

Heavy Metal Hero

Biff Byford of popular bikers' group Saxon reveals his love for a heavy metal of a different kind to Simon Ludgate.

MANY a star of the heavy metal brigade extols the virtues of biking as a way of life in their songs. But, in reality, few can actually ride one and fewer still are able to ride well.

Rob Halford, screamer-in-chief with Judas Priest, drags a Harley on stage for the climax of their set and shakes his leather-gauntleted fist at the baying fans. Little do they realise that this is a man who cries at Lassie films and thinks a choke is something you put round your neck.

Or take the case of Philip Lynott of macho leather brigade Thin Lizzy. When I was looking for a suitable subject for this feature originally, Lynott was on my short list for a session with Chas Mortimer's racing school but when I mentioned the words "race track" to the half-Irish, half-Brazilian singer, he went ashen under his dusky skin.

But Saxon's singer Biff Byford is a biker. A real one. So keen was he to introduce me to his brace of bikes consisting of a beautifully-customised Gold Wing and a brand new Harley Davidson 1200 Electraglide, that he persuaded me to flog all the way up the M1 from London to his house in Barnsley, Yorkshire to spin a few yarns.

Biff, who lives in a tiny house in a row of identical Coronation Street houses with his long-suffering girl-friend Linda, was dragging himself out of bed at one o'clock in true rock 'n' roll style as we arrived.

Unfortunately the Gold Wing was still in pieces at the garage, but the Harley squatted in the road exuding that "something" which only the big two-pot thumpers can.

"I haven't paid for the Harley

yet," admitted Biff. "I've got it on sort of trial from Steve Rhodes Motorcycles in Bradford, but I'm going to buy it definitely. I've only had it for two weeks, and I've fallen in love with it already. Besides someone knocked it off the stand as they were driving past the other day and it cracked the fairing, so I'll have to buy it, won't I?"

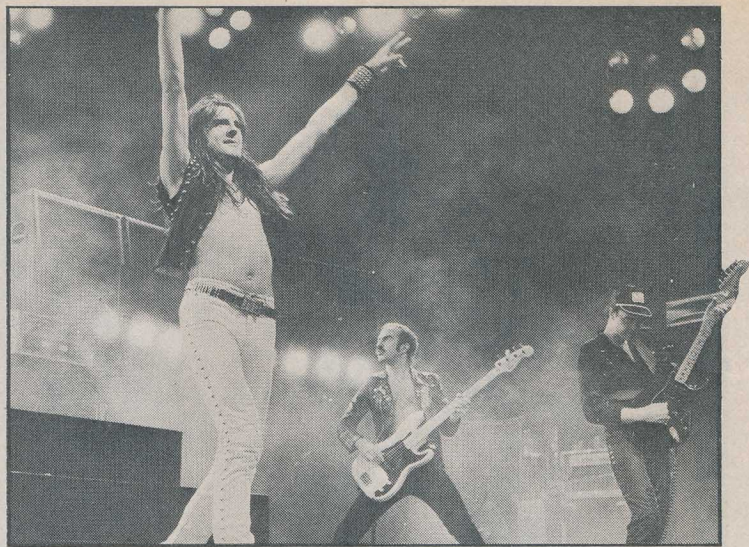
In 1969 when Biff was known as Peter, he was bought his first bike by his Dad — an Ariel 250cc two-stroke which he part-exchanged for a Triumph Daytona 650 the following year and passed his driving test into the bargain.

"I wish I'd kept those bikes, they were classics. That goes for the next one too. It was another Ariel, but this time it was the 700 cc single with a sidecar," he said. "I used to have a block of concrete in it when I didn't have a passenger to balance up the weight. Sidecars are great for anyone not into riding pillion and doing all the leaning. I ruined that bike in the course of a week eventually by using it for tracking. Still, I only paid a fiver for it in the first place, so it was no great loss."

I asked Biff what he thought of the Harley's handling having notched up 4,000 miles in two weeks on the Gold Wing after he bought it last September.

"The Harley's a lot noisier and it vibrates. You have to handle the gearchange with the greatest respect when you change down. If you don't double de-clutch and f-e-e-l the change, it'll crash on you. I suppose the box is an eighty-year-old design and is little more than a crash box anyway, so you have to expect a bit of trouble.

"When you get off a Harley, a BMW or a CBX seems small by comparison. There's no other bike quite like it, it's a way of life with an entirely separate feeling of pride."



Lights, smoke and a whole lot of noise — Biff Byford raises the roof at another of his sell-out concerts.

Although the Harley is still in bog-standard trim, the Gold Wing is another can of lacquer entirely. "I bought it for the basic retail price of around £3,000 and started adding bits myself at first. The first thing was the touring bars which are readily available in this country," he said.

"I had some extra-long cables made for the bars and gradually got more and more involved with customising, although the actual work is being done for me by Downtown Custom in Leeds and a guy who works for them called Mac who's well-known around here.

"I was inspired in the first place when I saw a customised Goldwing in the States and wanted one myself with Saxon's album

covers on it. Eventually I settled for the 'S', an eagle which is another of our symbols along with police badges. The gold lettering is 24 carat gold leaf which is responsible for the delay."

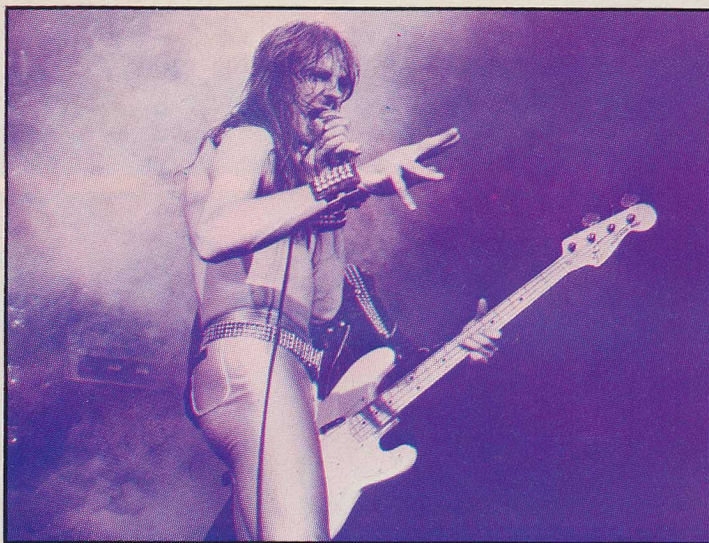
Apparently, Mac had been trying to rush the finish on the job in time for our visit and had sprayed on the first layer of lacquer too soon to the gold leaf which had been applied to the glass-fibre. The leaf shrivelled up and he had to start again.

Biff is also a fully-paid up member of the Gold Wing Owners' Club. He was cornered at the bike show at Earl's Court last year by one of the club's UK organisers and he signed up on the spot.

Unlike the ancient design of the Harley, the Gold Wing is a model



Saxon's Biff Byford and his 1200cc Electraglide — "there's no other bike quite like it".



Head-bangers of Britain warm to the aggressive music of Biff. Saxon's new album is ready to be released.

of modern technology, according to Biff.

"The Gold Wing is a very smooth bike all round. It takes a bit of getting used to and you have to ride it properly if you want to really motor," he said. In its final form the bike will weigh over 800 pounds fully-laden and that's a lot to throw into a corner. If you set it up right, no problem, but take the wrong line and you'll be all over the place. The shocks can be adjusted to individual requirements with the aid of a balance pipe to ensure equal pressurisation.

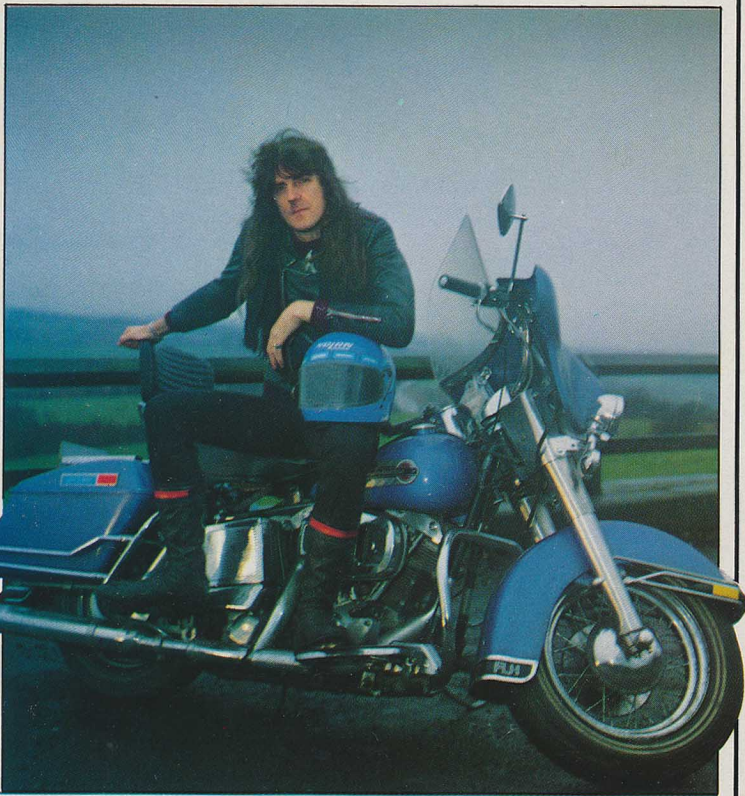
But what about having a shunt with all that luggage, gold and a total of twelve layers of lacquer? The worst mishap to befall the Gold Wing was when it fell off the

side stand, and Biff reckons the £1,000 price tag for the customising to be money well spent.

Besides, Biff is very safety conscious these days having come a cropper a couple of times in the past on a Ducati 250 and a Honda 250.

Biff asked me to say that he would be delighted to be of assistance on training schemes by making a public appearance to publicise it as he's got some pretty strong opinions about safety and training.

"Although I don't think the helmet law should be compulsory, anyone who doesn't wear one's a fool. But it's like seatbelts — it should be up to the individual whether they decide to protect themselves or not," he said. □

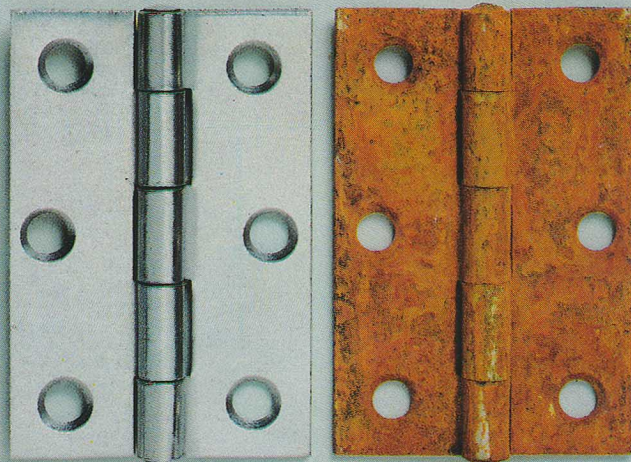


The Harley is noisy and it vibrates, says Biff who has long been a dedicated biker.

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