megaphone

by Dexter Ford, Editor at Extra Large

Bury My Heart In Gilroy: Indian Dies Another Death

AS I WRITE THIS, THE INDIAN MOTORCYCLE CORP. IS NO more. Audax Group, the bean counters who bankrolled Indian's resurgence, walked away without warning, leaving nearly 400 employees and thousands of pissed-off Indian owners holding the bag. Indian was selling more bikes in the United States than such prominent makers as Aprilia, Ducati or Triumph. But the investors panicked, took their ball and went home. Once again, all that's left is a name.

And what a name it is. Indian was America's first motorcycle. Oscar Hedstrom and George Hendee initially designed a motorized bicycle to pace bicycle races. But the commercial possibilities of a practical, reliable motorcycle quickly became obvious, and production was started on a trim, lightweight, single-cylinder machine.

Harley-Davidson was founded two years later. The Milwaukee boys started behind Indian and stayed there for many years—along with most of the world's motorcycle industry. In 1911, for instance, Indian sent a team to the Isle of Man TT. They kicked butt, thrashing the European makers on their own court. Indian won the first-ever Daytona 200 in '37, and was still winning races in the '60s, long after the last Indian rolled out of the factory.

If Harley-Davidson is an eternal, all-American icon to be revered, worshipped and tattooed, so is Indian.

Indian, in truth, was a war casualty. The company built thousands of motorcycles for the U.S. Army in World War II—and managed to lose money doing it. Indian could never pull its way out of its war debt, and the Springfield, Massachusetts, factory finally closed its doors in '53.

Harley, of course, has had its own problems, including being sold to the bowling-ball people (AMF). In the '70s, Harley's prospects did not look good at all, with outdated, unreliable bikes and a customer base of aging tourers, outlaw bikers and Elvis. AMF bailed, selling the company to a group of Harley executives.

The rest is history. Those executives, led by Vaughn Beals, turned Harley-Davidson into a global phenomenon. They improved the products, building the aluminum-cylinder Evolution Sportster and Big Twin engines. But mostly they turned riding a Harley into The American Way Of Life.

They made it acceptable—even, in some cases, mandatory—for otherwise respectable people to be seen on a Harley. They made the motorcycle as much a social talisman as a mode of transportation.

When Indian Motorcycles restarted in '98, the hope of its investors—and many Indian fans—was that lightning could, indeed, strike twice. But the company started out building what were, essentially, rebadged Harley clones.

It was a smart thing to do, though crusty Indian and Harley partisans have bitched about it ever since. To become a financially viable motorcycle company, you have to build motorcycles. If you can use a popular engine architecture, one already in production by independent makers such as S&S, you'd be crazy not to.

Indian, to its credit, soon introduced an engine that was largely its own, the Powerplus 100. And Indian was frantically designing its own unique engine architecture. The motorcycles were far from perfect, though the company worked hard to improve their performance, reliability and build quality. The '04 Chief, which would have been unveiled just three days after the company folded, had more than 100 improvements. And some of the designs in the works, which I saw on a top-secret tour of its design studio, would have truly put Indian back on the world stage.

Exactly where on that stage is a very interesting subject. I recently spoke with Fran O'Hagan, Indian's ex-executive vice president for product development. He called me by cell phone from a roadside rest stop in California's Sierra Nevada, having just climbed off his GSX-R1000.

"For decades, Harley and Indian competed head to head. And there was no reason why Indian couldn't have competed heads-up again," O'Hagan said. "Right now, the hot motorcycle market is cruisers. But that may not be the case tomorrow. Indian, in its heyday, was never a cruiser company—it was a sportbike company, a racing company, a touring company, all those things. I saw no reason that Indian couldn't have competed with anyone, worldwide. Look at Honda. They make wonderful machines, but there's no real brand image, no lifestyle behind it. Then look at Harley. The image, the lifestyle aspects, are there, but the actual machines lag behind.

"Imagine," O'Hagan said, "a company having those two things combined. I saw Indian becoming a great, global motorcycle company—not just a 700-pound, pushrod motorcycle company.

"The world motorcycle market is huge, with millions of bikes sold every year—the U.S. market is just a small percentage of the total market. The United States buys more cruisers, it's true. But I believe, as time goes on, that the world motorcycle market won't live or die by cruisers. And now you can build great motorcycles, economically, without making huge investments in your own facilities. At a certain volume level, it makes perfect sense. You don't have to become a fuel-tank maker—you find the world's best fuel-tank maker and take advantage of their investment and expertise.

"Will Indian come back somehow?" O'Hagan asked. "Well, if you look at the history of Indian, you'll find that the Indian brand is so well loved, and has been for so long, that somebody will find a way."

Let's see...an American company building truly world-class motorcycles—sportbikes, sport-touring bikes, cruisers, tourers—and keeping a legendary American brand alive. I think I could have lived with that. MC