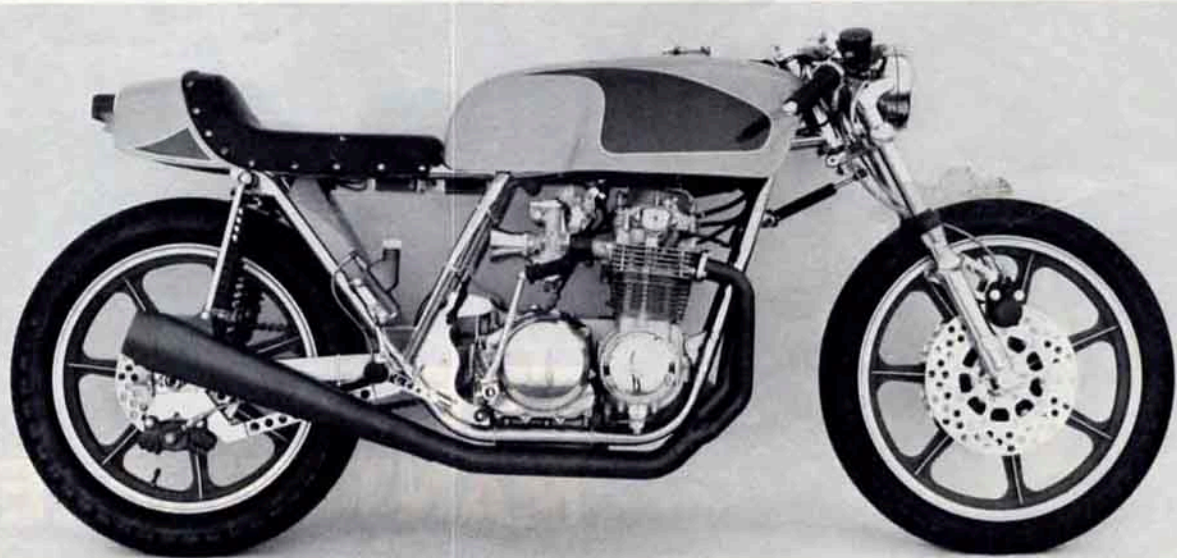
tions. A close roadee inspection of the motorcycle would tax your repertoire of excuses, or entangle you in a long, technical discussion of equipment requirements. It would be enough to have you hollering for your attorney. Unless you're Howard Blau, who owns the motorcycle in question. You see, young Mr. Blau is an attorney.

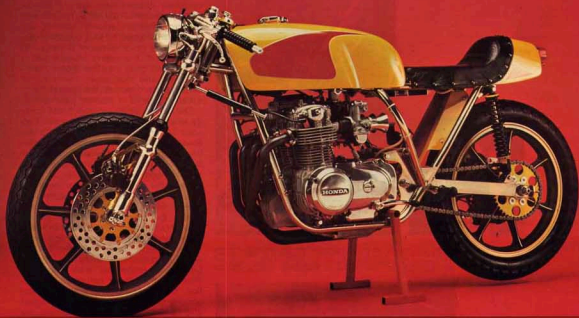
Words can't quite capture some motorcycles. You could call Howard Blau's machine a Honda custom, but that terminology doesn't separate the bike from a Honda Four with flashy paint and chromed acorn nuts. In America, "custom" suggests lustrous detailing with slavish attention to insignificant parts. True, Blau's bike has nary a rough edge and almost glows in fluorescent splendor. Yet the bike is custom-built to the core; it's the difference between good veneer and solid mahogany.

Call it a special. But even that label doesn't quite cover the motorcycle. Special often refers to a kit bike, something like a Rickman-Honda or Seeley-Norton. Well then, you say, the Jailhouse Runner must be a glorious home-brewed-and-built special, erected in the shadows of welding torches and milling machines. The motorcycle did take shape in that kind of environment but through the grace of professional talent. Though Blau is a certified motorcycle devotee, the Santa Monica counselor is far more at home in a courtroom than a machine shop. Certainly he was the key figure in the bike's construction, but in a larger sense Blau simply commissioned the thing.

This Honda-Whatever fits into the classic coachbuilt tradition, which died in the

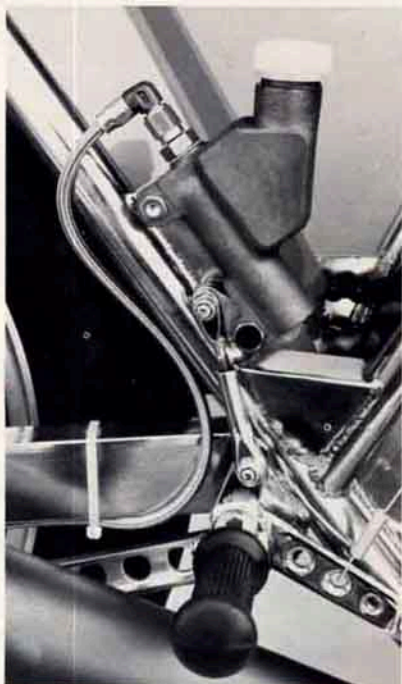
THE MANTLEPIECE



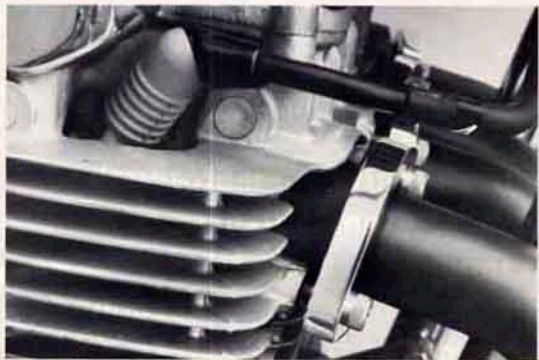


"... to those who see nothing
beyond stark function in motorcycles,
Blau's effort must seem a bizarre exercise.
But those who see beauty
in mechanical things can comprehend
this three-dimensional *objet...*"





THE MANTLEPIECE



United States when the custom houses strangled during the Great Depression. In the Golden Age of Automobiles, the Duesenberg owner did not necessarily buy his automobile in the conventional way. The Duesenberg factory in Indianapolis, Indiana preferred to turn out incomplete automobiles; dealers and/or customers could order rolling chassis with engine, drivetrain, wheels, fenders and bumpers. Shipped off to a coachbuilder, say Murphy in California or Brewster on Long Island, the rolling chassis had a custombuilt body installed. Some manufacturers and most coachbuilders had certain pattern-models, the illustrations of which appeared in dealers' catalogues.

The Duesenberg customer could specify what he wanted on his chassis. Perhaps he fancied the style of a particular roadster but wanted a modified fender line, slightly different wheels, or accessory headlamps; all that, and more, could be arranged within the limits of good taste. If the customer had the money of God and the taste of a Philistine, the coachbuilder (operating under artistic duress, but with suitable compensation) would fashion a body complete with warts. Occasionally a patron would demand a totally one-off body, and after setting some guidelines, allowed the coachbuilder to follow his own creativity. Whether one-offs or patterned production, the coachbuilders, both here and abroad, fashioned some truly extravagant and handsome automobiles during the Age of Babbitt.

Commissioned machinery is sure evidence that a golden age has arrived. Professionally built one-offs never occur in a vacuum. They are products of a highly energized and developed motor culture which has at least three characteristics: a large pool of standard machinery that has pushed creative technology to cost-effective limits; a small body of artisans who can build special pieces such as cast magnesium wheels; and an affluent clientele so mesmerized by the vehicles they will support and underwrite the creation of one-offs. In those circumstances the American coachbuilders thrived during the automobile's Golden Age; and today, the same circumstances have converged again in motorcycling.

Suggest a parallel between Honda's common 500/550 engine and the historic 6.9 liter Duesenberg, and that notion will cause brand-name *cognoscenti* to fall out of their zip-back boots in shock and anger, while classic car buffs will explode straight out of their white patent-leather shoes. There's no use arguing—the icon-worshippers can have their 6.9 liter Indianapolis Eights; we'll take the Honda Four. Indiscriminate motorcyclists, who have never learned the distinction between an excellent engine and a rare one, may still wonder why Blau selected the proletarian Honda Four. Simple. Its engineering papers and five years of experience concur—it's a tremendous unit.

In August 1973 *Cycle* observed a fundamental truth at the center of the 500/
(Continued on page 48)

550 series. "Engineering, even in its most bloodless, computerized form, still is, at least in some measure, art. So some engines naturally prove to be better than others, despite all the learned diligence of the men with the slide rules. Occasionally all the decisions that go into the creation of an engine prove to have been especially happy ones, and the finished product is especially good. That appears to have been the case with the Honda CB-500 Four. It does not differ much in overall specification from the CB-750 engine designed by the same team. Yet it has turned out better. Not more reliable, or anything coldly quantitative, but simply better in terms of that indefinable something we call feel. It's smooth, free as turbine, and you know it's going to keep right on spinning merrily away for as long as the road lasts."

In search of more power, Blau had earlier jumped the displacement of his standard CB-500 Four to 570cc. This modification was (and still is) an expedient way to more horsepower because the cylinder liners were simply bored out to accept 60mm pistons from the old Honda 305 series. This piston switch gave impressive results by raising the displacement and elevating the compression ratio almost to 14:1. In response to that kind of pressure, most engines would light up like a hand grenade. But not Honda's 500 Four.

The 500 engine, pulled out of his street bike, became the cornerstone of Blau's creation. In the interest of more power, the engine grew again, this time out to 590cc. CB-500 engines usually reach 590cc with the installation of 61mm CB-750 pistons. The compression ratio moves to a reasonable 10.25:1, but the cylinder liners thin out to razor-blade thickness.

Bill Meyer handled the short-block work for Blau. And in the process of rebuilding the engine, Meyer fix-kitted the transmission, alleviating the 500's infamous sticky shifting. The electric starter was tossed out, joining most of the electrical system discarded earlier. A Sebring pointless electronic ignition replaced the conventional Honda breaker points. As finally installed, the Sebring unit (now superceded) is comprised of two solid-state voltage regulators and recharging system for a ten-cell, .6-amp nicad battery pack. The cells provide enough current to power the headlight long enough to meet legal requirements. But the main function of the battery pack is to excite the primary field in the Honda's alternator so that the engine can be started. The electrical system is so compact it would slip into one pocket of a hunting jacket.

Jack Hateley, an old-line Triumph specialist and custom-engine builder in Northridge, California prepared the cylinderhead. Hateley's meticulous assembly included tailoring intake tracts, matching valves and valve springs, and doing a precise valve job. Blau selected the Yosh-

imura Isle of Man camshaft (YR-2-3) and the mandatory S&W valve springs. The camshaft (25-55/55-22) considerably animates mid-sized Honda Fours; generally, most owners find the camshaft produces more power everywhere, but the real bonus is above 8000 rpm.

The engine's exterior has a pleasing surface variety with highly polished alloy counterbalanced by bead-blasted cases. The blasted aluminum alloy has an even, fine-textured matt instead of the usual Honda engine paint. In this case the lovely external details—from socket-head case bolts to polished-aluminum carburetor bellmouths—do not add up to an Easter egg engine; a resplendent exterior over a cooked interior.

Motorcycles yield to stylists with great stubbornness, and sometimes refuse to capitulate at all. Automobiles are quite different. Four-wheelers are mechanical objects over which forms can be laid, so auto stylists can bypass the running-gear hardware. In building a beautiful motorcycle, however, one can't ignore the mechanical structures. Sheet-metal surgery (the pitfall of automotive-types in motorcycles) invariably makes a motorcycle look like a grotesque motorscooter. Imagine the difficulty of designing an engine compartment in an automobile, wherein under-hood forms, spatial relationships, and finishing became important. An equally difficult task faces anyone who wants to construct a handsome motorcycle. A successful design must necessarily incorporate, not cover, the motorcycle's mechanical bits-and-pieces which often resist any arrangement pleasing to the eye.

For Blau the running gear was important, both aesthetically and functionally. Visually the running gear ties a motorcycle together, perhaps not in the same way as an automobile's fender sculpture, though just as surely. But function was primary: without a first-notch frame, swing-arm and suspension, there couldn't be a viable motorcycle. As a smooth, fast street rider, Howard Blau knew the difference between a good-handling motorcycle and anything less, so he couldn't talk himself into just another pretty frame with an arresting shape.

Performance counted. In 1973 at Ontario Raceway Blau saw the germ for a very special street bike in the Action Fours 570 Honda. Later he visited Chet Page, a design engineer for Rohé Scientific Corporation (medical diagnostic equipment), who had built the Action Fours frame. In the old tradition of coachbuilding, Blau explained what he wanted: an elegant one-off race bike a half-step removed from the track. And the Action Fours bike was close to Blau's specification: a similar frame/swing arm, with minor modifications for street use, would meet his requirements.

The frame was only the beginning. Blau wanted a tank and seat built to fit the frame. Here customer and constructor had to share basic taste in motorcycle forms. If Page liked highly angular shapes

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and Blau wanted soft, rounded ones, someone else would have done the tank and seat. But again in Page's previous work, Blau had seen appealing shapes. Patterning a tank and seat after those on his own bike, Page developed Blau's one-off components in fiberglass.

In a literal sense, Page built the frame for Blau's 590 engine. So close were the tolerances that other 500 Honda engines wouldn't quite fit. Finally, a rolling chassis left Page's workshop in Huntington Beach, minus the engine. The cycle ran along on TT-100 tires, which covered a set of polished and gold-anodized Morris wheels. A Ceriani road racing fork, with 35mm tubes and triple clamps, graced the front end. A few mounting brackets had been placed—for the coils, steering damper and footpegs. The footpeg position, of course, had been set for Blau and coordinated with the Tommeselli clip-ons. By conventional standards, the bike might have been nearly complete, but actually Blau had just rough rolling stock in need of finishing.

From Page's workshop Blau hauled his prize to Jewel Hendricks' garage. Hendricks, who had spent years in engineering and development work for Tyler Camera Systems in Hollywood, California, is a virtuoso with machine tools. He has an easy, natural understanding of machinery: almost reflexively he sees how things go together and how things can be built. It's the gift which every engineering student wishes he had, and few possess. Moreover, Hendricks works metal with such fluidity and precision that the stuff almost becomes plastic in his hands. Hendricks had built his own special, and Blau, having seen the machined details of that bike, recognized Hendricks as *the man*. Blau liked the way Hendricks solved problems—and the physical shapes and forms which resulted.

Slowly and sporadically, Jewel Hendricks made progress. For Blau, Hendricks was a constant source of amazement in a machine shop. Blau would walk in with a chunk of 7075-T6 aluminum alloy, and Hendricks would create. In turn Jewel had never met anyone who was so amazed, mystified and awed by big machine tools clicking out parts. From Hendricks' mind and hands came scores of parts—everything from the front-brake junction box to the taillight/license plate holder.

Of all the parts he fashioned, Hendricks has three favorite pieces: the centers for the front disc brakes, the rear brake lever, and the hanger for the megaphone. Other individuals, to be sure, may find different parts more dazzling: the hangers for the front brake calipers, the rear brake torque arm, or the front-brake junction box. So painstakingly rendered and machined and polished are these pieces, it is inconceivable that anything from the Golden Age of Automobiles was better crafted.

Blau's bike spent almost a year in Hendricks' Van Nuys workshop. He inched forward at a pace which others only tolerate in artists. And everytime Blau saw a completed piece, it re-affirmed the wis-

dom of patience. Had Hendricks' total energies been focused on the Blau project, the motorcycle still would have dragged to completion. Six months passed while Blau waited for the Lockheed rear-brake master cylinder. Working on the bike was like building a pyramid; if parts were missing out of one row, there was no way to build another tier.

Early in 1975 the bike moved into Howard Blau's living room where he fussed over the paint scheme and continued detailing. He sat down with drawing paper and watercolors, trying to formulate the right design. The frame, which had been nickel-plated after Hendricks finished, required no paint. Some parts, large and small, were still going to and coming from Washington Metal Polishing in North Hollywood, California, as Blau picked and sorted his way to completion, avoiding a garish overkill.

With his final paint scheme on paper, Blau enlisted yet another member of Southern California's Semi-Secret Circle of Talent, Jim Crago. The Montrose painter, like all gifted specialists who attract twenty times the work anyone would want, accepts projects which interest him and passes off ordinary chores. Blau's tank, seat, and splash guard returned in flawless yellow and red enamel separated by gold striping.

Somewhere in the process of its creation, the motorcycle began to transcend the original objective—a race bike a half-step away from the track—and became a work of art. The artistry flowed out of the function. Had the priorities been reversed, canvas rather than metal would have been the appropriate medium. To those who see nothing beyond stark function in motorcycles, Blau's effort must seem a bizarre exercise. But those who see beauty in mechanical things can comprehend this three-dimensional *objet*.

Blau never intended that the motorcycle be an everyday piece; indeed, he keeps a Triumph 750 Bonneville for routine sports/street riding. For that matter, twenties-style high-rollers didn't vamp around in coachbuilt Duesenbergs. Coachbuilders and customers alike understood that the best of those automobiles were both vehicles and art. And like the Golden Age classics, the value of Blau's machine has little to do with what was spent on it or what can be done with it. The value comes from what it is.

Blau's sensitivity to shape and form and craftsmanship—as well as his knowledge of function—made the motorcycle. Equally important were the artisans and specialists whom Blau discovered and recruited for his project. Certainly they didn't all work under one roof, as in the days of Murphy and Brewster and Rollston. There's little difference, because Blau made his own roof and drew the talent under it. His motorcycle testifies to the richness of that talent. American crafting genius never died with the great classic cars; it's all around us today—in space, on the race track, and in Howard Blau's living room.

HOOKER 22.9 STOCK 18.8 Bassani 16.2

Just telling it like it is . . . We took a 1975 MT 250 Honda, added the Hooker expansion chamber and got 21% more horsepower than stock and 41% more than Bassani! At peak performance, Hooker unleashed 22.9 horsepower at 5,500 rpm: compared to Stock with 18.8 at 6,000 rpm and Bassani with 16.2 at 6,000 rpm. By seat of the pants testing, we were confident it was a great system. But even the best riders can be fooled, so we always depend on our dyno to tell the truth. And the simple truth is: Hooker is the ultimate performer.

*Testing was conducted at Hooker's California facility, on May 15, 1975 on a Stuka dynamometer by Product Development Engineer, Dick Lyell. The Honda (engine #MT250 E2010168) was tested stock and with off-the-shelf tuners from Hooker #26820 and Bassani #MT250. Copies of this comparison are available from Hooker Headers.

A skateboard in your favorite cycle magazine! That's right. California cyclists have discovered a new challenge and excitement in high performance skateboarding. From all over the country more and more cyclists are asking about the newest Hooker product: Hooker has revolutionized the sport with the Hooker Tune Flex Skateboard. No longer is skateboarding limited by equipment. Urethane wheels, double action trucks and flexible boards have expanded the sport to sophisticated high performance levels. But these innovations are only beginnings, the real revolution is from Hooker. It's the Hooker Tune Flex Board; an exciting suspension system combined with a superior fiberglass board for total versatility.

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