

BROKEN PROMISE

Yamaha's reformed dirt thumper revived dreams of past singles. Somehow they missed the boat. Mike Scott reports

It is with some trepidation, as Prime Ministers used to say, that I approach the task at hand. The Yamaha SR500 has had many fanciful words written about it, most of them devoted to reviving some sort of legend (could it be rumour?) of the greatness of big singles of the past.

It is said to be the Gold Star of today. Frantic revivalists (OK - reactionaries if you must) have set about the big single with hack-saws and glassfibre at the ready, to bring about the rebirth of the ho-hum good old days. Other dewy-eyed old-timers have been perceptive enough to discern that the Yamaha is very Japanese, and bears only a passing resemblance to their cherished Velos and Goldies. They return to the scrapyards for the satisfaction of their Freudian urges.

I am enchanted neither by the myth of the big single (nobody who has owned a Matchless G3 500 suffers from delusions of past grandeur), nor by the latter-day appeal of the Yamaha. Big singles of yore were at best highly demanding enthusiasts' machines and at worst horrible plodding clunkers. The Yamaha, at best, is a pleasingly light and frugal, but basically sluggish middleweight. At worst, it's an overgrown dirt bike way out of its element and having trouble breathing.

I am, then, a non-believer. Not susceptible to the rose-tinted view, nor prepared to forgive the Yamaha's excess of halfway-there compromises in exchange for its undoubted virtues.

I could have been convinced had Yamaha gone further in their aim of roadifying the dirt-thumping XT500. As it is, they stopped about midway in the process of transformation. The SR500 is neither a dirt bike nor a road bike, though it is certainly passable (in all senses of the word) in both environments. Point is, it should be one or the other. Since the XT500 is good on dirt and perfectly acceptable on tar, it is obvious that the SR500 could quite happily have been useless on dirt, provided it was a good road bike.

Happily, most of the areas in which the Yamaha falls short can be easily modified. The compromise tyres (Bridgestone Mag Mopus, yet) must go: for preference on such a light bike I fancy some TT100s.

Those ridiculous cow-horn handlebars - scourge of the London Taxis' paintwork - must also be thrown away pronto. Or given to your worst enemy as a present. In fact, I attempted to fit some Seeley clubman's bars which I had lying around. They felt pretty good, but the extended nozzle of the front brake master cylinder collided with the speedo, so the instruments must be remounted for such a modification to work.

Junking the unfortunate little tank and trail-inspired seat in favour of something more redolent of road-burning, would help the looks a lot, and rear-sets would complement the clubman's bars to improve riding posture.

It might even be possible to lower the front end an inch or two, by simply dropping the fork clamps down over the legs. Don't rush out and do that without some careful sussing, though, for it is simple typewriter speculation.

And there - if you coax some zip out of the reluctant engine - you have the start of a pretty shit hot road bike.

So why didn't Yamaha do it that way from the start? Personally, I cannot imagine. Except to think that the demands of the American market - made up, as we all know, of paunchy middle-aged weekend bikers who stick to the 55mph speed limit - dictate the God-awful riding position and muted performance. Thing is, there are some serious bikers in the States: so how can they allow the dubious tastes of others to prevail? Honda have at last recognised the fundamental differences between European and American bikers (something Triumph have known about for years), and have altered their model range accordingly. How about some of the same, Yamaha?

But this is wishful thinking, something I did a lot of while riding the SR500. Like wishing it would start more predictably. Or at least idle consistently. Wishing it would go faster, to complement the exciting handling. And wishing it would stop weaving when the speed did creep above 80mph.

This is harsh criticism. All the more so because I know there's a fine little motorcycle locked away somewhere inside that Yam. A pity it has such trouble getting out.

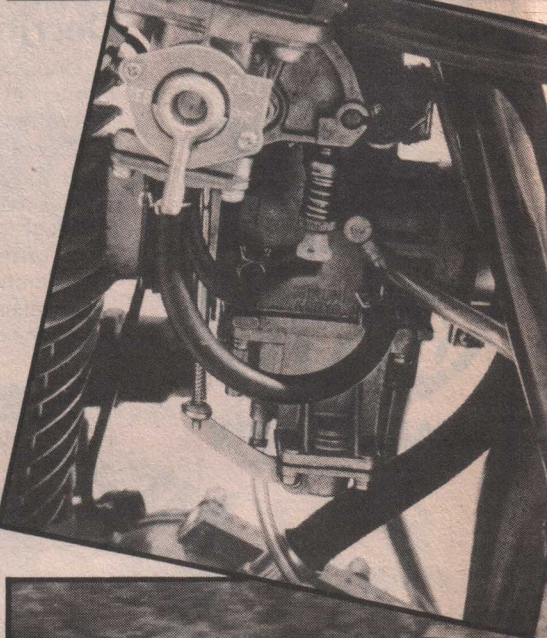
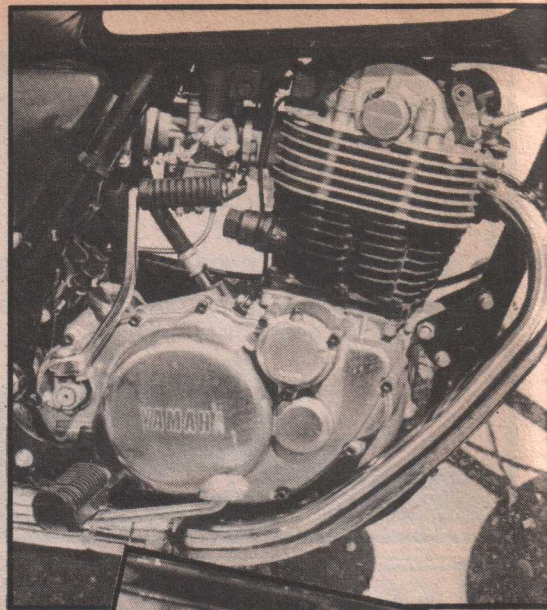
Starting. Yeah. As a veteran of a 500 single, I poo-pooed any fancies of following Yamaha's carefully prescribed starting drill. "I can start a single." Famous last words, though most of the time I could. When I couldn't, it was invariably at the most embarrassing times: on one infamous occasion I had the suit-clad importer of a range of small Italian bikes pushing me along the pavement (I tried to stop him, but he would insist).

After that, I swotted up on the drill. Using the valve lifter on the left-hand bar and the sight window on the end of the single overhead cam box, you move the engine to precisely the position suggested by the handbook. If it's cold, choke it. If it's slightly warm, half-choke it. If it's halfway hot, push the idle mixture adjuster (a plastic knob on the carb body) which both ups the idle speed and leans the mixture. Complying with this drill *usually* made the Yam a first or second-kick starter.

Still, it had a bad flat spot near the bottom of its wide rev range... something to do with the choked-up breathing, I imagine. This meant a propensity to stalling unexpectedly at the lights, when the tedious starting procedure was rendered slightly dangerous as well.

Even once it was running, the Yamaha still didn't give uniform satisfaction. Quite simply, not enough poke. Perhaps our bike was a bit of a slug, for other journals achieved better top speeds than our modest 92mph. I'm inclined to suspect, though, that they're a bit tardy. The test bike revved freely enough, to the top of its 7000rpm range, but there was never that quick response one would expect from its pumper carburettor, and which marked the better sporting singles.

The conclusion is inescapable: the Yamaha SR500 is not a sporting single. Fair enough, you may say. Why not, say I?

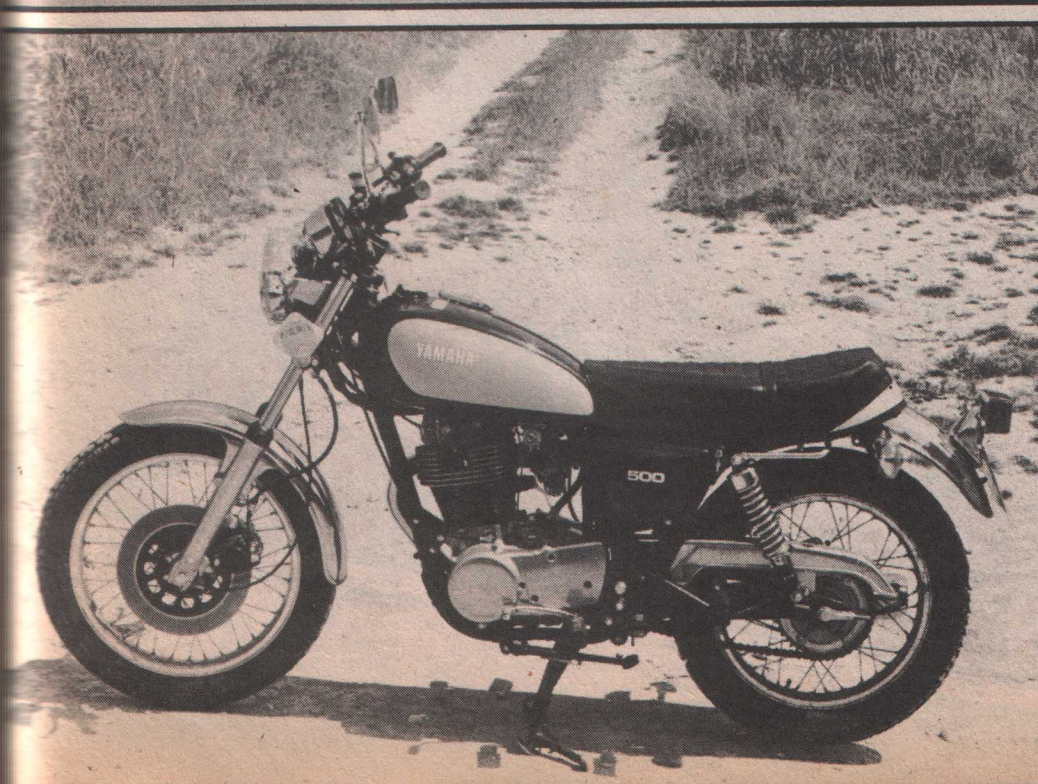
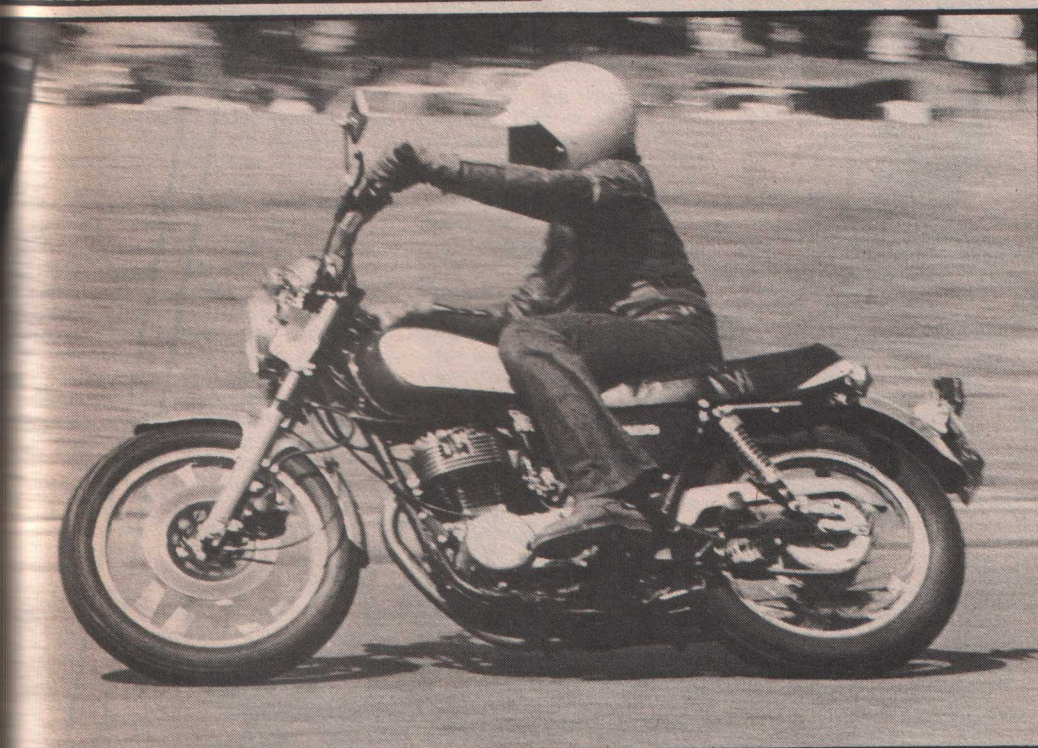




Having got that off my chest, I must admit that there were times when I actually enjoyed riding the SR500. Mostly in London, or similarly constricted environs. The acceleration, if never exciting, was always sufficient. Coupled with the Yam's slim figure and quick steering, it makes for an outstandingly manoeuvrable bike. As ever, there's a fly in the ointment: those gosh-awful handlebars. They're so wide that in any sort of traffic you leave a trail of smashed wing mirrors and soured relations behind you.

It's in this sort of situation that one is at last positively grateful to its trail-bike background. And time at last to appreciate the flexibility of what is a thoroughly sanitary big single engine. It could, in behaviour, hardly be less like the great British thumpers.

The single-overhead-cam motor runs on roller bearings throughout, and it is obvious that much careful Nipponese attention has been paid to smoothing vibration without resorting to weight-adding counter-balance shafts. As one might expect, they've been very successful. Sure, the Yamaha shakes, but it is



very well-controlled and the rider is isolated from the worst of it by extensive rubber-mounting of footrests and handlebars. Electrical components are similarly protected from vibro-massage, and not one bulb blew.

Gear primary drive takes the power back to a perfectly ordinary five-speed box, then it chains out to the back wheel. I felt that mid-range performance would benefit from slightly higher gearing — it would make the SR less buzzy. But that would make fifth altogether too high: it's already on the high side for two-up open-road cruising.

Which is, incidentally, when the Yamaha is at its absolute worst. Here the dirt-style handling that's such fun in town becomes a liability. Arms flung wide to take in the sweep of the bars, the bike feeling like it's perched up high at the top of its forks, it suffers from the vague high-speed weave endemic to trail bikes. It *feels* like the frame is twisting around the neck, but I'm sure that's a false impression. I'm more inclined to blame a combination of vague semi-knobbie tyres, squidgy rubber-mounting for the bars, and the influences of extraneous forces (your arms, being tugged by the wind catching your chest) on those same ridiculous antlers.

It is all the more frustrating because, this failing aside, the Yamaha corners pretty damn well. It's amazingly narrow round the bottom of the engine (hard for a single not to be), and the ground clearance is unnecessarily high. But for the limitations of the twitchy tyres, you can rilly lay that mutha down. Nothing scrapes, unless it's your elbow as you fall off (or a carelessly placed exhaust clamp, on our test bike). Just before this point, a subtle shift in body weight will push the light machine that crucial few degrees back towards the upright. Like I said, there's a hell of a good bike somewhere inside that Yamaha.

In the end, the failing that is hardest to correct is the stodgy performance. It seems so obvious to me why it's so sluggish: that absurdly quiet exhaust chokes up the breathing something rotten. It seems also then that the way to make it go faster would be to chop the baffles out. But singles are temperamental to tune up, and indications are that there's much more to it than that. But 33bhp is too little.

There are some nice things to say about the Yamaha, and I'd better start soon before my bile does me an injury (God, what a disgusting concept). It's nicely finished, for instance: replete with every modern convenience other than an electric starter. Self-cancelling indicators, one-key operation and the steering lock incorporated with the ignition switch spring to mind. The oil-in-frame helps keep the bike slim and simple, and it didn't leak a drop of the stuff. The brakes work nicely, though the back drum is prone to locking and hopping.

And yes, of course. The best thing of all. The Yamaha single is astonishingly economical in these days of 20mpg superbikes. It was a bad run that didn't beat 55mpg, and I once coaxed it to 67mpg.

Is this OK? May I start complaining again? Sorry, but I have to anyway. The Yamaha is commendably the cheapest roadgoing 500, at £980 inclusive of VAT. But there are traces of it being built down to a price. I don't mean to imply that the detail touches the Japs are so good at have been neglected. But the seat is not hinged, and therefore there is no stash space, lockable or otherwise. The tools, for instance, live invitingly behind the side cover.

The SR500 could be a superior town bike, but for the width of the handlebars.

It could be a superior dirt bike, or at least an excellent green laner, fitted with knobbly tyres. It isn't, and you might as well buy an XT anyway.

It could be a fine street bike, but the silly seating position and sluggish engine prevent it from being so.

It could be many things — but it isn't any of them. The art of compromise has turned sour.

Perhaps they'll get it all right on next year's model.