

Building Bikes That Show And Go

By Steve Murray [Published in MidWeek, November 10, 2006]

Whether creating wild, modernistic bikes or more traditional ones, Hawaii builders are building a following

To many, they are just loud interruptions on a quiet Sunday afternoon - packs of Earth-rattling noise-makers that kick up dust and set off car alarms for miles around. Known as choppers, bobs, hogs, war horses, cruisers, hybrids, baggers and crotch rockets, motorcycles are increasing in number wherever people want to experience the thrill of the open road without dropping the mortgage on gas. And though Harleys, Hondas, Nortons and Indians turn heads as they sparkle on the showroom floor, it's the custom bikes that get most of the attention at rallies or while stopped for some roadside grinds.

Custom motorcycles were born in the aftermath of World War II as returning servicemen chopped off fenders, wind-shields, crashbars and anything else to improve the performance and looks of their war-surplus bikes. But it wasn't until the 1960s that things really took off as popular art, music and movies came together to create one of the most-stylized times in American history. Motorcycle design followed the trend as artist and mechanic combined to create the perfect vehicle for the counter culture - one that would be embraced by their owners while unsettling the establishment. It was a movement that has been described no better than by the Guggenheim Museum during its 1998 exhibit that celebrated two-wheeled transportation.

"The motorcycle is an immortal cultural icon that changes with the times," says the museum's web site. "More than speed, it embodies the abstract themes of rebellion, progress, freedom, sex and danger. The limits imposed by its possible forms and functions, and the breadth of variation that has been expressed within these limitations, provide a framework in which to examine the motorcycle both as object and as emblem of our century."

With the popularity of shows like *American Chopper* and *Biker Build-Off*, a growing number in Hawaii are ponying up big bucks for these one-of-a-kind creations. For these people, custom bikes are the perfect blend of art and engineering and, maybe more importantly, are the ultimate expression of individuality.

Drive around the Island any weekend and it's obvious these machines are everywhere, and no two are alike. Some are as long as a Civic and others so wide you'd wonder how anyone could get their legs around them.

Steve Kalnasy, editor and publisher of *Hawaiian Chopper Magazine*, said the interest in motorcycles in general, and in customs in particular, has been growing.

"If you go back to the old days, the '70s, the '60s and even into the '80s, you see the hard-core motorcycle riders were a different type of person. Today, you're seeing more business people, professionals getting into it. In a lot of the clubs in Hawaii there are lawyers and doctors, there are business owners and there are guys who are blue-collar workers and guys from the military. Everyone is mixed together. For some people it

gives them a vehicle to let their hair down. It gives you a chance to have an alter ego, but in a positive way.”

Although Kalnasy says no one style of custom bike dominates in Hawaii, most of what you’ll see can be grouped into two categories that, for the lack of a better term, we’ll call clean and radical.

Nui Kauhane , owner of Grumpy’s Customs in Kailua, is a master of simplicity and the low, wide “local boy” style of motorcycle. If you have the money and the time, he’ll hand-build you one of his award-winning rides that not only shows, but goes. Kauhane’s “local boy” is something to behold. Boasting mostly a single color paint scheme, his bikes are built low to the ground with a wide body, a police-style solo seat, floorboards, front and back crash bars and a beastly growl that just makes you smile. Basically, it’s a big, comfortable bike that you can ride for hours and look good doing it. And although Nui will build anything you want, it’s his specialty that keeps people coming.

“I tried not to have a style when I first started because I wanted to be versatile and to do anything. But now I’m realizing that you have to set your own style, and being born and raised here, I prefer an island-style bike,” he says. “Seeing your uncles, your dad, everyone is riding an island-style bike. These ‘local boys’ are only here, nowhere else in the world. Guys that build bikes on the Mainland, they’ve never seen a bike like this.”

On the other side of the fence is Roger Kuwahara of Kustom Fab. If your dream machine is one that is twisted and raked into some ridiculous radical design with a freaky paint job, then Kuwahara is your man - as one of his customers found out after he asked Kuwahara to build him a trophy-winning bike.



Nathalie Walker photos nwalker@midweek.com

Roger Kuwahara is hard at work on his latest creation in his Sand Island shop.

“Chris (Aton) told me, ‘I want you to build me a bike that will win the Choppers Only show. Hands down, no one will dispute it. I just want something that people are going to say that’s crazy, that’s the wildest bike they’ve ever seen.’”

What he got was the “Punisher,” a chromed and silver metallic creation that looked more *Terminator* than *Easy Rider* , featuring a Dennis Mathewson paint job and the high-tech cleanliness that Kuwahara loves.



The award-winning Punisher built by Roger Kuwahara.

“We specialize in internal wiring and hiding it. That’s our specialty,” Kuwahara says. “I started doing that back in the mid ‘90s. I made my own circuit boards. I was actually making etched-out circuit boards and making my own LED arrays back in the ‘90s. That’s kind of like our forte, technical innovations.”

Another one of Kuwahara’s creations that has gotten quite a bit of notice is his “Fusion” bike that he created for another lucky customer. The old school meets future design features complex metal work and another Mathewson paint job that produces “how did he do that?” comments.

“Everyone thinks that it’s made of copper, but that’s paint,” says Mathewson, the owner of Cosmic Custom Airbrush. “It was a technique that we messed around with and tried experimenting layers, and by accident came out with this real killer look.”

Part of that look involved scuffing some of the paint with a wire wheel - a technique Mathewson developed with a friend from Los Angeles. The “Fusion” bike won best old school chopper and best paint at the 2005 Choppers Only Hawaii third annual Run & Show at Kapiolani Community College.

For many people wishing to get that unique look without ponying up the price of a Jaguar S-Type Sedan, the only alternative may be a change in color. In fact, it’s the little jobs, like fixing dents and dings, and fenders and tanks, that keep painters in business. It’s not all show bikes and custom cars for these artists.

Mathewson began tricking out the paint on Hawaii bikes and autos in 1990 after a decade of sending home tourists with some of the hottest airbrushed T-shirts in the land.

“At our peak we had nine locations and 35 air brushers on staff on Oahu and the outer islands,” he says.

Originally from Sin City, Mathewson began working as an air-brush artist at the age of 14 under the guidance of legendary painter “Big Daddy Rat” Karl Smith.

Ed Roth and Von Dutch Kenny Howard were some of the other originators who helped and inspired him.

“I opened a paint shop when I was 17 in Vegas, but I sucked,” he says. “I tried to compete with these first generation guys who were awesome, but I tried and I learned a lot, and I have only worked for myself since.”