

4. Mods & Rockers - - “Only In America”

As a teenager growing up in the UK during the fifties, I could not afford a car and was forbidden by my father to ride or buy any form of “dangerous motorbike”. I always wanted a motorcycle and predictably, became a secret co-owner of one with a buddy and kept it at his house. I bicycled everywhere throughout my teens and secretly rode motorcycles around fields whenever possible. Another thorn in my side came in the form of the Mods & Rockers movement that was exploding across Britain at that time. The media made the most of this with wild and adverse publicity headlines. I was almost nineteen years old before I got my first ‘approved and legal’ motorized two wheeled vehicle.

The Mods

Now I realize that readers know all about the origins of the “Mods and the Rockers” over in England, but please allow me to explain for the benefit of those who may not be aware of the distinctions between the two groups. Mods were groups of young people, usually from a middle-class English background during the ‘60s. Mostly guys, they selected the motor scooter as their machine of choice: Lambretta, Vespa, NSU Prima, and Zundapp Bella being the most common. Even Triumph made the 250cc Tigress and BSA the Sunbeam to cater to this element. Few young people had cars so the choice was simply two wheels. Much overlap existed between the two rivaling factions where motorcycles and motor scooters were daily transport. Riders were members of neither group entirely by choice, economics played a role too.



Similar rivalry between the “Soshes” and the “Greasers.” existed in the US during this era. It seems that the Soshes -- also known as “Preppies”, were the equivalent of the U.K. Mods, and the Greasers were the U.S.

version of Rockers. Because of the different economic backgrounds between the two countries, the muscle cars associated with the U.S. Soshes were substituted for the motor scooter in the UK. The gang fights between the rival factions made English newspaper headlines almost daily, especially the weekend battles in the seaside town resorts of Clacton, Southend, Brighton, and Blackpool. Amazingly, although violence was commonplace, few people ever seemed to get really badly hurt. Cuts, bruises, and broken bones were in abundance, but fatalities were very rare. The English rock band, The Who, even made the *Quadrophenia* record album and movie follow-up, based on the Mods and Rockers cultural differences.



Being a Mod meant much more than merely riding a motor scooter. Strict codes had to be maintained in not only the appearance of the scooters themselves, but also the attire of the riders and their passengers. Indian parka jackets were all the rage and usually were accompanied by some pretty wild choices of crash helmets. Denson Poynter “Winkle-picker” shoes were the favorite footwear; and Beatles-style suits, including jackets without collars or lapels, were copied from them, along with the Beatles-style haircuts. Choice of music was an equally major factor, with bands like Gerry and the

Pacemakers, The Beatles, Mungo Jerry, Manfred Mann, and Ray Davis & The Kinks.

The Coffee bars and Wimpy Burger bars prominent back then in the UK were the main meeting places for groups of Mods to congregate. It was commonplace to see groups of Vespas and Lambrettas cruising down the road with fox fur seat covers and military tank radio aerials sprouting from the rear rack/spare wheel carrier with fox tails flying aloft at the top. Banks of chrome spotlights and air horns up front were a status symbol and were bolted on just about anywhere you could find room to fit them. Chrome racks front and rear were a must, even though they were rarely used for their intended purpose. This was fortunate, because the resultant high center of gravity would make handling positively dangerous. I don't ever remember seeing all lights being lit up; the tiny scooter mag-dynos fitted would never have supported much more than a mere flicker if they were all turned on simultaneously. Some pretty fancy body panel paint themes were also popular, and chrome "everything" was a matter of course.



The Rockers

Any self-respecting Rocker would never be seen or caught dead on a motor scooter back then.



Their macho image was personified by big fast motorcycles and speed. This was clearly reflected in the styling of road bikes. Favorite machines were usually British, like Norton, Triumph, BSA, Vincent, or hybrid café racers like the Dresda Tritons. Notable and coveted "road-burners" were the Bonnie, Tiger 110, Commando, Black Shadow, Super Rocket, Rocket Gold Star and Gold Star. Others included AJS 7R (A full-blown racing machine), Velocette Clubman Viper, and Venom. Rockers were noted for their engineering prowess in tuning and maintaining their pride-and-joy mounts. Mechanical skill went with the territory of owning a motorcycle in Britain, where 'Lucas Prince of Darkness' had almost a complete monopoly on the motorcycle (and car) electrics industry.

Racing and speed were at the heart of every Rocker's soul, and street racing was also illegal but nevertheless commonplace.

For this reason, alcohol was not that prominent. Many guys were always prepared to race someone, and even the most stupid knew that alcohol would certainly not help racing reflexes. Like in the States, blue denim jeans, leather jackets, high leather boots, and long Elvis Presley-style haircuts were the thing. Usually being from the working class walk of life, most Rockers graduated from small motorcycles, bought as cheap means of transport, and then gradually progressed up to the big singles and twins. The music of choice for this group was the heavy driving sounds of artists like Eddie Cochran, Chuck Berry, and Gene Vincent in the '50s, added to by notable "bad boys" like The Who and The Rolling Stones in the '60s. These bands slowly became musical icons common to both Mods and Rockers alike by the end of the sixties era. The name 'Rocker' has its origins in the Rock & Roll music of the time and the practice of 'racing the juke-box records' along a set route and back.



The favorite meeting places for Rockers were notable cafés, like the Ace Café in North London, and in selected truck-stop cafés known as Transport Cafés or “Greasy Spoons”. When I lived on the outskirts of East London, the lay-bys (pull-ins) found every couple of miles along many main



roads like the Southend Arterial were jam-packed with motorcycles on almost every night of the week during the summer. The North Circular ring road with its traffic lights every quarter of a mile was like a series of drag strips. Clubs like the “59 Club” sprung up all over. The term “Ton up Boys” came into popular use -- referring to the practice of “doing the ton,” or exceeding 100 mph -- but was more of an esoteric thing than an actual organization. I do not recall there ever being an official Ton up Club, as such. Leather jackets were not as widely used as they were in the US. A great majority of Rockers rode their machines to work and wore the more practical Barbor or Belstaff Trialmaster jackets which were more in keeping with the unpredictable

English climatic requirements with its high propensity for rain protection. The chrome tank racks fitted on Triumphs were great for strapping the accompanying water-proof leggings.

Like in most youthful eras, youngsters eventually do grow up (well usually!) and after more than a decade of Mods & Rockers antics, time and this phase moved on. (Next it was the turn of the ‘Skinhead’ era.) Many ‘reformed rockers’ got married and started families and the motorcycles and motor scooters were for the most part quickly replaced by small family cars. Over forty years later I can at last reveal my secret of the sixties. My first two wheeled vehicle was, - - - - A Vespa Motor Scooter. Not even a Vespa Gran Sport (GS), but a ‘bog standard’ 125cc, year-old 1959 model with a windshield and turn signals. It was 1961 and I was an engineering apprentice at Ford Motor Company in Dagenham, Essex. After handing my pay packet to my mother for two years and cycling the 16 mile trip each way to work, she had somehow saved enough to surprise me by relenting and buying the Vespa for me from a neighbor. A born Rocker at heart, I didn’t know how to



react and tried my hardest to hide from her my disappointment. But I was deeply grateful and it wasn’t long before the windshield ‘got broken’ and I progressively converted the scooter into ‘a right little screamer’.

Two bikes that I proudly owned during the early sixties (and wish I still had), a 1962 Triumph ‘souped-up’ and ‘Bonnevillised’ Thunderbird to the left and a 1949 HRD Rapide (also souped-up’)

The little fellow on the HRD is my son Russ who is now forty-one years old and his buddy Paul is astride the Triumph.

Note the ‘Ace Bars’ on the Triumph and the leather petrol tank cover on the HRD.

In England, twenty-one is the socially accepted birthday for ‘Coming of Age’. I left home and had the key of my own front door. It was finally time to escape the parental, “As long as you live under my roof” syndrome. I bought the motorcycle of my dreams, a 1949 HRD Rapide, but I still kept my Vespa. It was fun to switch from bike to scooter and visa versa, just to read the faces of my friends at work. As for the uniform, I never ever bought a jacket with no collar and wouldn’t be caught dead in a parka. (However,

I did once buy a pair of Denson Poynter winkle-picker shoes; I thought they looked kind of neat with my blue jeans.)

Fast forward to Detroit, Michigan, 2006. “The lamb shall lay with the lion” said the prophecy, and lo and behold, there is now a Motorcycle Club and a Scooter Club arranging social outings, rallies and rides together. A good humored relationship is enjoyed by members of the Metro Triumph Riders Club (MTR) and the Rovers Scooter Club. No ‘Mods & Rockers’ battles have emerged so far and great times were had by all who participated. Dressing appropriately to fit the era is all part of the fun as mock glowering looks were exchanged between the rival factions, only to disrupt into outbursts of uncontrollable laughter. Mach ‘nods-a-plenty were also the order of the day. From ‘Yesterday’s Reprobates’ has emerged ‘Today’s Baby Boomers’, all now resplendent with their graying hair and struggling waistlines. So successful were the meetings that they have become regular annual fixtures on the calendars of both clubs



Buzz Jones – Leader of the Pack - Rockers

alike. The streets of Royal Oak, Michigan once more came alive this weekend with the thunderous roar of 60’s ‘road-burners and screaming two stroke scooters.

Triumphs and Vespas alike descended upon the huge parking lot of a friendly and participating



73’ Vespa Sprint with 200cc Engine – Rocker’s Choice for Best Scooter

jeans and leather spats were in abundance on the Rockers together with Marlon Brando ‘The Wild Ones’ style zipped leather jackets. I think many of the Rockers were a little surprised to learn just how knowledgeable the Mods were about the history of their scooters and shared the same enthusiasm for their machines as the Rockers have for their motorcycles. The Rovers Scooter club has its very own class section at the MTR Classic Bike show, ‘The Battle of the Brits’, held every Each group presented an award for what they judged to be their favorite machine. The differences between



Darren – Leader of the Pack - Mods

establishment on Woodward Ave., famed for its annual “Woodward Dream Cruise” classic ‘Muscle Car’ extravaganza. Around forty five machines arrived despite a chilly October morning. The rewards of the early cold ride in were a sunny and warm afternoon combined ride around local rural lake areas of Royal Oak. The ‘leaders of the pack’ were Buzz Jones for the Rockers and Darren for the Mods, who rode side by side to lead around forty-five riders on a fifty mile tour of local scenery. Many of the Mods were dressed in smart creased dress pants and dress shirts and neckties under their Parka jackets. Blue



63’ BSA Super Rocket with 650cc Pre-unit A10 Engine – Mods choice for Best Rocker’s Bike

machinery and clothing made a striking and highly entertaining contrast, just as they did back in the sixties. Unlike the sixties, a carnival-like atmosphere along with the afternoon sunshine made for a great day out. September at Freedom Hill, Sterling Heights, Michigan.



Peter Gareffa presents award of Rockers Choice of Best Scooter to Winner Greg McCormick



Tim Hatton receives his award for Mods Choice of Best Rockers bike.

Now, we might wonder, could this situation ever happen without hostility today back in the UK? I'd like to believe that everyone by now has grown up enough with the passage of time; it would be nice to even think so. But, maybe, just maybe, no-one would show up. - - - **“Only in America!”**

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