



BIRD

ON THE WIRE

So, the 2012 model announcements will confirm what we've known for months now, that the Rocker C is dead. It marks the end of a less than illustrious experiment in changing the shape of the modern Harley-Davidson and its passing hasn't lead to a public uproar. It was actually a great bike to ride, but it wasn't without its issues.



We're starting to see evidence of that with the number of custom Rockers that are filtering through, in a way that we didn't see with the previous attempt to change the shape of the Softail, the Deuce, but then in fairness, once you'd swapped-out the tank and rear wheel with its VR-style mudguard, you were effectively left with a Softail with custom forks. The Rocker's genes are a little harder to bury.

And so they should be, because while there were a great many things that I would have changed about the Rocker, there are elements that really worked well ... okay, so I liked the cast aluminium oil tank with its cooling fins that continued the lines of those on the rear pot, and the back end of the Softail-style frame with its wider swing-arm that took a very well-behaved 240-section rear tyre. And I knew that I liked them but didn't know just how much until I turned up at Oxford Harley-Davidson to take out their then-new Ultra Limited Demo a year or so ago, and spotted a Rocker in the showroom that had been put together by a local bike builder, Rocket Bobs.

That bike was based on the unlovely standard Rocker, which while it had the benefit of a seat that wasn't stuffed full of the ironmongery that folded out to create the Rocker C's 'trick' pillion, suffered for the most ill-advised cosmetic finish that Harley-Davidson has used on any motorcycle ever. Rocket Bob's Pete Pearson had done the decent thing by replacing almost all of it with a deep lustrous black powder coat – wheels, handlebar risers, fork lowers and the oil tank – but there was more to it than that. The silly hugger – a clever idea to reduce the gap between the wheel and mudguard, but poorly realised by replacing it with a bigger and less attractive gap between the seat and mudguard – was gone, and an abbreviated, more conventional Softail-style mudguard replaced it.

It could have been a new Night Train – arguably it should have been the new Night Train – and made the news pages that issue: Rocket Bobs was on our radar.

Fast forward two years, and after putting a lot of work into developing a range of stuff for Dyna models, Pete's been playing with a Rocker again, and he's taken it a lot further: I'll let him explain ... >>



"I have an obsession with design, and with a specific side of design: flawed iconic design. It's not necessarily the obvious, mainstream stuff, but is usually mechanical and mostly from the good ol' US.

"To me, a finished piece of work is one that you can spin through a full 360-degree, metamorphosing as it does so but with every change as adrenaline-charged as the last. We're not talking amorphous euro blobs like those red penile rockets from Italy, we are talking sculpted curves: about Coke bottles and Harley-Davidsons, Zippo lighters and American muscle cars from the '60s.

"To take an obvious example, the '69 Charger looks impossibly svelt from a dead profile and yet changes to a squat, badass mutha from a front or rear three-quarter view, and the looks keep changing as you walk around it: a car designed by a bloke with an absolute passion for the art with zero interest in crumple zones or polar bears.

"But not everything is as 'finished', and the flawed Rocker has to be a perfect patient. From the rear three-quarter view the Rocker is at its worst, in my opinion: the tank becomes so thin and out of place that it utterly destroys the whole bike. The skinny front 19-inch wheel, however, is probably the biggest WTF moment, and in flat profile so much of the scoot jars with your mind that seeing one for the first time, I just left the showroom immediately, muttering incoherently under my breath.

"And yet there are minor details, such as the headlamp mount, to the full-on 'Coke Bottle' moment offered by the oil bag, so often passed over when viewing the Harley that caused so much discord and divided opinion. And even though its now dead, I feel the debate will carry on for a good while yet, but in the meantime there are plenty around to buy up and re-build into something more ripped.

I've been working with Rockers for a couple of years now, but have always wanted to be given free reign over a build, rather than being limited to just one area of the bike, so when I met up with Jim, who laid out a plan allowing me to do just that – to build a Rocker exactly how I saw it: no compromise, no area untouched – I was so eager to get rolling.

"The main problems – as I see them – with the Rocker are as follows: the seat height is governed by a poor rear frame design and a huge battery; the Deuce-like tank is just badly mounted, although I believe there is huge potential in that tank and it will feature large



in a future build; the idiotic speedo/console thing only surpassed in fugly by the front wheel and the bars. Then there are touches like the bracket stuck to the downtubes to run the clutch cable through, which is one of the most idiotic pieces of flawed engineering I've seen. And the coil on the side of the motor! Why Harley think these need to be out in the open is beyond me, especially when the Rocker is one model where the thing fits perfectly behind the headstock!

"On the other hand, the main focus of a Rocker is the oil bag, and to keep this build grounded in Rockerdom I wanted to leave it completely alone and build the whole scoot around it.

"First off was the tank choice: the obvious contender was a Street Bob tank, as its main radius would flow right into the rear frame but mainly because if slammed tight to the engine the bike would look long and low from the flat profile ... lean, even! And from the rear, the fatter tank would give the bike a full-on muscular stance. So we got hold of an FXDB tank and cut the tunnel out – which is a pain, because of the fuel pump mounts etc – but with its new tunnel fabricated and purged-welded in place we had the perfect line, although we'd need to notch the right-hand side to clear the pots: something I dig so much that I want to hit every tank I see these days.

"The profile had to be kept as clean as possible, so the flush console and motogadget mini that we'd already developed for Dynas was a no-brainer, and with Harley's flush fit filler cap and gauge, the overall impact is exactly what I was looking for.

"The battery was easier, dropping in a Speedcell Lithium battery into the well at the centre of the oil bag, joined by all those difficult to place electronics that eat into the space beneath the seat, and there's still space to tuck almost three-inches of gel over neoprene to cushion the seat pad.

"I wanted to fabricate our signature Pintail for this Rocker – one that looks, from the front, as though it is molded to the tyre, but from the side stretches out and follows the

radius of the rear frame – which meant cutting away most of that rear frame to get the line I needed, and replacing everything from the spine back with a new cross member and mounts. Having built a jig around the bike and chopped out the parts that were in the way, we replaced them with our own kit and beefed up the spine while we were at it, settling for an inch of usable suspension at the swing-arm to allow for a lower ride height without making it unrideable.

"With the swingarm, we had to follow the same route to lose 10mm off the top of the arm and change the throw slightly so we could hook it up to our uprated shocks, with LA Choppers springs and a mechanical ride height adjuster.

"The Pintail itself was set and welded-up with the tyre in place and the arm mimicking maximum compression, so we know that the bumpstop – effectively the edge of the seat – is 8mm from the 260/40 Metzeler rear tyre. The kick tail of the seat is fabbed from two 10mm steel plate struts stolen from one of our regular Rocker kits, heated-up to cherry and gently bent and then twisted through a third plane to



create the shape you see. It looks delicate but is in fact extremely tough.

"The wheels were an obvious choice for us: an 18 x 8.5 rear and a 23 x 4.0 front from HD Wheels in California. They don't come cheap – quality never does – but their aluminium Apollo SL rims just do it for me and we use them on a

lot of our builds: the next set, which we'll be using on our new Bob build are probably the sickest wheels I've ever seen.

"The 23-inch front wheel had to happen but it did present a few problems. The 130-section Avon Cobra was too much rubber for the Rocker's narrow glide setup and the tall hoop meant we would have to drop the forks to keep the stance right. We fixed that reasonably easily with a set of mid-glide trees from a Dyna Custom, which meant welding a steering stop to the headstock, but with the Rocker's fork legs being the same 49mm as the Dyna donor's, they were a straightforward fit. We then lowered the forks by 3-inches with one of our kits – once we'd DLC-coated the stanchions and, of course, blacked-out the hardware – which gave us the inch of usable suspension travel >>>

that we were looking for. It's a solid ride but it performs well, and you don't get a stance this tough without slamming it.

"There's no sense spending good money on stunning wheels and then hiding them, but equally a bike's got to stop, so we reprised the rear brake set-up from the Voodoo Bob – a laser cut mini rotor gripped by a racing caliper that will outperform the oem offering by a margin – while a 13-inch floating rotor gripped by a Rocket Bob-branded Harrison Billet Mini-6 looks equally tiny at the heart of that towering front wheel.

"Back to my particular brand of design addiction, our "Zombi" bars were originally drawn up for this build – it was all I could see, and I needed a set that nailed where I was going and how I wanted the thing to present itself – but they made a guest appearance on the Voodoo Bob, on the cover of AmV44, and I put the first batch on the site and sold a bunch long before this bike saw the light of day. The controls and switchgear are from Joker Machine's JX series, along with the risers and air cleaner, all milled from billets of 6061 in their workshops just outside San Dimas, SoCal: their attention to detail and the sheer quality of workmanship is outstanding and their products always lift a build to new heights.

"The motor is largely standard, but it needed to be stripped to be painted in

a two-tone black and grey powdercoat scheme – I've got a thing for black jugs, which probably stems from a love of Shovelheads, which could in turn explain why I've spent so long working with Dynas – and there was no sense in refitting 96-inch barrels, so it got the 103-inch kit. That capitalises on the free-breathing cleaner, and then fitted a one-off stainless exhaust, that we messed about with to make it look and sound right, which comes out close enough to the rider's ears to savor the sound, but not close enough to cook their butt cheek.

"There's not a lot of colour on the bike in total, but if you've clocked the name – Blackbird – you'll realise why: a result of brainstorming in the barn with Art Slade, who painted it. It's a subtle celebration of asymmetry with little more than a beak-yellow flash of colour as an accent to draw the eye into the flat black and grey that matches the shading of the motor, and it's as deceptively simple as it is understated – not one to leap out at you, which made it all the more rewarding when it placed third in the Modified Harley-

Davidson class at the California Dreamin' Expo in Bournemouth, against some very tough competition.

There are of course a whole raft of other mods and parts that went in to complete the build but it could take the rest of this magazine to explain them, so I'll leave it to the pictures and a final word to thank Jim for giving me free reign over the project, and putting up with me taking 8 months over design and build time!

Words & pictures:
Pete Pearson

