

GARY'S FRANCES'S TWIN CAM

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Organising a studio shoot for a BSH bike feature is a rather less straightforward an affair than you'd have thought. It's probably an exaggeration to say that the whole process is something akin to pinning your hopes on an alignment of the planets, but there will always be a number of uncertain variables involved in settling on a suitably convenient date for the owners of the bikes in question which will also coincide with a window in the photographer's schedule, as well, of course, as a day on which the studio will be free.

and no matter how thorough you might think you've been in your preparations, on the morning of a shoot there are always the inevitable nagging doubts about whether the model will turn up, or indeed, whether you did actually arrange things with the make-up lass (apologies for sounding sexist there, but the fact is that hair and make-up duties will invariably be carried out by a person of the female gender. Apart, that is, from the occasion when Andrew turned up. He was really quite good, truth be told...). Having set everything up, on the day of the shoot you just have to hope to hell that you don't receive a distraught call from one or other of the bike owners to say that some unforeseen catastrophe or other has befallen them and that they won't be able to make it after all. What you don't expect is for an eminently featureable bike to turn up out of the blue midway through an afternoon session, thus presenting you with a problem of an entirely different nature than that created by a no-show by one or more of the relevant parties. It'd be a crime not to make some sort of effort to shoot this unexpected

arrival while everything's conveniently in place, but on the other hand, you first have to square it with the owner, and if that's successful, then set about cajoling everyone into working a little longer than they'd been expecting. Suddenly, you find that you're not the most popular person in the world, to put it mildly. But, well, seize the day and all that... It was during the shooting of Ian Solley's BMW boxer café racer, Romeo 80 – as seen a few issues ago in the guise of both cover and centrespread bike – that the unmistakably thunderous sound of a big-inch Harley from the street outside brought proceedings peered outside to see what it was that had caused the window panes to vibrate with such violence. The culprit turned out to be the bike that you see here, Gary France's Twin Cam chopper. An acquaintance of Ian's who just happened to have been in the vicinity, Gary had decided to

drop in and see his pal's bike being captured for posterity in professional surroundings, only to find his own ride swiftly becoming the centre of attention.

Gary explained that he'd called his Harley 'Amelia', which, we soon concluded, was a decidedly benign name for what's a real monster of a bike. Our model for the day, Lacey, is hardly the most diminutive of figures, yet she was easily dwarfed by Amelia's massive presence, which makes it all the more surprising that Gary, who isn't the tallest of fellers, has no trouble whatsoever in chucking the old girl around, whether on the streets of the capital city or along the back lanes surrounding his Hertfordshire home.

At first, I must admit I didn't know quite what to make of Amelia. My initial impression was that she was a bit of an anachronism, a throwback in terms of style and finish. In conversation with Gary, though, it became clear that he'd always intended the bike to be his personal interpretation of a particular retro theme, albeit updated and refined – a 1970s chopper for the 21st Century.

While Gary himself was undoubtedly the prime mover behind this project, he's happy to acknowledge that a pivotal, hands-on enabling role in Amelia's creation was played by

Charlie Stockwell at Warr's Customs in south-west London. In turn, Charlie was fortunate enough to be able to call on the peerless fabricating talents of a certain Dave Batchelar at P&D Customs down in Slinfold, West Sussex, to transform a series of sketches into a living, breathing custom motorcycle, not to mention benefit from the accomplished custom painting skills of Keith 'Chuckles' Baker at Classic Cycle Works and, last but not least, commission the awesome handwork of the master engraver himself, Don Blocksidge. Gary himself now takes up the story:

"I'd always wanted a full-on custom bike, but one which I'd be able to use for regular long-distance touring, so, when I found myself in a position to seriously kick-start my pet project, both ride quality and handling characteristics were top priorities from the very start. My vision was an uncompromising long-forked '70s-style chopper, so the frame geometry would have to be absolutely spot-on if the finished thing was going to be practical enough to satisfy my touring ambitions.

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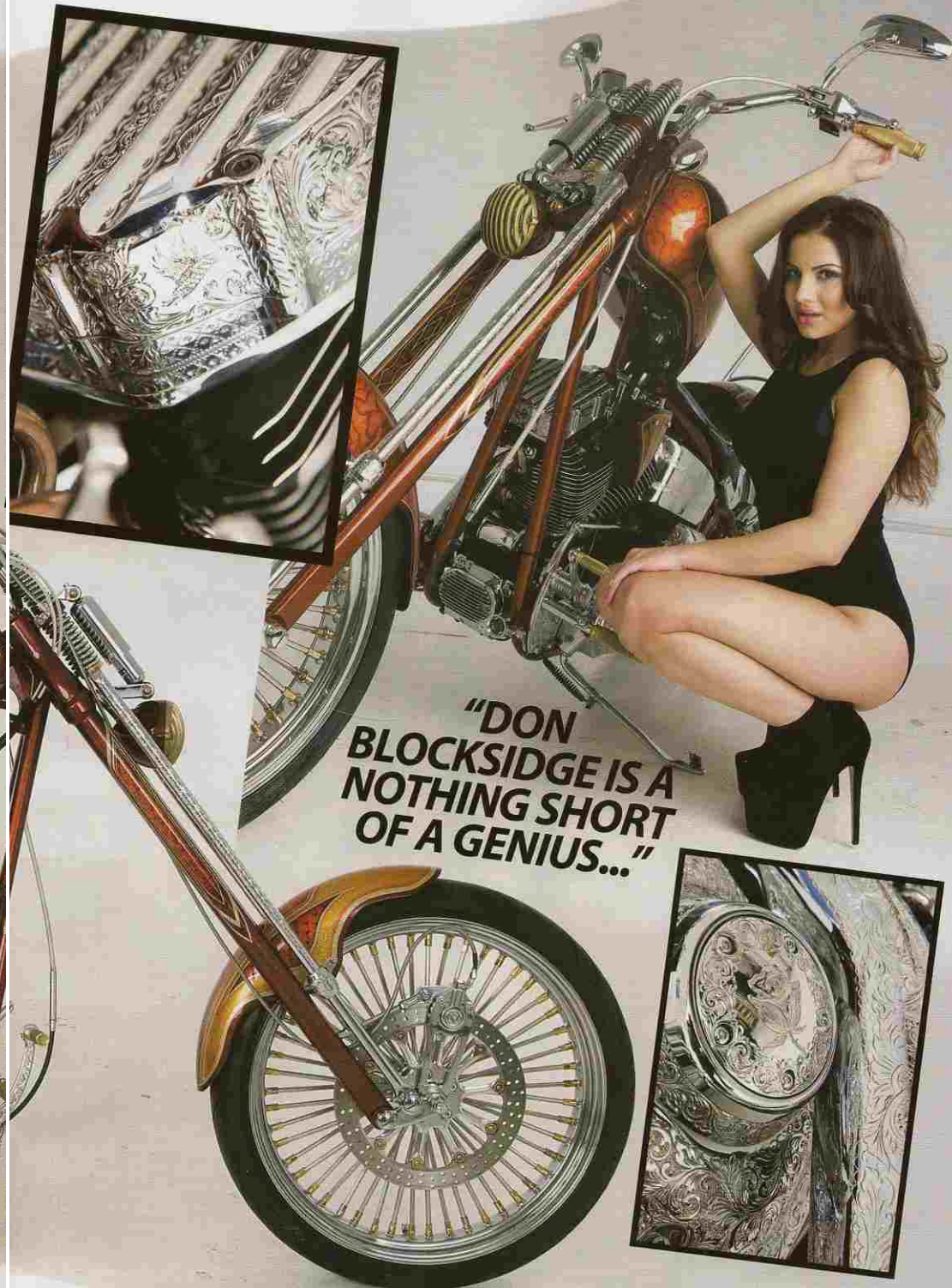
"The donor bike was Harley-Davidson FXSTC of 2009 vintage – a Twin Cam-powered, Softail-framed Big Twin – of which the only original components to be retained for use in the build were the engine, gearbox and primary, plus the frame and oil tank. The plan was to radically change the overall shape and lines of the bike by seriously shifting the steering head upwards and level with the ground.

"I had considered the idea of having a one-off rigid frame made – that was the look I'd wanted, literally thousands of miles without any rear suspension wasn't particularly appealing, so I decided to keep the softail configuration.

"The maestro himself, Dave Batchelar of P&D Customs, did all of the necessary calculations to determine the frame's precise geometry (as well as individual parts, such as the petrol tank, sissy bar, exhaust pipes, you name it...). Amelia was condition – dry built, if you like – so that it could be test ridden to check out the handling and to iron out the inevitable teething problems associated with a ground-up build like this. Even with its very well the bike handled, and I couldn't believe how surprised to find that I was able to throw it into bends with a great deal of confidence. The decent handling was largely down to the considerable amount of stretch Dave had introduced to the frame's downtubes and top tube, which, despite being fitted with a fourteen-over springer front end, allowed the steering head to be set at a comparatively steep angle.

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owl. And when I describe them as 'tiny', I really do mean tiny. Even though I'm perfectly well aware of everything that I'd asked Don to include in the engraving work, I can still sometimes find myself having to look really hard to pinpoint the precise location of each and every one of them.

"To many people who may, perhaps, be unfamiliar with the finer points of custom bikes, I'm sure that

Amelia will leave an overwhelming impression of boldness encapsulated within a riot of extraordinary engraving and rich, deep colours. The paint scheme comprises various shades of yellows, browns and oranges over a gold base, with asymmetrically applied Eerie-Dess panels, fishnet-effect and scalloped graphics, all set off by an extensive programme of pinstripping by

Keith Baker of Classic Cycle Works, whose business is based a couple of industrial units along from the aforementioned P&D Customs. To further complement the theme, Charlie Stockwell spent countless hours toiling away at the lathe to machine up any number of one-off parts and fittings in brass, carefully matching up the individual pieces with Amelia's overall look.



words: GARY S FRANCE & STU
photos: MIKE PRIOR
model: LACEY B

someone whose work is as near to perfection as can be achieved. I went to Don's house to watch him at work and was honoured to see him in the process of performing his art. Don works entirely by eye and never wastes time sketching anything out on paper, nor does he draw anything onto the piece that he's about to engrave (though he may – just may – make a pencil mark to show, say, the halfway point of a component). Having discussed a job with a client, he forms a picture in his mind about what the customer wants and works entirely from that. Oh, and it does help, I suppose, that he's possessed of a lifetime's worth of experience, of course. Out of curiosity, I made a stab at engraving using some waste material, and the results were so dreadful that they served only to make me further appreciate Don's truly exceptional talents.

"Although I was more than happy to give Don carte blanche to just go ahead and do his thing with Amelia's parts, I did make a point of outlining a few things which I wanted him to include somewhere within his designs. These represented references of a personal nature which are significant only to me and members of my family; amongst a number of tiny motifs added by Don were a rose, a watch, a bicycle and an

"Amelia's first trip of any significant length was a run down to Cascais, in southern Portugal, during which the big-inch twin performed fantastically well; in fact, she exceeded all of my expectations. Since then, she's cheerfully taken me on sojourns into the furthest corners of France, as well as a higher-mileage run across the Alps on a visit to Rome ... and back again, obviously.

"The thing that really gives me a buzz about Amelia is that I'm able to ride her on long-distance trips to bike events in far-flung places, pitch up my tent and then toddle along and enter the bike into a custom show. I derive an enormous amount of pleasure in watching other show entries being unloaded from the back of vans, secure in the knowledge that my bike's on an equal footing in terms of quality with these trailer queens, yet, once the show's over, I'm going to have the indescribable pleasure of riding mine home..."

spec:

ENGINE:

2009 Harley-Davidson Twin Cam 8 V-twin, 1800cc, Screamin' Eagle Stage 4 tune, one-off 2-into-2 upswep exhaust pipes with machined brass ends, 6-speed H-D gearbox, H-D Softail primary assembly.

FRAME:

Stretched twin downtube Harley-Davidson Softail.

FRONT END:

14" overstock DNA springer forks, 23" x 3.75 50-spoke chrome and gold Fat Daddy wheel by Ridewright Wheels, 130/60 x 23" Avon Cobra tyre, Warr's Customs mudguard, Performance Machine brakes, Earls Performance lines.

handlebars from Beaulieu auto/jumble, early chrome risers, Todd's Cycles brass grips, Motogadget Speedster speedo, H-D switchgear, CSC headlight.

REAR END:

Harley-Davidson Softail swinging arm, Progressive Suspension shock absorbers, 18" x 5.5 50-spoke chrome and gold Fat Daddy wheel by Ridewright Wheels, 200/55 x 18" Avon Cobra tyre, Performance Machine brakes, Earls Performance lines, Warr's Customs mudguard, CSC taillight, one-off stainless sissy bar by P&D Customs.

MISCELLANEOUS:

Stretched Zodiac image Series petrol tank, relocated filler neck, H-D Softail horseshoe oil tank/battery box, one-off rigid brass oil lines, one-off solo seat cover by Leather Mark, one-off coil cover, Arlen Ness forward controls, Todd's Cycle brass footpegs.

PAINT AND FINISH: Multi-layered metallflake paintwork by Keith Baker at Classic Cycle Works. Chroming by London Chroming. Engraving by Don Blocksidge.

THANKS TO: "Charlie Stockwell at Warr's Harley-Davidson, Dave Batchelar at P&D Customs for the fabrication, and Don Blocksidge for the engraving."

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www.GarysFrance.com