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# HOW GOOD WAS THE EARLY MACH III?

Even Kawasaki has had to tone down the fire-breathing 500 that first burst upon the world in 1969. PHIL HUNT sampled an early Mach III one recent weekend — and discovered why!

"H-O-L-Y b-l-o-o-d-y H-e-l-l!!!!"

Not given much to swearing, it was the best I could generate. Not that it mattered what I said, since I was enveloped in a cocoon of numbing noise. A wailing, howling, banshee scream, obliterating all sensation apart from the conviction that my arms would soon become part of Auntie Jack territory and separate from my body at the shoulders.

I had just hit the power band at full twist in second gear on an early model Kawasaki 500 triple. It was the start of a weekend on the machine that would reinstate this motorcycle, in my mind, as one of the legends of the two-wheeled world.

John Hall, from Barry Tapsall's Yamaha, had rung me at work.

"I've got a bike for you for the weekend. It's over at the Chermside shop."

"Great. What is it?" Oh, the naive innocence.

"A Kawasaki 500." This delivered with restrained confidence.

"Struth," I reply, "that'll rip me bloody arms off."

"Yeah. They're pretty fast." The award for "Understatement of the Year" will now be presented.

"Does Hank want me to pick it up this morning?"

"No. He's got to get some baffles for the mufflers."

As I hang up the phone I try to imagine what a Kwacker 500 without baffles will sound like, but my range of motorcycle sound memories doesn't extend beyond the threshold of pain. I am to find out later that day.

"I tried all day to get baffles," says Hank, "but there aren't any about. Got a kick start, though." It isn't quite the right one, but it almost fits

and, canted slightly out to the right, when folded home, it has that familiar Yamaha RD3 feel about it. The bruise on the inside of my right leg starts to deepen just looking at it.

Hank wheels the red beast outside and I strap on my overnight bag amid the black-humoured banter.

"I reckon he'll be doing a hundred by the time he gets to Joe's." Joe's shop is two doors away.

"He'll be cold riding this thing up the coast."

"The vibration will make him numb before he has a chance to get cold."

All very funny stuff. I swing my leg over. Nice wide tank — real bikes you hang onto with your knees. Test rear brake — a bit too high in relation to foot-peg, but OK. "Neutral's at the bottom, isn't it?" Front brake lever seems properly adjusted. Clutch medium pressure. Short (710 mm) bars look very sporting. No glass faces on the gauges . . .

"Hey, do these gauges work?"

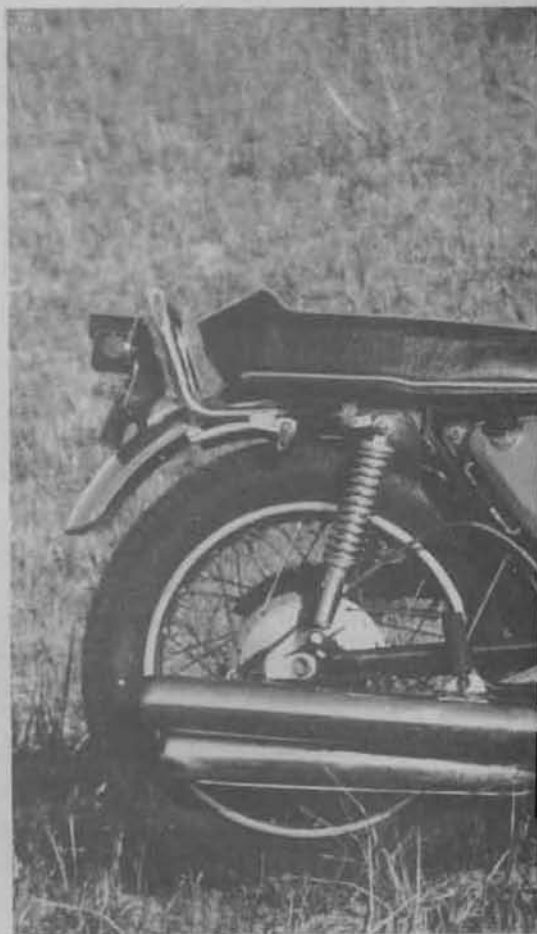
"No. You'll feel the power come on."

"Thank you very much." It might be the last thing I do feel. What about all those blokes who do mad wheelstands and loop-the-loops just when the power comes in?

Push down the handlebar-mounted choke and kick it over. Hell. It makes more noise than a truck just kicking it over. Another kick and . . .

The pigeons on the local Post Office roof instantly scatter. Small boys appear out of every shop door for three blocks. Car salesmen on the other side of the six-lane highway find their high pressure pitch drowned beneath clatter.

My intentions of warming up the motor are forgotten in a sudden desire to escape from the limelight. I nod farewells to the gathered crowd (saying anything is hopeless), pull in the clutch, snick it into first and try to move off. With an estimated 3000 revs (the tacho doesn't work, remember), the motor bogs down hopelessly as soon as I feed in a tiny amount of clutch. I'll sort this out later, I say to myself, and



The first Moch III was both a looker — and a goer!

grabbing about 6000 revs and slipping the clutch I trickle off the foot-path and onto the road. Once the clutch is right out I slip it up into second and accel-e-r-a-t---e up the road.

The five-kilometre ride home is extended to eight to take in a long, straight, suburban road, where I stop and practise moving the Kwacker off the line. With a warm motor the bogging down is not much improved, but I find that with about 4000 revs and by slipping the clutch to about 25 km/h I can get away fairly sedately. Simultaneously I discover that by grabbing more revs and letting the clutch out more quickly I can get away at tyre-blistering pace, with the front becoming ominously light. I decide that's for the boy-racers and burble home to the wife and kids.

Jamie, aged two, tells me about the "plane in the sky" that flew overhead about the same time as I came home. I tell him it was only Daddy on another big bike, and he dutifully rushes off to tell his Mum who, not surprisingly, already knows.

We load the bike on the trailer



his Honda XL350 is parked by the gate), and around the corner to the waterfront. The dreadful exhaust note echoes off glass shop-fronts and young men in dressing gowns appear on motel verandahs as I accelerate at a muted scream over the hill to Alexandra Headlands.

I arrive at the camp at the Alex and park beside a Honda 500/4 and a Ducati 450. The owners soon appear to investigate the noise and we resolve to go for a ride together later. We never get around to it.

Later that night, well rugged up against the nighttime chill, I set off on the Kawasaki for Brisbane. The road south is good quality two-lane highway, and demands little of either rider or motorcycle. Both of us reach expectations and I arrive in Brisbane cold, numb and fairly deaf, about an hour and a quarter later. Considering the traffic I calculate this to be about 15 minutes quicker than by car. Limited to about 6000 in top (the vibration, remember), I feel quite happy with the run.

After work my run back starts less enjoyably. The Kwacker's engine is cold. I try to warm it up in the car-park, but cold glares from attendants suggest I should get moving. Into Elizabeth Street and I am stopped by a red light. The incline is slightly uphill. The Kwacker's engine is still cold and won't look at anything below about 5000, so I rap it on and creep off. Two uniformed gentlemen on white Honda 750s nod me into the kerb.

"What have we got here?" asks one as I extinguish the flames.

"A Kawasaki 500," I offer, hoping my tone of voice indicates I think it obvious. Somehow my acting ability deserts me and I sound nervous.

My licence is in the car.

"You do have a licence to ride a bike?"

"Oh yeah, of course." I feel like I'm telling a lie.

"How long you had it?"

"Eight years." The magic words. The cop comes over all friendly. Suggests I should get the mufflers fixed so as not to give the young 'uns ideas. I tell him how we tried to get baffles on Friday and how there aren't any about. He says OK, but ride it quietly through the suburbs. I point out that that's not particularly easy and he seems to enjoy the joke. His mate joins the conversation for the first time and suggests I'll be cold riding to Caloundra at one o'clock in the morning. I tell him about my three pairs of trousers, two

and later drive off to the Sunshine Coast. I have to attend a Presbyterian Youth Camp and commute back to Brisbane to work on Saturday night (the old all-night DJ bit). Judith and the kids will have the car and the company of Grandma and Grandpa for the weekend.

On Saturday morning I wake the slumbering hamlet of Golden Beach as I ring-ding down to the highway connecting Caloundra with Mooloolaba. This road, laid over sand, is notoriously bumpy, and I figure it will be a good test for the Kawasaki's high speed handling capabilities, before I try them out on a bumpy sweeper.

A long, sweeping corner leads onto six kilometres of straight tar and I rap it on in third, then fourth. The acceleration is unbelievable. I find it difficult to push my fingers forward to reach the clutch lever, so resort to clutchless changes. It's not my chain, anyway. In fifth the wind supports my body and the riding position becomes quite comfy. Except for the vibration.

At what I estimate is about six or seven thousand revs (all I really know is it's damn fast), the vibration is literally sickening. There is no escaping the nausea produced in the

stomach, and the vibration swells the throttle-grip to about two-and-a-half times its normal size. The Kwacker is sitting down well on compressed suspension, and while the bumps don't throw the bike off line, there is a tendency for the rear to twitch slightly, pointing to problems about keeping that part of the bike steady in the corners.

Figuring I have had enough of the vibration, I try the brakes, and am fairly impressed (been riding trail bikes too long, I guess). The bike pulls up straight, although the front brake requires loads more pressure than the rear. Later experience confirms that the rear brake is oversensitive and locks up much too easily under less than ideal conditions.

At the end of the long straight the road curves gently to the left past Kawana Waters, where green mangroves have been filled in to yield scarred brown sub-divisions for the upper middle class. I lean the bike over. It is harder to shift than I expect. Screwing the throttle in fifth is undramatic, so I kick it into fourth and instantly we are going 30 km/h faster.

Into Mooloolaba, past new houses, the bowling club (where the green-keeper looks up at the noise . . .

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# THE EARLY MACH III

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shirts, two jumpers, and a parka. He terminates this banal chatter with a deft jab on his electric start. I kick the Kwacker over, roar away as quietly as I can, ride two blocks, and run out of petrol.

That makes it about 11 km/l. Not knowing how far reserve will take me, I use forty cents at a coin pump and get about 30 cents of petrol. At Strathpine I fill up at an all-night

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station.

More to warm my hands than myself, I buy a cup of coffee. Four teenagers are sitting at the next table looking out at the Kawasaki resting on its side-stand outside the cafe. The boys sport leather jackets with motorcycle graffiti patterned on the back. One has the best selection of sew-on brand patches I've ever seen. Triumph, BSA, BMW, Honda, Benelli . . . only Moto Guzzi seems to be missing.

"What sort of bike is it?" asks one, leaning over to give me the benefit of his bad breath.

"A Moto Guzzi 850," I suggest, off-hand. The boy with the name patches makes a mental note to get one. Bad breath turns to his girlfriend and tells her it's a "Mow-tow Gutsy".

From Strathpine to Golden Beach is 72 kilometres (45 miles). Forty-one minutes later I am home. Colder, number, and stone deaf.

Next morning I return to the Youth Camp. As I leave Caloundra I encounter a Falcon Hardtop hurtling along at 30 km/h. The road curves away to the left and I see it is clear. Peeling off, I prepare to pass and suddenly find myself kneeing the bulbous side of the Falcon. With nary a signal (your blinkers don't work, mate!) he's decided to go straight ahead into his driveway. Well, it is Sunday, after all.

I quickly stop and have my theory about over-sensitive rear brakes confirmed. I restrain myself from calling the driver names and attempt to ride off "more in sorrow than in anger". Trouble is, this bike makes so much noise it sounds angry at idle.

The weekend over, I take the bike back . . . the long way. After leaving home at Ferny Hills, a north-western suburb of Brisbane, I ride up through the green of the Samford valley.

It is a crisp morning. The sun is shining. The roads are dry. The birds are singi . . . (enough, you get the idea). The road winds through 80 km/h sweepers up over a range and into the valley. I soon get into the habit of leaning down on the right handlebar in right-hand corners (and vice-versa). The bike is heavy to lean over easily and this technique helps no end.

I become Gregg Hansford blasting through the esses at Lakeside. The dense green of the rain forest becomes my Armco, bouncing wailing exhausts back onto the track. I recall noticing the footpeg rubbers had been ground away (the centre-stand has long since been removed), so I try to see how far the bike will

lean. After three or four sweeping bends I am convinced that the previous owner was a poseur and stop to investigate.

Sure enough, the footpeg rubbers have been cut away. There are various dents in the pipes, but then he could have fallen off, couldn't he? You might be able to lean this bike over to the pegs, but not with the fairly square Avon on the rear. In any case, poseur or not, he made sure his cornering would never suffer from lack of ground clearance.

Through Samford, and I turn off to lovely Eaton's Crossing where mug vandals have destroyed what was once the prettiest barbecue site in Brisbane. The road here is graded dirt and winds along the top of a ridge for a couple of kilometres before dropping steeply to the Crossing. The view is quite magnificent, and because of its distance from the main thoroughfare, often missed by the tourists. The mountains are today as green as ever, the farms as quaint.

I become Steve McQueen riding the vast outback. The road is cut down into the ridge and the earthen banks reflect the banshee cry as I lean into another left-hander. The slithery feeling says paragraphs about the bike's ability to handle the dirt. It also reveals the real inadequacies of the steering set-up. Over-generous trail makes the bike stable, but heavy to steer. Yet, when upset by large stones or loose gravel, it over-reacts.

Down into Eaton's the road is wet from cars fording the crossing, and balancing the under-sensitive front brake with the over-sensitive rear down the slope is a work of art for which I expect applause. Only the sparrows seem to notice, and they appear to be too startled by the exploding exhaust note to appreciate the finer arts.

Through Eaton's and up the hill the road becomes bitumen again. Good surface this. It winds gently through the bush with near perfect surface for about eight kilometres. Leaning on the handlebars to get the bike over, I become Warren Willing at work. A little self-deception goes a long way.

Presently I turn the bike in again at Tapsall's. After pleasantries about acceleration, cold and deafness, I climb aboard my commuter, a Honda CL90, and give it the gun. Is it going? Push it down into first. Accelerate up the road. Accelerate? I understand they measure the acceleration of these with a calendar. Ah, well. It does get 53 km/l. And one can't expect too much of a commuter after a weekend away on a legend. ●