

**“Meet us at the
lights and bring
your fastest bike.
We taking all
bets and getting
cash tonight...”**

With guns, \$15,000 drag motors and four times that in prize money, the traffic light Grand Prix is serious business in the US. *Bike* infiltrates the dangerous world of illegal street racing.
Words and photography by Jonathan Green

'Man you know you don't deserve that bike,' spits Ronnie, rocking back on his heels and throwing his full weight behind the next insult. 'You know what colour your stripes are dog? They f**king yellow. You a coward. Get yo' ass home before yo' get hurt.' There is now a palpable fear that the next exchange will

be the thunder-crack of a bullet from a 9mm.

It's midnight on a Wednesday night in the small town of Forestville just off the 495, the beltway that encircles the American capital Washington DC. We stand in the parking lot of a neon-lit restaurant called Cranberries. It's an unremarkable modern red brick place surrounded by the mundane stores that you see all over America: Burger King, Radio Shack, Walmart.

But the car park is a raucous hub-hub of exhaust smoke and whining engines – it teems with around 100 sportsbikes. The riders wear top of the line Vanson leathers. Over them, T-shirts bear images of the murdered rap superstars Notorious B.I.G and Tupac Shakur. Gold chains, gold-capped teeth, waxed tanks and chromed wheels glitter in the amber haze of streetlights. The most popular bikes are trick Suzuki Hayabusas, with \$5000 paint jobs, long swingarms, tuned motors and bottles of nitrous out of sight, fastened to subframes.

'I got something for the po-lice too,' says one rider, pressing a button inside the fairing of his GSX-R1000. The numberplate snaps up out of sight.

These bikes are set up to drag race blistering 1/4-mile sprints in illegal street races. And the talk and hustle are all part of the pre-race warm up. The theory is that if you insult someone brazenly enough they'll react in anger and throw down to race... more often than not when they shouldn't.

The world of illegal street racing is huge business in the US and drag racing its most popular form. It's quick – over well before the police turn up, a test of riders' reflexes as well as the accelerative power of the machine. Riders are known on an underground scene. Some travel the country like pool hustlers, setting up races for money, whistling in and out of towns and stripping the unwary of their cash. Others like 'Shine' and Johnny Locklear operate more like hired gunslingers, riding for secretive big-money backers in well-publicised races. Fortunes are won and lost.

As one racer from Philadelphia, who asked not to be named, said: 'Big money's involved, sure. It's fast money, tax-free from the inner city, know what I mean? These guys aren't Michael Jordan or Donald Trump – who else could afford to lose \$40,000 on an illegal motorcycle race? People get rid of dirty money fast. If they need more they just go and make some more. Some of the motors in these bikes are worth \$15,000 alone.' And another source from South Carolina says, 'I've seen guns pulled at street races when guys lose amounts of money that can buy a house.' >

DOES STREET RACING HAPPEN IN THE UK?

The street racing scene in the UK is actually really small. Very, very rarely riders do meet in London for a thrash but there is rarely any money involved, no guns and the

bikes are pretty much stock. Why? Street racing is very much an American thing for several reasons. First, there are hundreds of thousands of miles of roads, meaning quiet spots are the rule rather than the exception. Also, the penalties for speeding aren't

nearly as stiff as they are here. Get caught in America and you'll pay a fine – but your licence will be left unmolested. Finally America's truly massive gun and drug culture has helped create a scene so big and so lucrative good riders can actually make a living from it.



(Top) The bikes and riders have changed but outlaws still wear patches



(Below) With so much at stake, scrutineering is intense and undertaken personally. Nitrous systems are easily concealed and common





(Above) A race face and thousand-yard-stare are standard with tuned black ZX-10Rs (Below) Long swingarms keep front wheels down



(Above) Hayabusas remain the weapon of choice (Below) Cops largely powerless



My main contact is Ronnie, a gap-toothed, blustery personality of 6ft 2in with an arch wit. He's cascading insults onto a man he thinks he can goad into racing. Yet the 40-ish man, overweight and knock-kneed in a blue bandana, senses that all may not go well were he to race. He stalks back to his glistening white Hayabusa, slump shouldered, his ego battered, the slurs still ringing in his ears. 'Yo! And take that bandana off,' shouts Ronnie after him. 'You don't deserve to wear that neither.' Ronnie tips me a wink. 'This is how the hustle starts,' he says conspiratorially. 'I wanna get inside his head before we come to race.'

Soon a deal is struck with a more serious contender with black leathers and a pencil moustache. The money is 'locked up'. We leave in convoy, Ronnie with his bike on the back of a trailer pulled by a Jeep. We head deep into the night to a spot behind an evangelical church on Route 4. The last thing on anyone's mind tonight is prayer and redemption.

Punters weigh up each rider's chances like prizefighters, betting in noisy exchanges. The riders check out the bikes, Ronnie on a blue and white GSX-R1000 while the other rides a Kawasaki ZX-10R. 'You better not spray me,' spits Ronnie, giving a vengeful glance. Spraying is slang for using nitrous, which can temporarily boost power by some 35%. They examine each other's bikes for hidden nitrous bottles that would give an unfair advantage.

They then angrily discuss the terms of the race. 'Gimme three and the break,' says Ronnie, frowning. He's after an advantage of three bike lengths before his opponent goes. The other rider has the faster bike and is around 60lbs lighter than Ronnie. He agrees. One of Ronnie's cohorts, like a boxing trainer inducing confidence into his fighter, buoys up his spirits:

“I've seen guns pulled when guys lose amounts of money that could buy a house”

'Dog, when you drop the hammer on that motherf**ker he goin' be sick.' Ronnie nods. I start to take pictures when someone whispers, 'Better put the camera away – you don't know what jokers we got around here who don't want their face in pictures.'

The racers head out to the dark two-lane highway, spectators gathering at the roadside. The road clear, they taxi into adjacent lanes, occasionally looking back to make sure no cars are coming. They roll into burnouts, sending thick clouds of smoke wafting into the trees at the roadside. Each guns the throttle and jumps the bike up to an imaginary centreline. The bikes roar as engines hover near red lines.

The revs drop sharply and the bikes thunder off the line. Noise splits the air as they howl up the gears and eventually disappear over the brow of the hill, the bikes doing nearly 160mph. Two of their cohorts are at the makeshift finish line, holding the money, acting as unofficial marshals. We drift back through the trees to >

US BIKING CULTURE

Traditionally, American biker culture is Harleys cruising barren stretches of road in the Midwest and white riders mimicking outlaw gangs like the Hell's Angels and the Bandidos. Black Fifties leather jackets are worn in homage to Marlon Brando in *The Wild*

One and Hunter S Thompson's book *Hell's Angels* is considered a bible. It may be a boring cliché but it's one that's sold countless Honda Rebels and black leather jackets to accountants over the years.

But today there is a new breed of motorcycle outlaw, one with still less respect for the police. And,

diametrically opposed to the hackneyed Harley-on-the-open-road idyll, these riders come from New York, Philadelphia and Washington DC. Black rappers like DMX have introduced sportsbikes like the Hayabusa to an MTV audience. More often than not, these new riders are African American.

the parking lot waiting on their return and news of the winner.

But an uninvited guest arrives first. A Sheriff's Department cruiser has heard the commotion and slides into the parking lot, bathing startled faces in red and blue flashing lights. Panic: people stream in different directions, some hurriedly firing up bikes and speeding off into the night. The police play a constant cat-and-mouse game with racers. Ronnie advised me to drive his Jeep and trailer to a pre-arranged rendezvous if the police came. I do, crawling slowly past the police, hoping I don't have to explain myself. I look around but Ronnie's long gone.

Getting into the underground

To write this article I first posted a message on the psychobike.com

website. Street racers use it to set up races and

trade insults. At first I was met with derision – most people suspected I was a cop. But a racer with the moniker Ronraceme offered help. 'I got nothing to hide,' he said.

We meet on several occasions over the course of a few months at various lock-ups Ronnie has around Washington. The first time we met he had a fellow street racer with him. 'Don't take no pictures of my tags,' he said. He was a police officer.

At 38 Ronnie is older than most street racers. He grew up in the Eighties crack epidemic when black men had a one in 12 chance of being murdered before their 45th birthday. That's double the mortality rate of American soldiers in the Second World War. 'Every day, at any time, I could be ducking bullets and breaking away,' says Ronnie, who has a cruel-looking scar on his right inner forearm. Held up at knifepoint, he fought back. 'I told the sucker he would have to bring a pistol if he was going to deal with me.'

For years Ronnie and his friends have been united by a love of motorcycles. Ronnie first started racing in his early teens, riding a

1978 Honda CB400 in places like the grimy warehouse district on DC's V Street. Since then bikes have evolved and the horsepower has increased massively – as have the sums of money involved.

Shortly after we met, Ronnie journeyed up to Philadelphia for a pre-arranged street race. 'I knew I was going to win but there were 35 of them and one of me,' he confides. 'The guy pulled out a wad this thick,' he says, spreading his finger and thumb wide. 'I coulda left there with \$8000 but I knew I had to keep the bets small. I knew I wouldn't be leaving there with all my money and my bike.'

The main highways around New York and Connecticut, notably route 24 and the Bruckner Expressway, are notorious spots for big-money races. Racers and their sponsors deploy several cars as roadblocks. While the traffic is stopped the racers run the 1/4-mile without interference. Ronnie raced one of these for several thousand dollars a few months ago.

'Nobody could get by – I guess if anyone had got out to make a problem they would have been dealt with.' That said, the race did not go Ronnie's way. 'I was about three bike lengths ahead at 148mph when damn, he shot past,' explains Ronnie, disgustedly. 'He sprayed me.'

Street racers have made an art form of the task of engineering bikes to look stock. 'Nitrous is easy to hide, especially 10oz bottles,' explains Ronnie. They're often hidden inside frames, fuel tanks or air ducts. 'I used to have an obvious one that someone would find and I'd say, "okay, you caught me, I'll turn it off". What they didn't know was that I had another one in the fuel tank.'

Stock engines are upgraded with big bore kits and aftermarket crankshafts (known as strokers) to raise horsepower. Various modifications are made to try to keep the bikes from wheeling off the line: yokes are machined from lead; the battery is moved to the nose; and longer swingarms are fitted. Standard street-racer kit also includes compressed air quickshifters, operated via the horn button, which slash shift times and help prevent missed gears. Riders also experiment with fuel mixes, blending petrol with stuff like VPC45, which can cost as much as \$40 a gallon.

'You never know what the other guy has,' says Ronnie, 'so you bring the most badass thing you got.' Secret engine mods aren't the only form of tolerated cheating. Ronnie's seen racers pretend to drop something to distract their opponent long enough to give them an advantage off the line. If the race is being started by a flag man, racers will use a friend who, just before dropping his arms to signify the start, will stamp his foot to give an advantage. Other less-scrupulous racers have been known to douse a lane on the highway with oil before a race, often with nasty consequences.

Yet while technology has made bikes faster and cheating easier, it has its drawbacks. Word travels fast on the internet and once a rider's won in suspicious circumstances, he may find it hard to get more races. Anonymity is crucial if you want to enter big-money events. Ronnie lost Maryland but maintains it was a ploy just so he could then line up other races with unwary punters. However, he's still a name on the underground circuit. 'They know me,' laments Ronnie. 'It's hard for me to get a race anywhere now.' Other street racers I met would bemoan the same fate. In street racing, success and notoriety are very bad things.

And though the most street racers get is a ticket for a few hundred dollars if caught, worse is the fear of having their motorcycles confiscated. These machines represent massive investments of both time and money.

A few weeks later I meet Ronnie in Philadelphia at a bike workshop in one of the toughest parts of the city. As the stakes get bigger, street racing just gets more dangerous, with faster bikes and higher speeds. 'They'll never stop this,' says Ronnie, lining up races in gabbled cellphone conversations. 'I'm like a crackhead,' he grins guiltily, 'the dope man looking for one more high.' And with that he screams off into the night with a fistful of dollars. ■

"The bikes thunder off the line, splitting the air with noise, then disappear over the hill at 160mph"



BUILDING A STREET-LEGAL DRAG BIKE

STEP 1: SLAM AND STRETCH IT

A longer wheelbase stops massive power being wasted on wheelies. Straightline Racing import the popular Trac Dynamics swingarms, which can give up to 12in of extra length for just £600. The polished, mega-braced JMC is also a classic. Braced on both sides, JMC make an arm for Hayabusas wide enough to take a 250-section rear

tyre. The back end also needs lowering. Aftermarket tie-bars slash inches from your ride height. At the front end, some racers use lowering straps, mounted to the caliper bolts and the bottom yoke, to take the travel out of their forks.

STEP 2: ADD POWER

Healthy Hayabusas make 150bhp but, with a good race exhaust and Power Commander, properly set up, can make 165-180bhp. Handy. From there,

nitrous is the next step. For just £325, Straightline Racing will fit a Stage 1 nitrous kit – that's an extra 30bhp under your horn button. Conventional tuning – gas flowing and upping the capacity, usually to 1400cc – also help, but ideally you want a turbocharger. Stage 1 is 250bhp for £3000; Stage 2 is around 350bhp for £4500; and Stage 3 is 600bhp+ for just £6400.

Thanks to Straightline Racing, Tel: 01553 772774



(Above) In the US, rap videos have deified fast bikes like the Buser (Below) Are you fast enough? Tough enough? Brave enough? Anonymous enough?

