



Silver Screen Racer

Screen racer, road rider David Essex talks to Bob Goddard

DAVID COOK was 14 when he rode his first motorbike and it was not an auspicious start. The James Captain had wound itself up to 60mph in a London suburb when the law took an interest and that first ride came to an unhappy end.

Last year, having made his name as David Essex on stage, screen and record and now a youthful 32, he tore around Brands Hatch on a 180mph GP bike while the cameras rolled to film part of Silver Dream Racer, a high-speed love story on two wheels.

Both events resulted from his passion for motorbikes which has survived intact throughout David Essex's successful and glamorous career. Silver Dream Racer, the latest chapter in his changeable, multi-

coloured life, not only brought Essex back to films after an absence of seven years but gave him the chance to live a part close to his heart.

For 12 weeks of filming during last summer David Essex was Nick Freeman, a talented but struggling road racer who got a chance at winning the world championship on his dead brother's bike, with delectable Julie Prince (Christina Raines) thrown in as sweet, loving encouragement.

Essex made the most of the film opportunity, riding the Silver Dream Racer (a Barton Motors four-cylinder GP bike) himself in most of the race sequences, and even popping wheelies for a piece of breathtaking daredevil street riding too.

David Wickes, who wrote and directed the film, had David Essex in mind for the lead role but had not realised that Essex, who had turned down a multitude of film subjects since he topped the bill in *Stardust* in 1972, was something of a bike freak.

"It was my interest in bikes that attracted me to the film, but it had to be a good story too. When I read the script I realised this film had a deep and compelling story line with the characters and personalities involved in the world of motorcycle racing, and I wanted to do it," said Essex.

"When we started shooting at Brands Hatch the bike was assembled in front of me. Then I got on and said 'give me a push' and shot off round the circuit before anyone could stop me."

"The bike was really good. It had to qualify to compete in the Silverstone Grand Prix meeting in order to be filmed in a real race, and Barton Motors are putting it into the world championship for real this year I believe."

So, having shown he could ride the bike, and having craftily worked a clause into his contract to permit it, he rode in most of the track sequences and looked quick, safe and professional.

The Rank Organisation agreed he could ride bikes in the film at reasonable speeds, leaving him to interpret what speeds were reasonable.

"I went into sort of training with my own bikes before the film so that I could move about a bit on the bikes and look good enough for them not to use a stand in."

"I have a DT250 Yamaha which I practiced wheelies on at my farm in Essex (where his

David Essex with a few of the supporting cast, plus the real star (top left colour). Dastardly Beau Bridges and evil sidekick (top right colour) and (bottom left) with his leg over Miss Suzuki. From left to right Clark Peters ('Scruppy' Jones) Julie Prince (Christina Raines) and David as local kid making good Nick Freeman.



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professional name came from) and a 750 Suzuki Low Slinger which came in useful for practising the track riding.

"I wasn't able to do everything on the bikes in the film because of insurance problems, and the wheelie sequence was half me and half stunt rider. I can do the wheelies but not between moving cars that close."

For Essex the high-speed track stuff did not represent anything more dangerous than his teenage experiences had provided.

The James Captain incident proved only a moderate setback. He spent the night in the police detention room and was later fined five pounds and banned from holding a driving licence for two years... until he was 16.

By that time he had become one of the early sixties mods and his first machine was a Lambretta TV. After a year on the scooter David developed a taste for a BSA Gold Star, and finally parted with £150 to own it.

This produced something of a paradox. Whilst a rocker at heart with a love of motorbikes, David insisted on mod clothing, but he lived through this display of mixed loyalties during the turbulent early sixties.

He created a little hell with the Goldie then changed it for a Triumph Trophy. Those years of big British bikes, cafes, juke boxes and rockers were pretty wild and woolly. Amongst hundreds of vivid memories is the neck-bristling recollection of the time he rode pillion on a friend's machine through the Blackwall tunnel at 3.30am.

"The traffic was two ways then, and the idea was to go through the tunnel at 100mph.

There weren't many cars around at that time of night which was just as well because we needed all of the road at that speed. There were eight bikes and none of us wore crash helmets."

On that point he made his opinion clear: "crash helmets are a pain in the neck... I hate them."

The image of the 1950's: cafe, juke box and a Bonneville outside, has been the major inspiration in his love of bikes. Now he feels motorcycles are moving into a science fiction world and he longs for the era when British bikes ruled the roost in the late 50's.

"I find today's motorbikes less exciting. They're not a bit like the old British bikes. My Suzuki 750 sounds like a car — I guess that's the price you have to pay for progress."

Burning desire

Despite feeling that the best years for biking have passed, David Essex still uses his Suzuki and Yamaha at every convenient opportunity. He much prefers riding to driving, but detests the layers of waterproofs and cold weather gear that our inclement climate necessitates.

"If it's pouring down I use the car instead — I don't think all those sets of clothing are too glamorous."

Last year he toured France on the Suzuki and was impressed by the brotherhood of motorcycling on the Continent. Wherever he rode other bikers flashed their lights, waved and chatted when he stopped.

And his interest in bikes has been fanned by his involvement in Silver Dream Racer. The thrill of the tarmac track has encouraged him to attend a number of road race meetings, but he says he's not a fanatic like Nick Freeman. In the film Nick is completely obsessed by bike racing and a burning desire to prove his talent against the polished professionals.

His mechanic, workmate and best friend

Cider Jones (Clarke Peters) labours long and hard to keep Freeman's battered old racer on the track but it's a losing battle and the pair's frustration is saved only by Cider's witty good humour.

Then Nick learns that his brother has been killed in a bike accident and he inherits the Silver Dream Racer, a revolutionary machine his brother has designed and built but never ridden.

Freeman sets out to become world champion with the help of beautiful Julie Prince whom he has poached from his main rival Bruce McBride (Beau Bridges).

The climax to the film is the world championship race at Silverstone where McBride and Freeman fight out the race wheel to wheel.

The action on the track is well filmed and truly thrilling. Sequences shot with a camera on the bike make you want to lean in your cinema seat, but sadly the producers have included some pathetic back-projection footage, where riders peer out through their screens while the scenery is winched past behind them.

Both Essex and Christina Raines play their parts well, but as much as you want Freeman to progress from downbeat no-hoper to potential world champion in one easy step, the result lacks credibility. In particular Freeman's relationship with his family is unreal.

Cider Jones is a sort of Huggy-Bear character, a jive-talking, fun loving good natured black who keeps the plot from taking itself too seriously.

Despite its failings, the film is well worth seeing, especially for the expertly filmed race sequences and heart-stopping crash stunts.

David Essex wrote all the music for the film sound track and a single, Silver Dream Machine and an LP with the same title as the film, are now on release.

