

PROPER CHOPPER BOBBER 357 ROAD TEST

One cute brute

And a total blast from the past



by Terry Roorda
Photos by Belle Raucous

Bobber, bobber, who's got the bobber? The short answer to that question these days is, "Who doesn't?" Bobber's the latest buzzword in the industry and scores of bike builders from bootstrap back alley operations to big buck production-custom concerns have been scrambling to get in on the action, and just in case there's any confusion on that score, most of these manufacturers call their model The Bobber, or some variation thereof, in much the same way that a flurry of models called some variation of The Chopper hit the market a few years ago.

At the Cincinnati V-Twin Expo in January, a good half-dozen exhibitors brought out new bikes christened with the B-word. That trade show was the coming-out party of the bobber craze, and it was also the breakout event for newcomer Proper Chopper of Santa Cruz, California, as their Bobber proved a solid hit with the industry reps and retailers in attendance, both because of its pitch-perfect retro styling and because of its pitch-perfect \$18,000 price point. In a deft move to distance their own Bobber from the swelling pack, Proper Chopper thereafter suffixed the name with the number 357—a not-so-subtle allusion to the famous first magnum cartridge, and it's a fitting nomenclature inasmuch as this bike does indeed pack a whole lot of pop into a relatively small package.

Minimalist in the extreme, the Bobber 357 is a lean hardtail with a 66-inch wheelbase—comparable to a Softail Standard—and a dry weight of only 540 pounds, making it 13 pounds lighter than an 883 Sportster. It's powered by a ferocious 95 hp 107-inch S&S motor that dominates the machine's appearance and personality. The transmission is a six-speed overdrive unit, and final drive is provided by either a Kevlar belt, or, as in the case of the bike we tested, a good old-fashioned lube-slinging chain. Brakes are four-piston HHI discs

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front and back, and if you're getting the impression that you get a lot of muscle and mechanical prowess for the money with this machine, you're getting the point. And that's even before considering how much styling panache the Bobber 357 brings to the game, starting with those wide whitewall tires, mega-spoke wheels and red rims. Then you've got all that retro-authenticity: the Frisco-mount Sportster tank, pin-striped black paint job, rubber dust booted 41mm front forks, keg-style oil bag, flat fenders, periscope taillight, and chrome risers with black drag bars (and I suddenly feel like I'm writing this article in 1972). Other stylish details abound here, from the grooved triple trees to the chrome switch housings, billet forward controls, and especially the unique frame rail-hugging seat. Put it all together and you've got a bike that's well-appointed, screamingly retro, wickedly potent and—dare I say it?—cute. But more on that concept later.

First we have to consider the tire size, since that's become job #1 for any American motorcycle reviewer in these rubbery days, and it's here that the Bobber 357 represents a welcome change in the direction of things. The front tire is a 130/90-16, and the rear tire is a (gasp!) 140/90-16. This is sanity, though not necessarily a symptom of the turning of the fat-tire tide in the marketplace, and not necessarily representative of the bobber trend in general, since a number of other "bobber" models currently available are fitted with 200+ rear skins. And it's important to note that Proper Chopper also offers fat-skinned choppers in their product line (a 240 hardtail,

240 softtail, and a 300 softtail) so they're not out to make a point here. Still, it's hard not to view their use of skinny tires on this model as a potential trendsetter even if only as a second front on the custom scene.

Road rowdy

You don't really have to throw a leg over the Bobber. It's so low and narrow in the back, you can just walk over it and sit down on it like mounting a goat (Did I say that?), and just for the record, it's a stretch to call where you sit a "seat," since it has roughly the thickness and cushioning of a falafel, and is more properly referred to as a "butt pad." It serves more as a place marker for where to park your glutes than as a conventional means of isolating them from the ride. The Pingel petcock is well-positioned at the back of the tank for easy operation, and the ignition key is also in an ideal location on the attractive coil cover. It's easy to reach but doesn't interfere with your leg placement. A tug on the S&S Super G's enricher lever and a punch of the starter button fires the

Bobber without a hitch, owing in large part to the electronic compression releases on the cylinders of the 107. Clutch pull is smooth and moderate, and shifter engagement reasonably quiet. And that's where things stop being polite. A twist on the throttle of this bike is just begging for it. The machine takes off like a jailbreak, lightening the front end to loftiness and spreading a g-force grin across the face of the operator. Slam a gear and it does it again. And again. The bike's power-to-weight ratio, and the tight geometry of its chassis make for an unabashed thrill ride, and as I blast down the road, it suddenly enters my mind that this is a hardtail, and I'd better get that into perspective before I get hammered on a bump and go numb in the nethers. But then, I'm so accustomed these days to riding hardtails with huge rock-hard low-profile rear tires that I've lost sight of how rideable a hardtail can be on sensibly sized, under-inflated rubber, so that when I do hit a bad patch of pavement, the tire and chassis absorb it with unexpected grace. Over the miles I came to consider the resilience and comfort of this hardtail as only slightly ruder than a slammed softtail (and a cushier saddle would close that gap considerably), and I stopped worrying about what the road ahead had in store, only rising up off of the butt pad to ride over upshot railroad tracks.

And, oh, the sound. The exhaust system of the Bobber 357 consists of a pair of 2.25-inch

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O.D. straight-through drag pipes with no pretensions whatsoever to political correctness. They bark, they bellow, they pop, they back off with window-rattling racket. They're deliciously out of step with the current industry-wide efforts to quiet things down in the interest of improving the public image of bikers, and on that score let me just say that I am wholeheartedly in support of that effort—so long as it doesn't apply to me, personally.

Cute to boot

The first time I pulled up to the porch of a roadhouse frequented by motorcyclists and heard the word "cute" tagged to my ride by a crusty railbird, I grinned sheepishly—or goatishly—and nodded my acknowledgement. It wasn't like that quality of the Bobber 357 wasn't something I hadn't already noticed myself. I'd noticed it in Cincinnati when I'd first laid eyes on the model. Somewhat later, after taking delivery of the test bike, I noticed how cute it was every time I went out to the garage and saw it sitting there flanked by a Fat Boy, Electra Glide and Pitbull which all looked outsized by comparison. It's cute, all right, and the cuteness derives from its compact stature and those red rims, balloon tires, simple sheet metal and ping-pong paddle butt pad. It's cute, all right, but not in the way a cheerleader's knees are cute. More in the way that a fuzzy-eared wolverine is cute.

While Proper Chopper is itself a start-up enterprise, the man behind it, Jeremy Casson, is no stranger to the business. He's been producing production customs for a while, now, and if you've happened to notice that the Bobber 357 bears more than a passing resemblance to the BMC Hooligan we've reviewed favorably in these pages in the past, it's no coincidence. Jeremy designed and built that bike as well, under a sub-contracting arrangement with BMC, and brought over the basic-black minimalism and some of the more distinctive style points to the Bobber 357. He's got a hand in on the build of every one of the Proper Chopper bikes delivered—which is a daunting task since the Bobber 357 model alone is being produced at the rate of 20 a month and falling behind demand. And there's a good reason it's falling behind and will continue to fall further behind until Proper Chopper ratchets their program up a notch or two, and that's because they've got a winner on their hands with this model. The price is right, the styling's irresistible, and there's a sizeable niche of prospective customers in the current custom market looking for something basic, tough, fast and rideable. ♦

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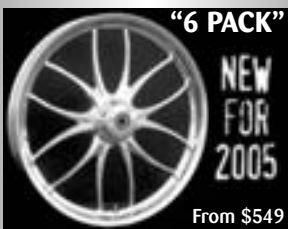
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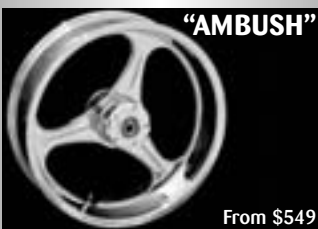
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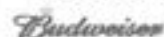
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