

CUSTOM BIKES—AND THE PEOPLE WHO RIDE THEM—HAVE SUDDENLY BECOME WAY COOL

CHOPPER MANIA

text by Dave Carty
photography by Michael Lichter
and Ken Hanna

Time was, people who rode choppers were bad news. The kind you tried to avoid. Now, you can't avoid them. They're ahead of you in traffic, in shows and rallies across the country, in digitally-enhanced living color on the Discovery Channel. That's not to say choppers are mainstream. On the contrary, it is still the rugged, individualistic, carefree-spirit types who tend towards these rolling masterpieces. There's just a few more of them these days, and that old biker image is being displaced by a new breed of road warrior.

None of this happened by design. The bad boys and their big, bad bikes are disappearing from asphalt America like the guys with ponytails who used to putz along in VW vans. Remember those guys? This may help: they drove real slow.

Eric Gorges is squarely in the center of this sea change in attitudes toward all those big dudes with bad tattoos and loud motorcycles. Gorges' shop, Voodoo Choppers, has been building high-end motorcycles for the custom-bike crowd for nearly a decade in Michigan, where it is theoretically too cold to ride for six months of the year. Even so, there's been no lack of business. And it's not the black-leather types

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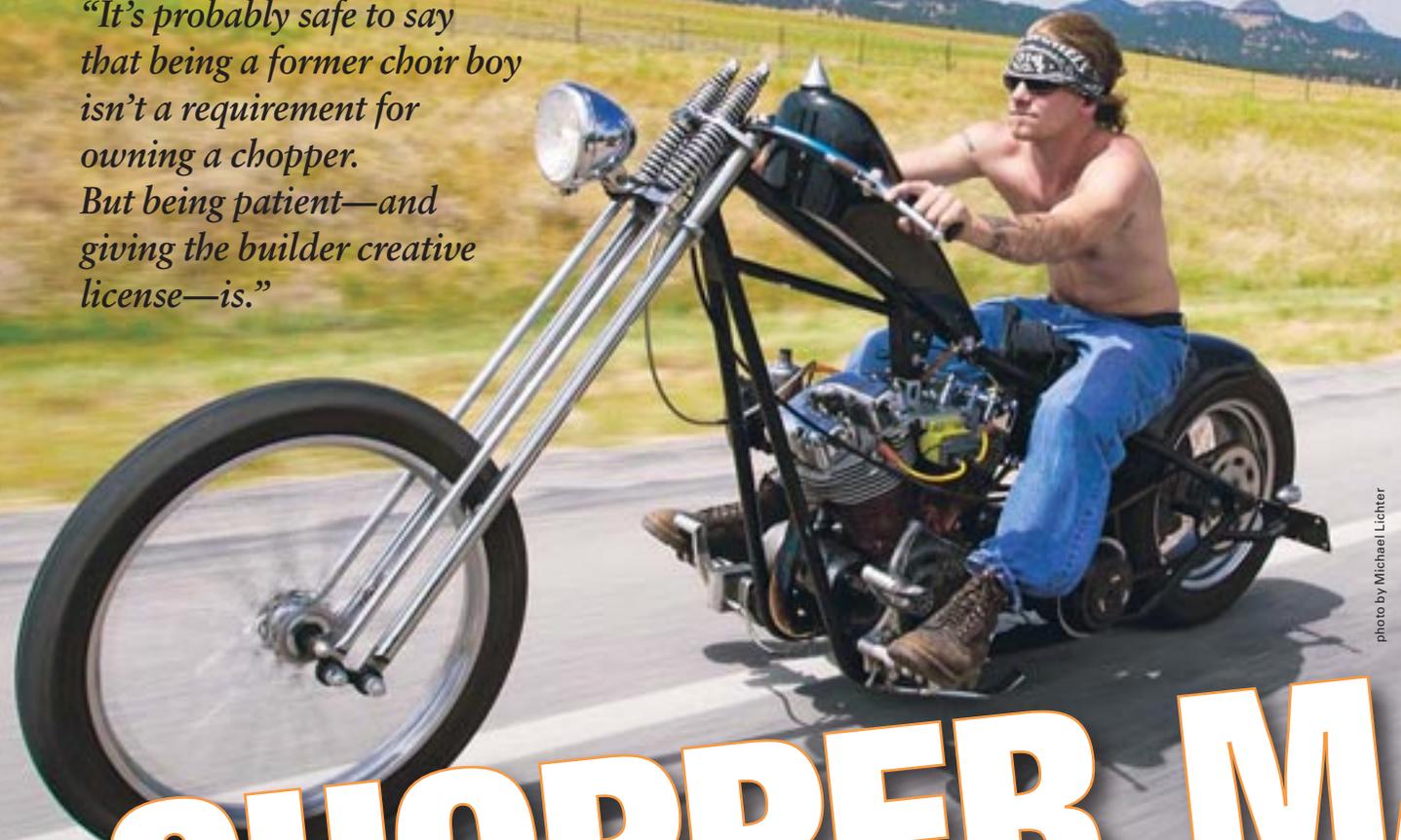


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that are snapping them up as fast as he can chrome the tailpipes and send them out the door. They’re going to athletes, stockbrokers, beer salesmen and construction workers. In fact, about the only thing his customers have in common is that none ever asks for a slow bike.

Gorges got his first street bike at age 20 and neatly sidestepped the broken bones and serial concussions most motorheads accrue. Even today, the 36-year-old says he’s never had a serious wreck.

“Man, you just don’t talk about that,” he says superstitiously. But twisting wrenches, particularly on motorcycles, was his first love, and he opened his own shop in 1999.

Ordering a custom bike is not, say, like ordering a Subaru. First, there’s the cost. A relatively sane, modestly chopped motorcycle will run into the low 20s. On the upper, wildly insane end, you can pony up 80 grand or more. That kind of money will buy you just about anything you want, including a custom machine that will fit your nearly seven-foot frame, or a bike designed around animal furs and antlers. Gorges has built both.

What turns Gorges’ crank—one of the things, anyway—is building a bike that exactly suits his customer’s personality.

“I really like to spend time and get to know that person,

(Right) Eric Gorges poses with one of his custom creations.

photo by Michael Lichter

photo by Ken Hanna

understand that person, how they’re gonna use it, what they’re going to do with it, how they’re gonna ride,” he says. “We spend just as much time talking about things they don’t like as talking about things they do like. The more I know about a person, the better I can build a bike that fits them.”

Gorges, who is divorced, implies that that kind of dedication can ruin a marriage.

“Part of the deal with doing this for a living is that it’s not just a job,” he says. “You know what I mean? It’s part of your life. It’s everything about you. And it takes a toll sometimes.”

But sacrifices—in money, emotions or flesh—are a price many are willing to pay. John “Boogie” Powell of V-Twin-Design opened a small custom bike shop a year ago in Seguin, Texas, but he’s been riding all his life, including a stint as a flat-track racer in Alabama.

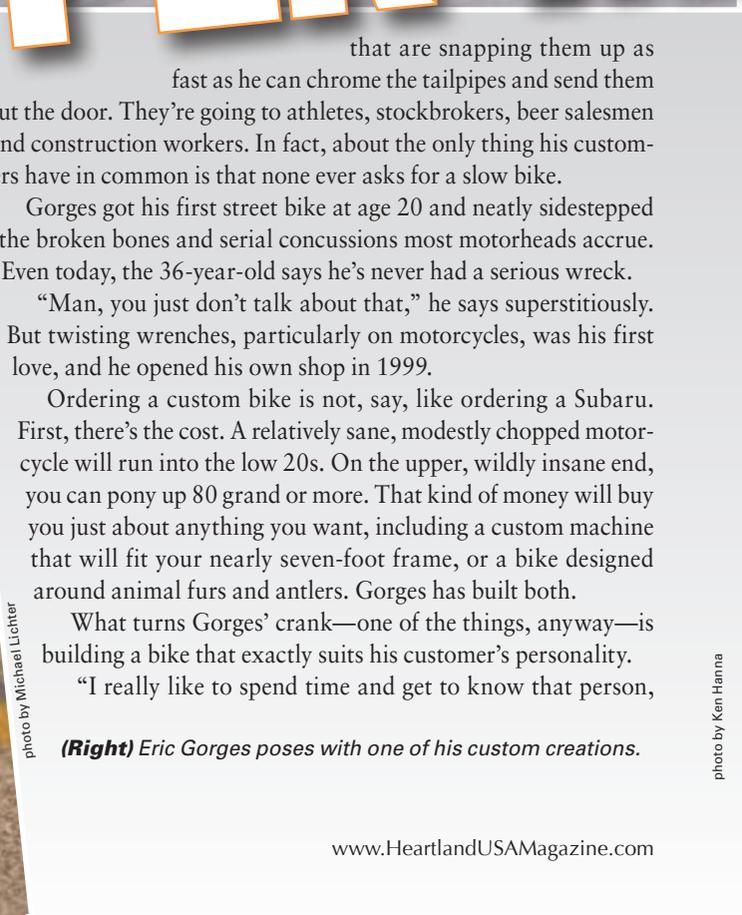
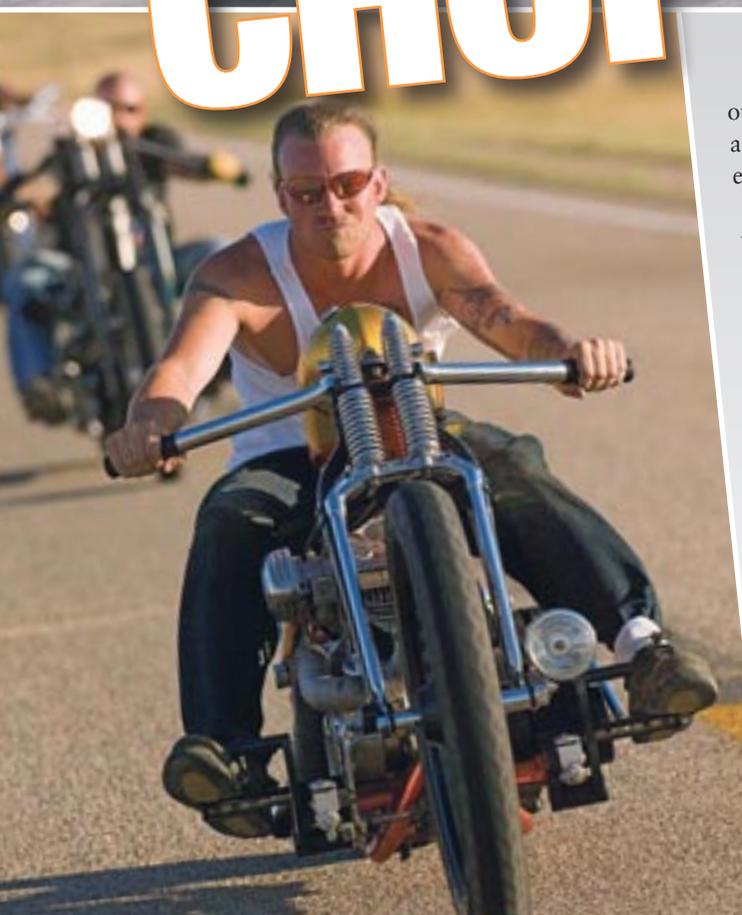
“Men are always looking for toys,” Powell says. “Bass boats were a big thing, four-wheel drive trucks were a big thing—and then builders started feeding the market twenty years ago with motorcycles that were one-offs for people who could afford to spend a lot of money for a one-off motorcycle that nobody else has like it. Everyone wants their own identity.” As with Gorges, his customers come from all walks of life. “Lawyers and doctors and Indian chiefs,” Powell says. “They want that excitement, that outlaw image, that biker image.”

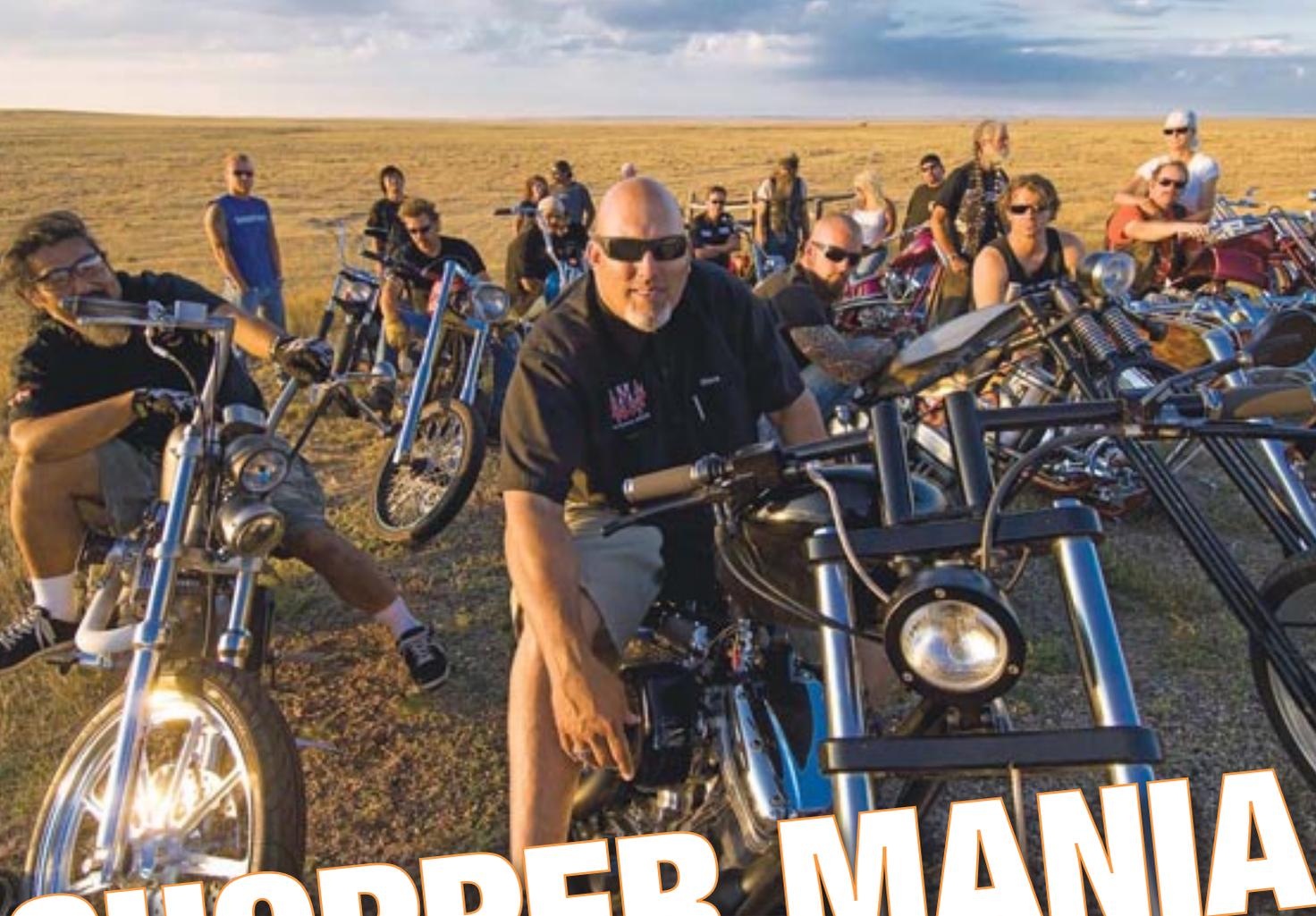
His customers aren’t interested in what Powell pointedly calls

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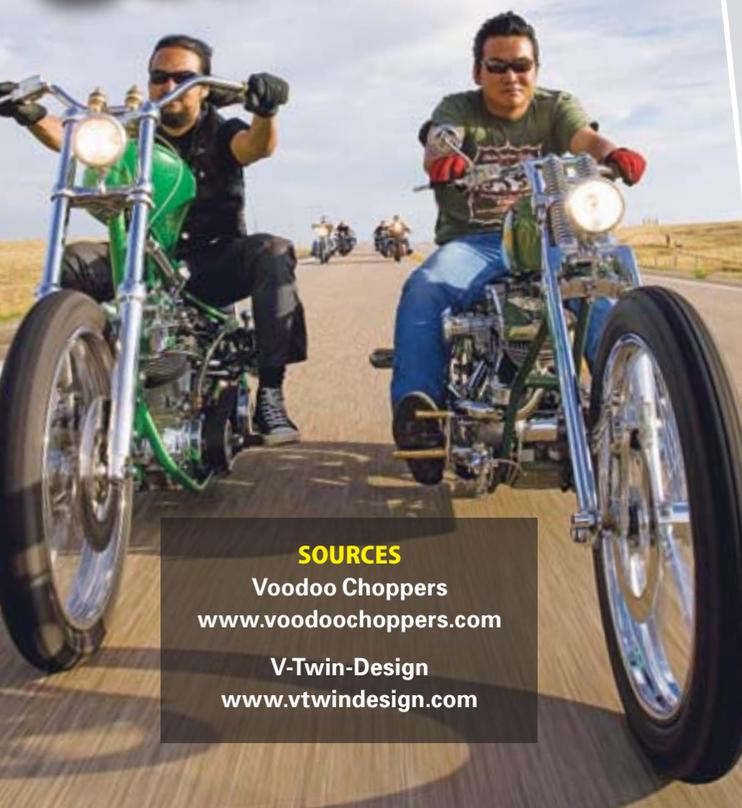


photo by Michael Lichter

“cookie cutter” motorcycles like Harleys. “They’re nice, and they’re expensive,” he says, “but they’re all the same.” One of Boogie’s custom bikes, they know, will make them look good, assuming they don’t kill themselves first. Like a lot of bikers, Powell has some personal history with that.

It was 1978, and he was 28 years old. “It was on a Saturday morning, breakfast in the front yard with a pint of tequila,” he recalls. “A friend brought over a little Triumph chopper and wanted me to take it for a ride. I didn’t want to, but I finally did. I ended up sliding through a dead-end intersection and broke my leg. Stove myself up pretty good.”

Did it change his perspective? “That kind of depends on if you’re still drinking or not,” he says, chuckling. “Until I quit drinking my perspective didn’t really change, no. But I quit 22 years ago, and I haven’t had an accident since.”

It’s probably safe to say that being a former choir boy isn’t a requirement for owning a chopper. But being patient—and giving the builder creative license—is. Gorges will tell you that there’s not much he can’t do to a motorcycle. It can be raked out to here, gold plated, built low, high, wide or skinny. He can build it light for speed or loud for attention. You can even get him to teach you how to shape a custom fender out of sheetmetal.

That’s what John Powers did. Powers now owns a

photo by Michael Lichter

photo by Ken Hanna

Voodoo Chopper with fenders and an air filter he hammered out himself. Like most motorcycle fans, Powers was interested in bikes all his life, but something always seemed to get in the way—first, his family, which was dead-set against his owning one, and then art school in Colorado, where he got his degree. Today, he’s a Michigan wholesale beer distributor. But a few years back the 38-year-old started a chopper fund, a fund, he assured his wife, that wouldn’t jeopardize the family finances. Before he knew it, he had twenty grand burning a hole in his pocket. His chopper cost twenty-four. No comments from the wife.

Listening to Powers describe the experience of helping Gorges design and build his bike is like listening to a dreams-do-come-true story.

“I’m more of a yuppy than I am a biker,” he says, “but I liked the fact that all these guys that I thought were cool liked his (Gorges’) work. The kind of bike I wanted to build was not necessarily an era piece, it was more of an understated, all hand-built chopper—no bells and whistles. I didn’t want one of these fancy yellow paint jobs that said ‘look at me, look at how fat my rear tire is.’”

Powers’ goal was to get the bike up and running in time for his yearly trek to the Smokeout, a motorcycle rally in North Carolina. Naturally, he almost didn’t make it.

“When we were totally done with the bike, when it was about ready to go to paint, Eric looks at it and says, ‘Man, I think we need to rake it out more,’” Powers recalls. “I said, ‘Isn’t it a little late to do that?’ And Eric says, ‘That’s the beauty of doing a custom bike. It’s never too late.’ So we pulled the front end off and took a Sawzall to the top tube of the motorcycle.

“We’re gonna do this—now?” Powers remembers asking. “But we ended up doing it, and it was amazing.” By then, though, time was running out, so Gorges trailered up the bike and drove down to meet Powers in North Carolina.

“We rolled up to the show, and he’s got my bike on the trailer,” Powers recalls. “I hadn’t even heard it run yet. The first time I turned the key, it was late at night, and there were screaming bikers with tattoos, people doing burnouts everywhere—that was the first time I got to start my bike. I coasted around the parking lot, and I felt like an absolute rock star. It was the coolest thing ever.”

The low-key Gorges probably doesn’t see himself as anything like a rock star. Custom bikes are as much a part of who he is as the tattoos that sleeve his arms.

And while he’ll admit there’s some truth to the biker image, “Motorcycles, in and of themselves, have become almost mainstream,” he says. “The outlaw bikers, the heavy clubs and what not—they’re still in existence, but the bikers in those old movies, like *The Wild Ones*, you don’t see that anymore, you know what I mean? It’s just not like that anymore.

“Anymore,” Gorges says, “You’re just a dude on a bike.”

About The Author

Dave Carty’s 16-year-old Honda Civic is passed by choppers on a regular basis.



photo by Ken Hanna



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