

'Bronson' TV show inspired Sportster owner to ride

By John Gunnell

In 2009, when photographer Michael Licheter helped organize the annual Motorcycle Art Exhibit at the well-known Sturgis bike meet, his theme was "Rebel Rousers Motorcycle Icons that Inspired Us to Ride." Michael wanted to explore what inspired motorcyclists to hop on two wheels and ride off towards the setting sun. Bill Weder, of Saint Jacob, Ill., was one of the enthusiasts who knew, right away, that his "Then Came Bronson" bike was just right for this type of exhibit.

Bill owns a 1975 Harley-Davidson Sportster XLH that he purchased new after seeing the TV show "Then Came Bronson." This was an on-the-road style drama NBC television broadcast between 1969-1970. Actor Michael Parks starred as Jim Bronson, an obituary writer from San Francisco who watched a friend jump off a bridge and commit suicide. After that experience, Bronson decided to drop out of society, quit his job and hit the road on his red Sportster.

In the series, Bronson actually buys back the bike that he once owned, from his friend's widow and then travels south, toward Big Sur, looking for the meaning of life. Along the way he has his share of excitement and adventures.



Actor Michael Parks starred as on-the-roader Jim Bronson.

Bronson rode an 833-cc Sportster with knobby off-road tires. On the gas tank was a triangular emblem with the dollar-bill-like image of an eye on it. Fans of the show soon labeled this the "Bronson Eye." The motorcycle wore license plate number 723795. Jim Bronson himself almost always wore a blue knit Navy watch cap and a leather jacket. He was the "Marlborough Man" on a motorcycle.

An MGM press release detailing changes made to the bike appeared in Cycle (Feb. 1970). It read: "For aficionados, the changes are as follows. The front wheel was replaced with a 21-in. aluminum rim carrying a 3.00 x 21 ribbed tire. The front fender was changed to a chrome-plated, bobbed piece and the headlight nacelle, or housing, was removed and a chrome sports light replaced it. A Harley-Davidson CH gas tank replaced the standard tank, and the oil tank and rear shock springs were chrome plated. A kick starter was added, although the Sportster carries an electric starter. The seat was replaced with a custom leather unit and a short chrome hand-hold was mounted behind the passenger seat. The chain guard cover and the voltage regulator cover were chrome plated. The rear fender was bobbed five inches and the taillight replaced with an old style English light. The motorcycle was repainted with a specially mixed formula, which is called, from this point on, Bronson Red. The final touch was the addition of the Bronson 'Eye' insignia to the gas tank."

After watching "Then came Bronson" and falling in love with the free-spirited theme of the series, Bill Weder knew he "had" to have a Harley-Davidson. He first purchased a 125-cc Harley-Davidson Rapido. Then, in 1975, he purchased a brand new Sportster—the same bike he has today. After buying the bike, Bill spent several years turning it into a replica of the Bronson bike. It was not built to fool anybody, but perhaps to show all of us that we're fools not to follow Jim Bronson's quest for freedom and spiritual fulfillment on two wheels.

Bill Weder and other fans of the Harley-Davidson Sportster will have their days in the sun the September when the 40th Annual Chief Blackhawk Chapter Fall National Meet of the Antique Motorcycle Club of America honors "The Evolution of Harley Davidson's Sportster." This meet will be held at the Mississippi Valley Fairgrounds in Davenport, Iowa Sept. 1-3, 2011 and it is the "Hershey of the Motorcycle Hobby."

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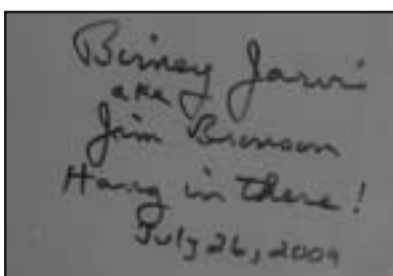
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Bill Weder displays some stills from the series when he shows the bike.



MPC released a 1:8 scale model of the bike.



< Actor Michael Parks who starred as Jim Bronson autographed the bike.



Bill Weder has collected a number of "Then Came Bronson" books.



> Antique Motorcycle Club of America showcased the bike in Davenport.