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Get your mind in the Gutter

*Motorcycle
Cruiser* builds
an unbeatable
custom—with more
than a little help
from our favorite
builder, Jim Giuffra

BY MARK ZIMMERMAN
PHOTOS BY MIKE CHASE

Here's the Deal: To publicize its line of cruisers and illustrate how to individualize them, Honda thought it'd be fun to have a little biker-rag build-off. Nothing serious, you understand, just a little friendly competition between scribblers to see what kind of customs the mags could come up with using a typical Honda cruiser as a starting point. The finished bikes would be unveiled at the 2006 Honda Hoot and then hit the road to be displayed at various Honda events throughout the country.

To ensure a level playing field, Honda would supply everyone with one brand-new VT750CA Aero and an OEM accessory catalog, from which it politely requested that a minimum of five accessories be selected and used in the build. Other than that, it was open season. The magazines didn't even have to get their hands dirty. Hired guns were perfectly acceptable, and if said gun wanted to build his creation around a rigid frame constructed out of surplus titanium sourced from the Russian Navy, then so be it.

The finished product could be mild, wild or completely over the top—as long as it was based on the supplied Aero 750 and made it to Knoxville in time for the Metric Cruiser Custom Show (sponsored by Cobra Engineering) on June 24, it was all good.

No prizes were offered, and the bikes weren't going to be judged, but things being what they are, the bragging rights alone would be worth the price of the entry. Three magazines responded. The first never made it to the show. Presumably, its bike, like the majority of its issues, is still gathering dust somewhere. The second made a credible effort, and the third? Well, that would be us, and in

all immodesty our bike was a showstopper. Here's the story.

We—Well, Maybe Not We—Get Started

Since our talents, collectively and otherwise, lie in arenas other than custom-bike building, we wisely turned to a shop with a proven history of building kick-ass rides, particularly those based on the VT750 Honda: AFT Customs, located in Martell, California.

For those of you who don't follow the metric show circuit, here's the 411. AFT Customs is a small California shop run by a fellow named Jim Giuffra. In 2005, Jim and his partner/coconspirator Ron Abel won the metric class at the World Championship of Custom Bike Building with a VT750-based bobber. That means that until somebody wrests the championship from them, a feat that's going to take some doing, the boys from AFT can lay claim to being the best metric bike builders on the planet, end of story.

Game On

With all parties in agreement, the bike was ordered, and the guys started thinking

about how best to transform it into something special. They wanted to keep this build fairly simple. In the first place there were circumstance-imposed time constraints, and in the second, they wanted to create a bike that looked like something Honda might produce on its own if it were bold enough.

Working with those premises in mind meant the frame geometry and the majority of the factory-supplied components had to remain largely intact, or at least recognizable, so wholesale slicing and dicing was for the most part out. Instead, pieces would be massaged and subtly reshaped to give the desired effect: a very high-end factory custom.

Since Jim wanted this bike to look like it might have rolled off the showroom floor, he also decided to leave as many of the DOT-required factory stickers in place as possible, including the VIN sticker on the lower frametube. Obviously, this precluded stripping and powdercoating the frame, a decision that would have greater implications as the build progressed.

The next problem was deciding what type of bike to build. A bobber was discounted out of hand; they'd already demonstrated rather conclusively that they knew how to build those. A chopper was briefly considered, but choppers, at least really good ones, are just a little too radical for the factory custom concept they had in mind.

Ultimately, they decided a bagger was the way to go, in part because the Honda's natural lines lend themselves to that type of bike, as did many of the factory accessories, and also because Jim and Ron both like baggers. Once they'd finalized the plan, Jim contacted his outside suppliers and cleared the decks for action. At that point, he and Ron



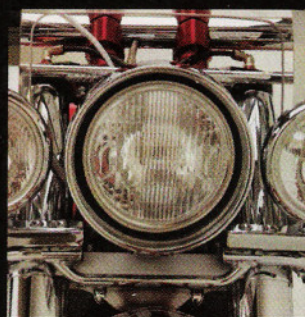
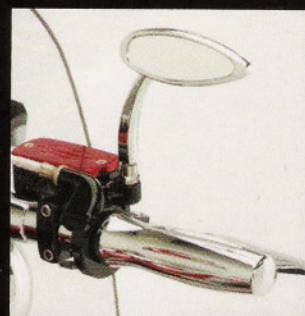
ANDREW CHERNEY



Week Three
Ron jumped into the deep end and had a hole through the center of the tank. He fabricated a sleeve and TIG welded it in place. This was where the speedometer would live from now on. Once the tank was finished and pressure-tested to ensure there were no leaks, it was placed back on the bike to check the fit and alignment before being sent to the painter. Since the speedo needed a new

housing, Ron included relocating the stock housing from the front down to the rear. Unfortunately, they'd done the best. Unfortunately, the last time they did it to a Shadow. The Aero frame dimensions were slightly different, making this relocation just a little more of a chore, but it was simple enough. All the boys

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figured they had at least 10 to 12 weeks to build the bike. They'd have to stay on top of things, but there would be more than enough time to finish it without killing themselves.

Waiting Room

Within a week or two the needed parts started arriving; unfortunately, there was no bike. Due to the usual FUBAR-type circumstances that always seem to surround these deals, the Aero, which was supposed to show up in early March or at the latest by April 1, wasn't dropped off until the middle of May. In fact, when it finally arrived at the shop, barely five weeks remained before it was due to be shown at the Hoot.

Both Jim and Ron work day jobs. Jim has his motorcycle shop, Amador Fine Tune, to run, and Ron owns a heavy-equipment repair/welding and fabrication business. The custom thing is somewhat of a sideline, something both guys do at the end of their regular workday. What this means is that given their need to make a living, eat and occasionally sleep, their five weeks are in reality more like two and half.

The options at this point were limited to three. First, the boys could bail on the project, and if they did, who could blame them? It's not like the delay was their fault, and they both had plenty of other irons in the fire. Forget their day jobs, at the time they were also smack in the middle of building the bike they hoped would take them to their second World Championship. Setting that little project aside for five weeks might have devastating reper-

cussions down the line. Second, they could phone it in, meaning splash on a little paint, dab on some chrome and bolt on a few accessories and—badda-bing, badda-boom—instant custom.

The first two options just weren't in the cards, which left Option No. 3: simply buckling down and doing it. This entailed a certain amount of self-sacrifice, like forgoing eating, sleeping and having any sort of personal life over the next few weeks, but it was the only option Jim and Ron considered viable.

Week One

Since the need to make a living outweighed the need to fiddle with *Motorcycle Cruiser's* custom bike, Jim had to wait until his regular workday was through before he could even uncrate the Aero and begin stripping it down to its component parts.

Working on the custom from 6 or so until midnight, he spent a week doing little more than tearing the bike down and preparing it for surgery. By the end of the first week what had formerly been a brand-new VT750 lay in semi-organized piles scattered around the shop. The biggest pile contained the engine and frame.

Week Two

The plan included relocating the stock radiator from the front downtubes to under the seat. Fortunately, they'd done this before. Unfortunately, the last time they did it to a Shadow. The Aero's frame dimensions were slightly different, making this remount just a little more of a chore.

But it was simple enough. All the boys

had to do was find someone to build them an aluminum-cored radiator to their new specifications (today), figure out some way to rubber-mount the thing so it wouldn't shake itself to death, reroute the coolant lines, evict the stock battery and several important electrical components from their former location under the seat, and reposition them elsewhere.

While they were in there, Jim removed the stock radiator brackets at the front of the frame. Since he didn't want to repaint the frame (which would mean replacing those unobtainable OEM stickers), this meant several hours of handwork carefully incising the brackets, hand-dressing the cuts and touching up the scars. By the time the radiator was installed, he'd burned up 20 full hours. In what hours remained, he hand-finished all the rough-cast stock components like the footpegs, kickstand, rear brake rod, and about two dozen others. Once they were as smooth as a baby's butt, he shipped them off to be powder-coated or chrome-plated as required. The hardware, brake discs and the new Sun rims were sent out for anodizing.

Week Three

Ron jumped into the deep end and hacked a hole through the center of the fuel tank. He fabricated a sleeve and TIG welded it in place. This was where the speedometer would live from now on. Once the tank was finished and pressure-tested to ensure there were no leaks, it was placed back on the bike to check the fit and alignment before being sent to the painter. Since the speedo now had a new



home, the wiring had to be modified. The new harness incorporated OEM connectors so the tank could be easily removed for servicing, and as a finishing touch the odometer reset button was moved up to the top clamp.

Since it's more or less a prerequisite that a bagger actually have working hard bags installed, a pair was sourced from Champion Side Cars. The Patriot bags looked great, but were wider than expected, a situation easily remedied by removing three inches from the mounts. While the boys were fooling around with the saddlebags, they decided to build a false floor in the left one and locate all the components needed for the soon-to-be-installed air ride suspension beneath it. It hid the air compressor and relays quite nicely, yet still allowed access for maintenance, and best of all, the bag was still perfectly useable.

Before the bags were finished a set of turn signals were installed and frenched, giving the rear end a subtle retro style. With a few hours left before complete exhaustion set in, they spun up custom mounting grommets on Ron's lathe.

Toward the end of the week Jim and Ron fashioned a custom set of handlebars and risers and a new brake pedal for the bike. The suicide shifter, cleavage cover and single pull throttle were items they had in stock, which saved some time.

Before they shut off the lights for the weekend, Jim installed the rest of the Baron Air Ride Suspension kit. Installing the kit had taken a bit of effort, but it was well worth it, especially since this bike was intended to be ridden as well as shown.

AFT Customs

Jim Giuffra—Owner, designer, chief cook and bottle washer

Jim, the driving force behind AFT, spent his formative years working alongside his dad, a talented and innovative diesel mechanic. He began his motorcycle career as a motocross racer (eventually reaching the pro ranks) and dealership mechanic. Ironically, his first foray into custom bike building was modifying Gold Wings. In 1987 he opened Amador Fine Tune, a general-purpose motorcycle shop that works on everything from 80cc minibikes to full-dress touring rigs. AFT customs is a spin-off of that business. Jim is a perfectionist who insists that his customs be as well detailed beneath the sheetmetal as they are above it. "I'd be just as happy to show our bikes with the bodywork removed. Anyone can make a bike look good from 10 feet away; ours have to be perfect where no one can see them before I'm satisfied."

Ron Abel—Jim's partner and master fabricator

Aptly named Ron Abel is a certified welder, heavy-equipment mechanic and master fabricator. Originally from the Bay Area, Ron, a former motocross racer, met Jim when he moved to Amador County. Initially a customer of Jim's shop, he and Jim began collaborating on projects in 1990. Ron works primarily at his home shop on individual parts, mainly at night and often behind locked doors, although he always helps with the bike's final assembly. "I like to do stuff that I've never done before. The most satisfying part of the build for me is when we're at a show and people look at the bike and can't figure out what was done. It's my job to make sure that people don't get it."

Melissa Kirkpatrick—model, helper and budding custom builder

After serving in the Army as a light-wheeled vehicle mechanic for two years, Melissa decided she'd like to try her hand at modeling and replied to an ad Jim had placed when he was looking for some eye candy to pose with some of his other customs for a photo shoot. During the interview Melissa mentioned she'd trained as a mechanic, and Jim offered her a part-time job on the spot. Melissa did the internal handlebar wiring on Gutta and also wired the ignition system. "I like working on bikes. It's a lot different than working on Humvees—those are covered in dirt or mud, and if something doesn't work or fit, you can whack it with a hammer. With the bikes, you can't even leave a fingerprint."

With the system pressurized, the bike rides and handles like any other Aero; in fact, it's better, because the air ride allows the rider to fine-tune the suspension to his specific requirements, be it carrying a passenger or charging the next turn.

When it's show time, the air is released, which drops the suspension, lowering the bike. In the "slammed" show mode, the VT is so low it's in the gutter (so to speak), hence its new moniker: Gutta.

Modifying the front fork turned out to be the most difficult part of this little job. First, Jim decided to install a pressure regulator to prevent the fork seals from blowing if someone accidentally over-pressurized the front end. Then he decided a little spring preload would be a good thing, as it'll keep the bike from dropping like a lead balloon whenever the fork air is vented to lower the bike.

Week Four

With the chips down and time running out, a young Army veteran whose last job involved rebuilding Humvees was brought in to help with the mockup and final assembly. Melissa Kirkpatrick didn't have a lot of motorcycle experience, but she was a quick study and took some of the weight off Jim and Ron. Since there was no time for a full mockup build as there would normally be if the bike were headed for the competitive show circuit, Jim, Ron and Melissa installed the parts as they appeared. If there was a problem they would have to rectify it without damaging the finish. Making a tricky job even trickier was the red-anodized finish

applied to much of the hardware—one slip of the wrench and it was scarred, and there may not be enough time to have it refinished. It was a nerve-wracking way to build a bike, but it saved much needed time.



Week Five

Working like fiends, the trio completed the final assembly. Incredibly, the bike was finished and ready to be ridden three days before it was due to be picked up and taken to the Hoot. On the other hand, when you figure it took two talented craftsmen and one talented mechanic working nearly 200 manhours to get the thing done, maybe it's not so incredible.

Show Time

Jim and his lovely and extremely understanding wife, also named Melissa, escorted me and Associate Editor Andy Cherney to the Honda demo ride trailer where the bike

was to be displayed before it was taken to the show. Andy and I were stoked; although we'd seen some photos, this was the first time we'd actually get a look at "our" bike.

The finished product is a knockout. Resplendent in Honda's traditional red and silver colors artfully laid down by Scott Hultquist at RiffRaff Customs, the Gutta is as sharp as a tack. There's not a loose end or overlooked detail on the bike. From the brake rotors to the narrowed bags, this bike is as finely built as a Rolex watch. When I dropped down to shoot some of the details, I realized that even the bike's hidden parts, like the wiring and cooling hoses, had been routed and finished with as much attention to detail as the rest of the bike.

Jim fretted that the crowd wouldn't appreciate the work that had gone into this bike. In a sense, I could see his point, as much of the work is extremely subtle. Later, when I discussed the bike with showgoers, I had to point out that the radiator had been moved from the frame downtube to its new home under the seat. The job was so well done that few among the throng, including the Honda factory techs milling about, even realized it's missing.

Although the bike wasn't judged, the consensus from the crowd that constantly milled around the bike was that "ours"—and I use the term only in the editorial sense—was the clear-cut winner. One guy summed it all up when he said to me, somewhat wistfully, "I wish I knew how to build something that pretty." Me too, buddy, me too. **WIN**

SOURCES

AFT Customs

Suicide shifter, single-pull throttle, handlebars and risers, cleavage cover, radiator-relocation kit, fuel-tank mods, brake pedal
www.aftcustoms.com
(209) 223-3848

RiffRaff Customs

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