•1 Modern Classics

Classic motorcycles are machines which have gone to legend. Most motorcycles readily tumble into the blankness of an unrecalled past. Only a few models escape that yawning anonymity and become lodged in the sport's history. The reasons are varied: the way certain motorcycles performed or looked or felt; the technical achievements they represented; the new directions in which they propelled the sport. But all great motorcycles share one common denominator; they make motorcyclists spark with excitement.

Early classics do not have a direct connection to contemporary motorcycles. Hand oil pumps, cylinder-head priming cocks, leaf-spring front forks and other technology from the twenties and thirties hardly link up with the motorcycles of the seventies. Conversely, most modern classics were built in the late fifties and through the sixties. Any present-day enthusiast would recognize the major design elements—telehydraulic forks, swinging-arm rear suspension, adequate brakes and powerful, compact engines. Today's motorcyclist could immediately operate a 1960 Honda Super Hawk, but that same fellow would be baffled by a 1925 Indian Scout.

To some enthusiasts, the machines of the fifties and sixties may seem too contemporary to be properly legendary. This is not the case. Forty-five years of motorcycle development have been compressed in the last two decades. In 1955 motorcycle engineering appeared remarkably crude and primitive compared to automobiles. And why not—the last era of intense, creative motorcycle development ended in the twenties. But by 1975 motorcycles had caught up with, and in some cases surpassed, automobiles as sophisticated vehicles. That was no wonder. Motorcycling flowered in the sixties as manufacturers introduced hundreds of new motorcycles in a decade of amazing activity. And some truly remarkable modern classics were part of that flowering.

With its grace of line and form, the Triumph Bonneville was the most handsome statement of the British vertical twin.

BSA Gold Star

Most modern classics pointed forward. As harbingers of the future, such classics connect directly to contemporary machines. The lineage between the Honda CB-77 and present-day Honda roadsters proceeds in an orderly path.

Other classics intersect with contemporary motorcycling in a different way. The BSA Gold Star was the perfect expression of the big-single-cylinder motorcycle: light, narrow, agile, simple multi-duty machinery. More than a decade after the last real Gold Star was built, the concept of the big single remains an attractive idea in motorcycling.

The Gold Star was a universal motorcycle. Americans raced them on flat tracks, Europeans ran the big single in road races, others used the Gold Star for trials, and the motorcycle served many owners everywhere as a road bike.

BSA first introduced their historic 500cc single-cylinder motorcycle in 1938; a second series 350cc/500cc bike débuted in 1949–50; and the final revision reached the marketplace in 1954. Physically, the Gold Star was a large motorcycle. From the beginning BSA scaled the bike as a full 500. Unlike modern big singles (350–450 two- and four-strokes), the BSA Gold Star wasn't a pumped-up 250 or 350. The majestic old bike had a long-stroke, undersquare engine. Its 85mm piston travelled up and down 88mm strokes. Though the real Gold Star died in 1963, BSA later applied the label to a smaller, lighter single. But that ersatz Gold Star never had the charisma of the original bikes.

The Gold Star had a purposeful grace born of its simplicity. At speed, the engine emitted great thumping sounds, mellowed and rounded in its silencer. Snapping the throttle shut reversed the thumps into a lazy, gutteral yawn. The noises were truly lovely. Perhaps that's half the magic of the big thump-and-yawn singles.

Owners may make detailed changes in their Gold Stars—but the big thumping single cylinder remains the center of it all.

BMW R60

Not all machines were fast, boisterous vehicles before the Japanese revolution in motorcycling. The sport always had a strain of civil machines, and BMW built refined motorcycles. All German motorcycles of the post-war period were "gentlemen's motorcycles," if one assumed that gentlemen would prefer silent, smooth, and finely crafted conveyances which were a bit shy on horsepower but very long indeed on reliability.

Most popular of the BMW models were the R60 and R69S opposed twins. These 600cc, overhead-valve, pushrod twins had 35 and 42 horsepower respectively. The R69S was the tuned-up version of the basic 600cc touring bike; but even so, the R69S could not touch the quickest British and American models. On the other hand, the BMW clientele never worshipped drag-strip clocks as the final measure of a

machine. To them reliability was far more important.

Owners of the German twins prized the BMW one-kick starting. One-kick starting was a big thing in the 1950's, and almost a BMW monopoly. BMW's shaft-drive was also an endearing feature. Enthusiasts likewise celebrated the BMW's smoothness, reliability, oil-tightness, and comfort. If one thinks about all those things which made the BMW reputation, then by implication he can sense what other motorcycles in the fifties and early sixties were like. No one ever complained that BMW's didn't have electric starters; one-kick starting was such a treat compared to most other machines.

Germans rather than the Japanese created civilized motorcycling. But most enthusiasts knew BMW's by reputation; the silent German twins bore premium pricetags which confined them to a small handful of enthusiasts. Only later did the Japanese sell to the many that which the Germans had reserved for the few.

R60, equipped with an Earls-type front suspension, came in two—and only two—colors: black or white.

Honda CB-77 Super Hawk

Hitting the electric starter button on a Honda CB-77 for the first time was a strange and foreign experience. Kickstarting had been the time-worn way to bring a motorcycle to life. Indeed, for many enthusiasts, the early Hondas were the first electric-start motorcycles ever seen. The starter would spin the engine over furiously, or so it seemed, until the vertical twin staggered into life. With two 24mm carburetors, sporty cam timing, and 10:1 pistons, a cold 305 needed generous choking; and when the single-overhead-cam engine lighted off, Super Hawk owners learned to warm them up. If this seemed a bit touchy to some riders, they could remind themselves that the 305cc Super Hawk was truly a high-performance piece of hardware.

The four-speed CB-77 would clear 100 mph in top, with the tachometer needle waving beyond 9,000 rpm. In the days when most 650's would struggle to break the century mark, when 7,500-rpm engines were "real screamers," when nothing under 500cc could be considered a man's machine, the Honda Super Hawk was a revelation.

Between old and new motorcycling, the Honda CB-77 formed a watershed. Modern motorcycles really arrived with the Super Hawk. It had amenities: dependable lights, full instrumentation, electric starting. It had performance: a highly efficient, powerful and compact engine; bulletproof reliability; full-width, double-leading-shoe brakes. The Super Hawk had civility: unbelievable smoothness (for 1961) and effective muffling.

There were other Japanese machines with similar features, but Honda had the best package. The CB-77 brought motorcycling into the modern age—and in so doing, captured America.

CB-77 has a basic honesty and economy of line—no frills. Its appearance isn't a product of a design studio.

Triumph Bonneville

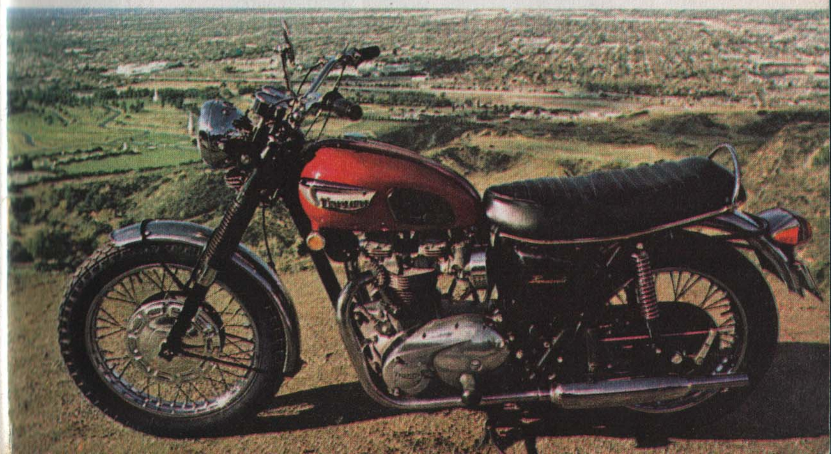
Certain words in motorcycling interlock automatically. Triumph and Bonneville form one such combination. Bonneville was more than Triumph's label for its top-of-the-line 650 vertical twin. Triumph Bonneville spelled out a codeword in motorcycling; it signified style, power, handling, and reliability. Harley-Davidson's Sportsters had more power; Featherbed Nortons steered better; BMW's ran longer. But the Triumph Bonneville had a balance of handling, power, and reliability. And the Bonny had something more: class.

Triumph's line leader changed through the 1960's. The 1962 Bonneville and the 1968 version were basically the same motorcycle. Nevertheless, in the peculiar British system of refinement, the frame, brakes, and electrics all varied in the 1960's. Triumph experimented with engine bearings; compression ratios went up and down; camshaft timings moved around; and the engines changed in detail. But the heart of the Triumph Bonneville stayed constant: the long-stroke (71mm x 82mm) vertical twin breathed in through two 1³/₁₆-inch Amal carburetors, developed about 50 horsepower at the engine sprocket, spun 6,500 rpm on a crankshaft without center main bearings, and galloped the bike well past 100 mph. The Bonneville was the best road-sports 650 in 1961, and it still was in 1969.

The bike's charisma had a solid foundation in the machine's integrity. Only at the close of the decade did the Bonny's charm begin to fade. Totally new motorcycles moved forward faster and faster. No matter how quickly slicked up, the Bonneville couldn't keep pace. Eventually, the bike's classic lines were smeared, and the name applied to a 750cc twin.

Born in the fifties and pensioned off in the seventies, the Triumph Bonneville had its halcyon days in the sixties.

Light, agile, and stable, the Bonneville had outstanding handling, yet the motorcycle could have sold on its appearance alone.



Suzuki 250 X-6

With its X-6, Suzuki redefined lightweight motorcycle performance in 1965. The Honda CB-72 Hawk had represented the Japanese approach to sporting lightweights—brisk but civil. Never a dazzling performer like the 305cc Super Hawk, the similar 250cc Hawk was obese. The twin-cylinder, single-overhead-cam CB-72 carried the extra burden of four-stroke weight. Yamaha's 250cc YDS2 could overwhelm a Honda Hawk, but the two-stroke twin owned a shocking record of unreliability. In the X-6, Suzuki created the modern lightweight road-sports motorcycle: a twin-cylinder, two-stroke machine with six-speed transmission, oil injection, and huge brakes.

Suzuki's two-stroke engine produced a lot of power from a little weight. And the X-6 proved reliable. Unlike Yamaha's YDS2, the 250cc Suzuki had alloy cylinders and pistons with carefully worked-out expansion rates. Piston seizures were uncommon. Moreover, the X-6 employed direct oil injection, and this new system not only metered oil to the engine precisely, but it also ended forever the bother of mixing two-stroke oil with gasoline.

Breathtaking acceleration characterized the X-6. With six speeds in the gearbox, Suzuki could tune a narrow, peaky powerband into the engine. The 250 two-stroke would rocket through the quarter-mile, snicking through one gear after another, and stopping the clocks in 15.3 seconds. That figure made the Suzuki a full second quicker than most other lightweights—and in the 250 class a second was a light-year. More important, the X-6 would continue to run hard without blowing itself into a bucket of shrapnel.

Power, reliability, and thoughtful amenities; those things made the Suzuki a legend in 1965. The high-performance road-sports two-stroke had truly arrived.

Ten years after its début, a good Hustler, vintage 1965, will trample its less powerful and heavier namesake of 1975.

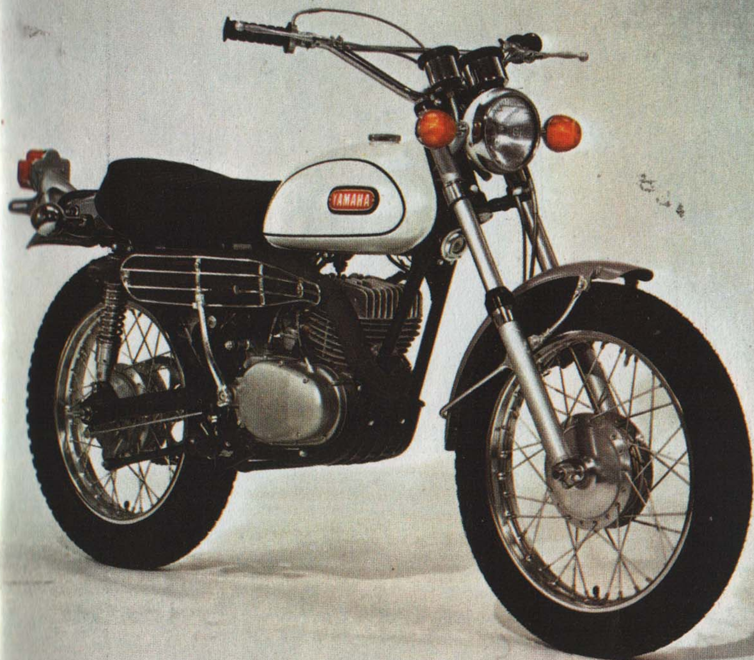
Yamaha DT-1

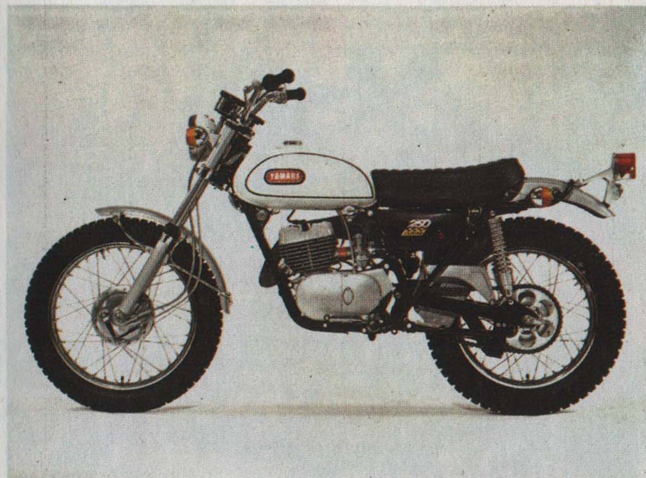
With the DT-1, Yamaha created a new kind of motorcycle. In the middle and late 1960's, manufacturers tried to devise dual-purpose motorcycles, which could be ridden both on and off the road. Invariably, makers followed a simple expedient: they used street bikes, adding skid plates to protect the engine, raising exhaust pipes to increase ground clearance, and mounting knobby tires to complete the package. Dressing up a street machine in an off-road motif just didn't make a two-wheeler worthy for off-road travel. So Yamaha tried a fresh approach.

Pursuing the dual-purpose concept from another direction, Yamaha started by designing an off-road motorcycle which could be outfitted for street use. Such machines were not completely unknown. In Europe, for example, ISDT-type motorcycles were off-road competition mounts that carried minimal street gear. But Yamaha did not want to build anything so fine as a competition bike; they intended that the DT-1 be used for light-duty, off-road, pleasure riding. So it was important that the motorcycle have full street equipment and possess all the accoutrements of civil motorcycling.

Technology converged in the late 1960's to make the Yamaha innovation possible. Two-stroke engineering advances guaranteed that Yamaha could build a lightweight, single-cylinder two-stroke without long development time. Moreover, an oil injection system eliminated the chore of mixing oil in the gas; banishing this messy routine considerably broadened the DT-1's appeal.

The Yamaha approach to off-road pleasure bikes worked brilliantly. Suddenly all the street motorcycles-cum-trail bikes were overweight and outmoded. Motorcycle enthusiasts responded in large numbers to Yamaha's concept. They liked both the DT-1's off-road capability and its agility for round-town riding. Quickly, other Japanese companies rushed to produce their own "enduro" machines. But Yamaha remained the greatest beneficiary of that market first discovered and tapped by the DT-1.





*Capped by a refrigerator-white gas tank,
the Yamaha hit a glory hole in the market.
Widespread off-road riding began with the DT-1.*

Harley-Davidson Sportster

Harley-Davidson's Sportster reached its zenith in 1968. The year was a fitting time for its peak, since 1969 brought a whole new generation of big motorcycles. New Japanese machines made the Sportster look old; indeed, in a few short months in 1969, the famous Milwaukee V-twin aged a decade.

The giant 55-cubic-inch twin had a very basic appeal: appearance, sound, and straight-line performance. The Sportster belonged to the Romantic Age of motorcycling. Motorcycles were rugged mechanical devices which played to the senses. Bikes had no gadgets, no appliance-like character.

The Sportster projected an image of pure motorcycle. It was brutish and basic: two wheels were punctuated by an enormous V-twin engine. Nothing frilly; nothing pasted-on.

Romantics loved the V-twin's barking exhausts. The staggered firing impulses created a signature as distinctive as a fingerprint. The motorcycle seemed to bellow horsepower.

Straight-line performance did not belie the exhaust. The big-displacement V-twin could lever the 520-pound motorcycle through the standing-start quarter mile in 13.5 seconds. That white-knuckled acceleration, accompanied by full-throated exhaust din, gave the rider a trip full of sensations.

In an age when most big motorcycles leaked oil on garage floors, vibrated their riders, kickstarted with grim reluctance, snuffed out lightbulbs, and handled fast corners with uncertain malevolence, the Sportster was king. No one demanded motorcycles which were perfect appliances. Better that your big motorcycle said *mean-machine* than preserved a spotless garage floor. When it came to motorcycle imagery, nothing said *motorcycle* as well as Harley-Davidson's Sportster.

Many Harley owners personalize their bikes; but tank and pipes are classic sportster, individualized though the bike might be.

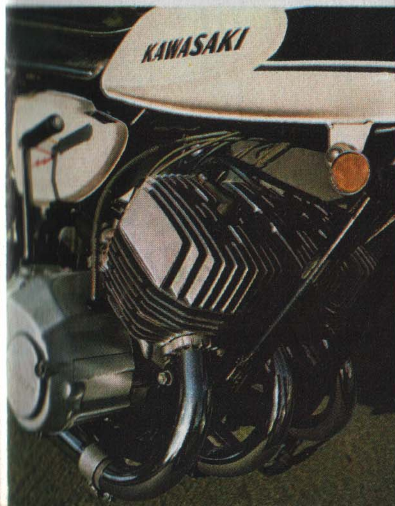
Kawasaki H1 500

The Kawasaki H1 was a gunshot motorcycle. Kawasaki intended that its 500cc, three-cylinder, two-stroke motorcycle, introduced in 1969, be quick and fast. More than that, the H1 proved absolutely hair-trigger sudden. American riders traditionally liked quick acceleration trips, and several modern Japanese two-strokes catered to the fast-departure crowd during the mid-1960's. Lightweights, such as the Suzuki X-6, were the crown princes of acceleration. The king of the drag strip was the H1. It played to the fast-exit instincts in every enthusiast.

Riders of the H1 specialized in impressive sprints between quarter-mile markers. Times dropped through the 13-second floor and into the high 12's. Terminal speeds in the quarter-mile traps hit 100 mph. The raw numbers became more impressive when one realized that full 750cc motorcycles could not match the Kawasaki 500's time-cards. Kawasaki demonstrated the kind of power which two-stroke engines could produce in full street trim. The Japanese company also showed the world the type of motorcycle which could result from such designs. Great horsepower and light running gear equaled a gunshot motorcycle.

No one praised the three-cylinder bike as a handler for good reasons. For openers, squeezing the throttle trigger sent the front wheel pawing in the air and on the one-two gearchange, the front tire would pop skyward again. If the Kawasaki exhibited an inclination to flying take-offs in a straight line, the bike had a dreadful reputation for wobbling and shaking when cornered with spirit; the over-zealous rider could bounce himself into a battered heap.

American enthusiasts soon grew out of their love affair with untamed rocketships. Having experienced straight-line super-performance, the American enthusiasts demanded something more than single-dimension motorcycles. Kawasaki, eager to please, gradually took the sting out of later H1 500's, and thus sent the original hot rod off to its place in history.



It didn't handle well, it wasn't very comfortable, and "quiet" was a word it didn't know, but the H1 sure was quick.

Honda CB-750 KO

Words poorly capture the importance of Honda's CB-750 KO. *Significant:* the first CB-750 redirected the path of motorcycle development; it blended shattering performance with appliance-like civility.

Innovative: the motorcycle reintroduced the four-cylinder engine to road-riding enthusiasts, carried the first genuinely workable hydraulic disc brake in the two-wheeled world, and offered a standard five-speed transmission in the 750 class. But the greatest innovation was the mass production of such an incredible machine.

Exciting: The Honda CB-750 KO gave the modern motorcyclist his first experience with a machine that quelled vibration, had dazzling engine performance (the standing quarter-mile passed in 13.4 seconds), impressive top speed (125 mph), outstanding brakes, remarkable handling—and an exhaust note which mesmerized.

Had the CB-750 been able to perform well in two or three categories, it would have been a memorable machine. But the CB-750 KO had top-rank credentials in almost every measure. For pure excitement, nothing in 1969 could equal the Honda 750.

The years have blunted the impact of Honda's 750. It proved such a pivotal machine that other manufacturers followed the lead established by Honda. As the CB-750 gathered company from other makers, Honda's glory-bike lost its uniqueness. Moreover, by further refining and civilizing later editions of the CB-750, Honda managed to dull the sharp edge of the original 750. Subsequent standard versions never matched the engine performance of that first magnificent Honda 750.

Honda's innovation extended beyond a mass-produced four-cylinder bike; the 750 was first with a hydraulic disc brake.