

Swing Low Street Chariot

What has eighty cubes of Midwest muscle, goes posing with a low profile and turns heads faster than its own crankwheels? From his vantage point 27 inches off the ground Mike Nicks gives the answer.

PERHAPS ENCOURAGED BY THE FACT THAT it is endowed with the biggest engine in motorcycling, I made a rather basic error in my approach to the Harley-Davidson Lowrider. My mistake, fool that I was to treat it as a motorcycle.

I expected the Lowrider to take me long distances in as much comfort as one can expect on a bike in that steel-grey season between the worst of winter and the opening of spring. I was even naive enough to assume that the 1,339cc motor would accomplish this kind of venture at reasonable average speeds.

Of course I should have known better. After all, I had ridden Harleys before. And only a few issues ago, in his vivid treatise on the rationale behind Sportster ownership, committed Harley rider Phil Wade had admitted that no one buys Milwaukee metal as a means of transport. "Or they don't keep it long if they do," he wrote. Phil must feel pretty confident of his grip on the President's chair at the Stoke-on-Trent Harley club to let that kind of heretic talk loose among the public.

However, the patron saint of road testers long ago observed that "Experience doth not teach them," and thus it was that I planned a 250-mile run on an early March day as my introduction to the Lowrider. In fact, though, I snuck round town on it the night before the long ride just to make sure the damn thing was somewhere near controllable. After all, any 1,300cc motorcycle can be a nightmare on wet roads, notwithstanding the fact that the enlarged 80-inch Harley engine is said to put out a mild 65 horsepower — barely a tad more than yer modern-day Japanese 650cc four.

But it was the torque I was concerned about rather than sheer brute power. I had the most fecund visions of those 3½-inch wide pistons copulating up and down the cylinder bores at 4¼ inches to the stroke, and I imagined how easily a misplaced spurt of that low-down poke could stab the Lowrider's back wheel from under it. Also, the Harley name has in the past not always been synonymous with such qualities as fine handling, dependable braking, and vibration-free running.

As it happened, these fears were not entirely justified. The motor turned out to be an undemanding device ideal for puttering on mucky winter roads, while the triple disc brakes, if insensitive in action, at least stopped the Harley — in the wet, too.

Ninety miles into the ride the next day I was glad to swing off the road and into a cafe and filling station. While topping up the twin compartments of the gas tank and lobbing yet another can of multi-grade into the oil tank — Harleys really drink the stuff — I reflected that, yeah, it did stop reasonably and rumbled

along in an agreeable sort of way. But for the kind of open road use I was putting it to, the Lowrider had shortcomings a-plenty.

With a 63-inch wheelbase and a dry weight of nearly 600lb it's a pretty cumbersome hunk of metal on which to mix with four-wheeled traffic on heavily-used two-lane routes in the wet. The brake lever needs quite a squeeze if a short stop is wanted, and it's a long reach from the handlebar to the lever if you're not blessed with American-size hands.

And then you have to contend with Harley's archaic method of operating the indicators. A button on the right bar works the right flasher, with a similar arrangement on the left — but you have to maintain pressure to keep the lights working. I know Wisconsin is a long way from Silicon Valley, California, but at least Harley should have cottoned on to the existence of the humble switch by now. As it is, the sleight of hand required to indicate for a right turn while braking and blipping the throttle for downward changes, especially when the fingers are encased in a waxed-cotton riding mitt, should qualify the Harley rider for honorary life membership of The Magic Circle.

Warmed by food and a shot of alcohol — only one, officer, honest — I felt more tolerant about the Lowrider's failings as I settled back into its hammock-shaped seat, thumbed the starter button, and listened to the v-twin motor wheeze into life. But with another sixty miles beneath my wheels, this time motorway stuff, I was looking for a break once again.

The Lowrider's problem on motorways is not the anticipated vibration — though the engine does shake merrily enough — but the choppy seating posture dictated by the cowhorn bars. The motor is willing to slug along at 70 to 80mph, but the rider's spine can't take the strain of the wind pressure at sustained high speeds. And while the vibration is not of the high-intensity wrist-shattering variety, it sets the hands chattering down the almost vertical set of the unserrated plastic handlebar grips. Maybe binding some tape around the grips would provide more, uh, grip, but in their unmodified state they leave the rider constantly reaching back up as though he's climbing a rope. Lowriding on motorways is not recommended.

All this discomfort prompted me to abandon the super-highways and take to mature old 'A' roads for the rest of the journey, which at least afforded an opportunity to assess the power of the Harley's suspiciously small 5½in diameter headlight. Suffice to say that I was able to leave it on main beam all the way, and no one gave a retaliatory flash in anger.

The next day dawning mild and dry, I kicked aside the waxed-cotton gear and got into something more appropriate to Harley

riding — leather jacket, jeans and cowboy boots (lissen, Calderwood didn't call me the world's oldest living teenager for nuthin'). And with the enthusiasm that comes only when you're riding someone else's property, I tested the Lowrider's cornering clearance with a vengeance, if not entirely intentionally. All I did was pitch 'er into a rough right-hander with a bit more passion than I'd been able to on the previous day's wet roads, but the result was a massive CHING! of metal-to-tarmac contact and a wobble that took me perilously close to the hedgerow. Previous occupants of the Lowrider had already ground a flat on the underside of the front exhaust pipe, but now a bolt securing one of the exhaust pipe clamps had obviously dug in and been torn clean off.

Cross off country-land scratching from the list of possible uses for the Lowrider.

It's a shame that the Lowrider can't be laid further into corners, as by the end of this test the bike's basic handling qualities had totally belied the apprehension brought on by its massive overall dimensions. A V-twin engine, being narrow, can be located low down in a motorcycle frame, unlike transverse multi-cylinder units which need to be mounted relatively high to stop the crankcase extremities from grounding during cornering. An example of the effect that engine width has on a machine's centre of gravity was experienced by BSA-Triumph when they switched their racing programme from the twin-cylinder Bonneville to the 750cc triple. At the same banking angle as the Bonnie, the triple's engine had to be placed 1¼in higher in the motorcycle. As well as a narrow and thus low engine, the Lowrider also benefits from a ground-hugging seat height of only 27 inches. All this makes for a bike on which fast and accurate changes of direction can be made.

Harley's advertising makes much of the boosting of the 1,207cc engine that has traditionally powered the Electra Glide and Super Glide series to 1,339cc. But even with this bigger mill, on-the-road performance remains agricultural. The extra cubes have been gained by lengthening the stroke from 100.8mm to a whopping 108mm, while 1½mm has been added to the cylinder bore. The result is a five horsepower gain over the most powerful version of the 1,207cc engine (which is still available in some Harley models), although the peak torque figure is increased by a mere 1½ft/lb.

What with this magazine's eternally hectic schedules being exaggerated by the editor taking a prolonged floozy-hunting — sorry, business-trip to America, we never did get to haul the Lowrider to MIRA to check out performance figures. Absolute top speed remains a somewhat academic consideration



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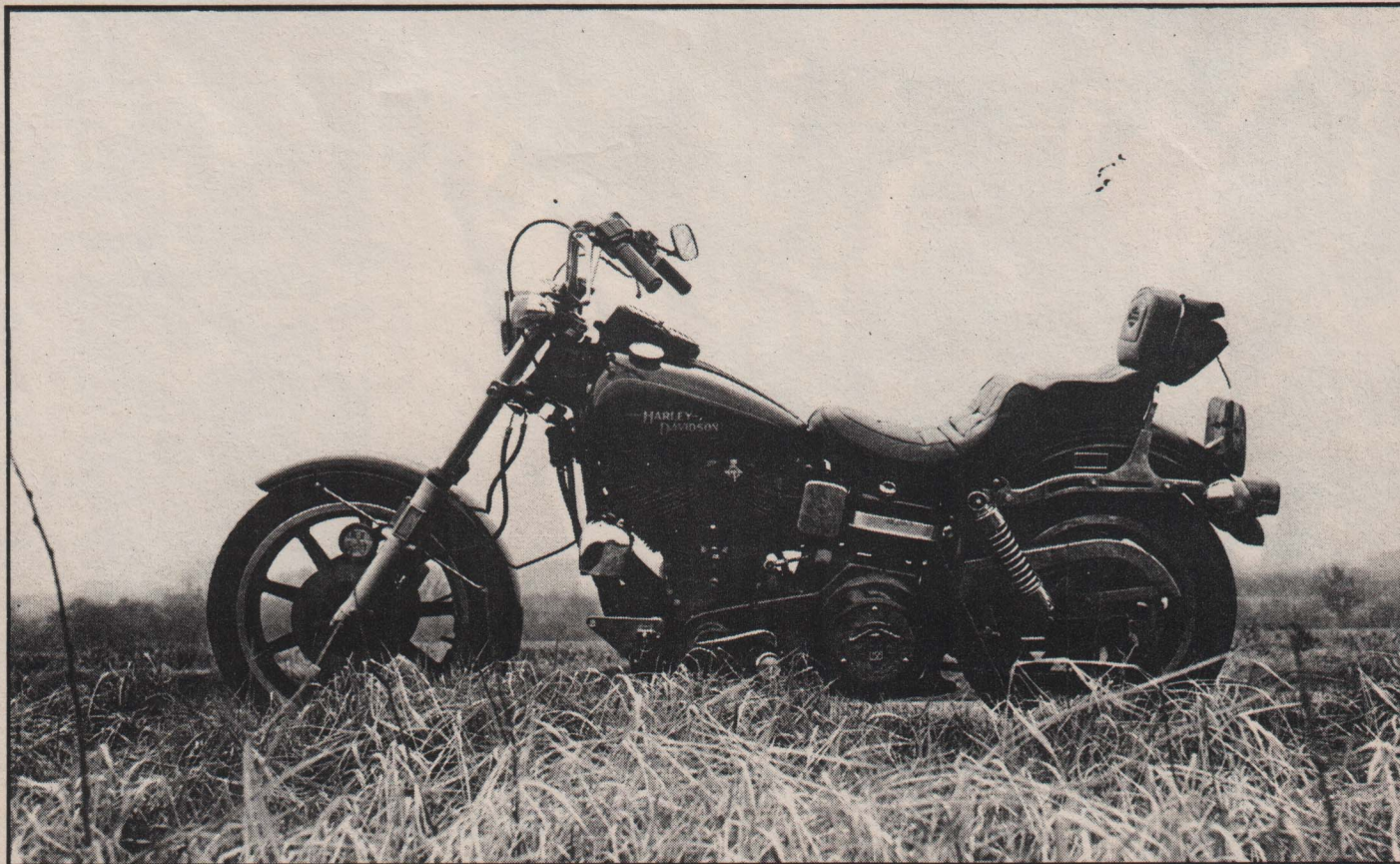
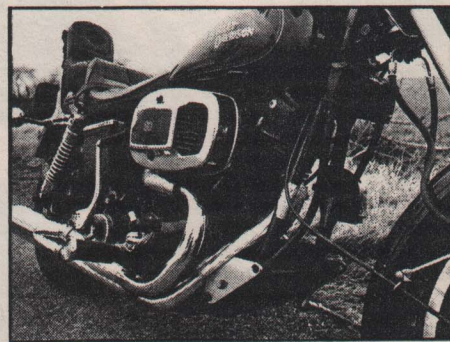
with this bike, however, as it's just not the kind of machine on which you go red-lining. As mentioned earlier, it's happy enough at up to 80mph — as long as the rider can bear the riding position. At that speed the engine is chuntering at around 4,000rpm, which means you have another 1,500rpm in hand — that's right, forbidden territory starts at a mere 5,500rpm on a Harley-Davidson 80-incher. Incidentally, it's impossible to take a speedometer reading of a 1980 Harley's top whack due to the latest piece of crass American 'safety' legislation which prohibits motorcycle instruments from registering more than 85mph. My guess is that if you could find a road long enough the Lowrider would top out at somewhere near the ton.

True Harley freaks will of course be wondering when I'm going to stop nattering about speed and handling and get into the essence of these bikes — their image, charisma, style. Well, to be quite honest I don't think the Lowrider's got much of the latter. It has a largely all-black finish with red pin-striping, the speedo and rev counter are set in a panel in the tank so that you have to bend your head down from the road to grock them, and there is an 8 x .8in platform that acts as a pillion seat — bad news if you like big gurls. Oh, and you get a cissy bar too, and that little

stash pouch attached to it just crying out to be vandalised.

Image? For an outrageous £4,280, which is what this bike costs, I'd also want a lot more of it. Harleys are like BMWs in one sense, and that is that their best bikes tend to be their cheapest — or least expensive — models. A Sportster is faster than a Lowrider, makes your blood run hotter, and costs nearly £1,100 less. It's also the best motorcycle Harley make — just ask Phil Wade.

Beating across Salisbury plain at a solid 80mph on the journey to return the Lowrider was a mixture of pleasure and pain. Wind pressure resulting from that contorted riding posture was tearing my arms from their sockets. Yet beneath me, I felt that giant long stroke mill burbling carelessly away. C'mon Harley, forget about that jaded chopper/custom bike concept you have been styling your products around for so long now. What you have got is a machine that somehow survived motorcycling's last great Heroic Age, when one imagines people rode their bikes instead of posing on them. Capitalise on that heritage, make your V-twins comfortable to ride, and machines like the Lowrider will be a much better buy from the European biker's point of view.

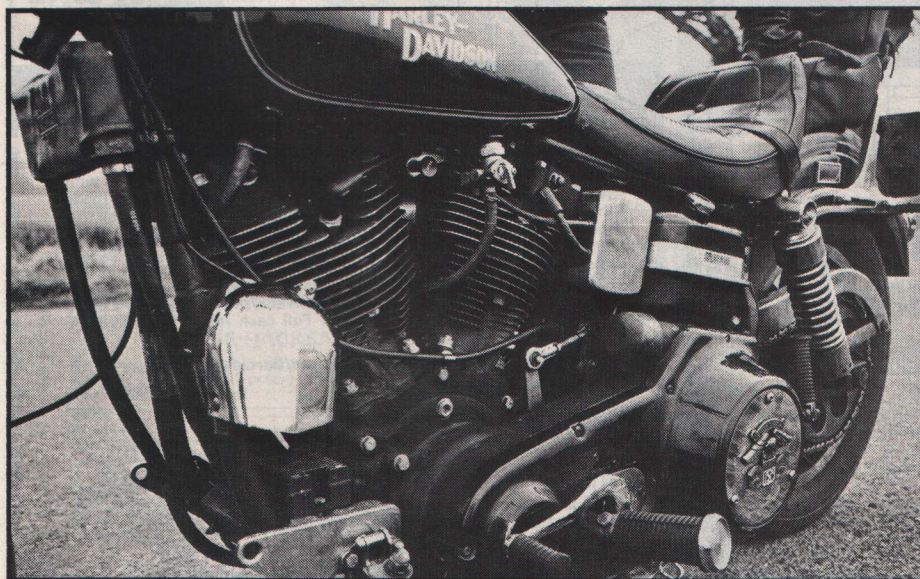


Photography Martyn Barnwell.



Bottom: Original script on tank, eagle on clutch evoke nostalgia — engine oozes pure heft.

Below: Buckhorn bars and fatbob tank. Instruments are situated conveniently at, er, eye level?



CHECKOUT



HARLEY-DAVIDSON FXS LOWRIDER

Engineohv V-twin
Bore x stroke..... 88.8 x 108mm
Capacity.....1,339cc
Compression ratio 8:1
Carburation.....Keihin
Bhp rpm 65 5,400
Max torque rpm 71.5ft/lb.....3,800
Primary drive duplex chain
Clutch multi-plate, wet
Gearbox..... 4 speed
Electrical system234w alternator,
electronic ignition
Lighting 50/40w headlamp

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase 63.5in
Seat height 27.0in
Overall width 29.0in
Ground clearance 5.0in
Weight (dry) 586lb
Fuel capacity.....2.9gal

EQUIPMENT

Indicators.....Yes
Electric starterYes
Trip mileometerYes
Steering lock.....Yes
Helmet lock..... No
Headlight flasher No
Others 1 mirror, small
tote pack

CYCLE PARTS

Tyres
(front).....NJ90-19 Goodyear
(rear).....MT90-16 Goodyear
Brakes
front).....2 X 10.25in discs
(rear).....10.25in disc

PERFORMANCE

Top speed
(prone)95mph (est)
(sitting up).....90mph (est)
Standing ¼ mile15s (est)
Speedometer error
at indicated 30mph..... n/a
at indicated 60mph..... n/a
Braking distance
from 30mph n/a
from 60mph n/a
Fuel consumption
(overall) 53.5mpg
(ridden hard) 50mpg

PRICE£4,280 inc VAT
Guarantee 6 months/6,000 miles
plus free 12 months/unlimited
mileage Autoguard cover

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Harley-Davidson Concessionaires UK,
Park St, Luton, Beds.