

MOTORCYCLIST



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THE DIRTBAG ^{W/} ON
TIPS/DONATIONS

Francisco's appropriately squalid Hunters Point district. Cheap rent and *laissez-faire* locals add

up to a strong inner-city bike scene. After driving a few rundown blocks on Revere Avenue, I got to the industrial site. A cloud of tire smoke—visible from a block away—said I was in the right place.

The rules are simple. You have three months and \$1000 to build a bike that will cover at least four city blocks. No Harleys. The results are loud, dirty and spectacular. The crowd is predictably eclectic. Everything from bikers flying club colors to Aerostiched BMW riders to slick nuevo-greasers to tattooed girls with duct-tape accoutrements. No attitudes or anti-social behavior. Everyone is too busy examining the contestants.

Oil leaks are part of the aesthetic. So are obscenely loud gutted exhaust pipes, some routed surreally around the operators, rolling tributes to the Three Stooges "Plumbers" episode. One '70s Honda CB500 twin rolled up with a radically raked springer front end, handicapped parking placard and more hose clamps than you've ever seen on one exhaust system. San Francisco Motorcycle Club members Morgan D, Slim Jim (a local AFM racer) and Stefano built it. We talked as they wired an electrical switch prior to their cruising/burnout sessions. The bike was rescued from a junk pile, aka free. Total cash expenditure was about \$150. Friends donated appliance switches, baling wire and hose clamps. The one spendy bit was a \$100 carb rebuild kit. Disco-era diaphragm rubber doesn't live to see its third decade.

Most of the others are recently unearthed '70s Jap bikes, but a custom late-model Chinese pocket bike made the scene with an impromptu burnout session. Seeing all these bikes in one place proves you can always coax one last spark of life out of an utterly forsaken two-wheeler. Some spectators rolled up on examples of spectacular disrepair, such as the '90s Ducati 900SS with a fairing crafted almost entirely from duct tape. Other notable sightings included velocity stacks made from Budweiser cans and an aluminum crutch/kickstand.

Burnouts occurred in quick succession at a rate of approximately 10 per hour. These spontaneous rubber-burning rituals were frequent, dramatic and punctuated by cheers from the crowd. Helpful bystanders contributed water and—better yet—beer to keep the tires spinning. The smoky epidemic spread like California wildfire. A Universal Japanese Sideback rider got in on the act, instantly clearing a 30-foot circle in the crowd as people scrambled to watch from a safe distance. The acrid aroma of smoldering 20-year-old rubber swirled around tired engines straining for redline and one last flicker of glory. A precocious child collected strips of spent rubber from countless burnouts, presumably to make his own tires for next year.

Sounds interesting, you say? It's easy to be a Dirtbag. Tap that buddy who used to ride outlaw back in the '70s and haul off that mummified CB750 hardtail chopper that never got a nibble on Craigslist. His wife will be forever grateful. Evict a few spiders and you're looking at the perfect foundation for the 2008 Dirtbag Challenge. Just add imagination, fresh gasoline, Rustoleum and lots of attitude. **MC**

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DIRTBAG CHALLENGE

Rat Bikes by the Bay

WORDS: Ed Milich PHOTOS: Craig Howell & Ed Milich

Want to upstage those \$50,000 Orange County Choppers at the roadhouse next Sunday? Excavate that '86 Yamaha Virago that's turned into a backyard Kudzu topiary. Top off the fuel for the first time since the Reagan administration and Sawzall the superfluous bits: mufflers, speedo, front brake. Slam the seat and suspension till your butt drags in every turn. Lay down a \$3.99 rattle-can color combo from the discount bin at Lowe's and pop-rivet an Alf doll on the back fender. Embellish liberally with shiny parking-lot detritus. How about a sprinkler-pipe rocket launcher? Your 3-year-old would *love* to fingerpaint the bodywork. Anything goes, as long as you spend more mental energy than cash. Now park your rat bike next to those so-called customs and see which gets more love.

The annual Dirtbag Challenge (www.dirtbagchallenge.com) elevates rat-bike construction to postmodern art by showcasing the efforts of the Bay Area's best deconstructionist bike builders. It's beer, bikers, Betties, burgers, bands, badasses and burnouts in one big, happy, two-wheeled garage party. The 20 or 30 contestants rev up for 8000-rpm sing-alongs and tire-smoking sessions before vying for valuable prizes and more valuable infamy. Welcome to the cheap, greasy roots of custom motorcycle building.

Part freak show, part bike show, 2007's challenge took place on November 11 in San

