

HONDA VALKYRIE RUNE

New from Honda for 2003...and 2004

2003 CBR600RR



CBR600RR—To be sold alongside the current CBR600F4i will be this hard-core racer-variation. Said to incorporate a number of technologies bred in the V-5, RC211V Moto-GP bike that has so far dominated the 2002 World Championships in the hands of Valentino Rossi, the new RR will use the same bore and stroke, but rev to 15,000 rpm (redline is 14,200 on the F4i), courtesy of dual valve springs on both the intake and exhaust. The engine has been shorted by 30mm to move the rider forward for more weight on the front wheel. Dual Stage Fuel Injection (DSFI), which features two injectors per cylinder, each at different heights into 40mm throttle bodies (the F4i uses 38mm units) is also new. The lower sprayer enhances rideability, and the upper one engages at high-rpm to boost top-end performance. In addition, the airbox volume has been increased to 15 liters, and even the starter motor's gears have

been moved to the right hand side for increased lean angle when cornering at the limit.

The sharply chiseled bodywork is an obvious change, as is the GP-style stamped aluminum swingarm and lower clip-on handlebars. The headlights are a new "Line Beam" type with three piece reflectors (a world first, according to Honda). At the rear, an underseat four-into-one muffler looks similar to the one fitted to the new Ducati 999.

The chassis itself is produced with a new casting process to provide optimum rigidity with reduced weight.

The suspension is also different. The RR uses larger 45mm forks (vs. 43mm on the F4i) and the rear suspension uses a Unit Pro-Link arrangement that is patterned after the RC11V GP bike. Unique in that the upper shock mount is contained within the swingarm, rather than the frame, its claimed advantage is that it "eliminates negative suspension energy from being transmitted to the frame." New brakes are also fitted, with larger 310mm front rotors (vs. 296mm units on the F4i). Wheel and tire sizes remain the same.

No hp-increase or weight reduction is claimed, and prices have not been announced, but Honda obviously wants the 600cc title back for 2003!

2003 CBR600F4i



2003 NPS50 Ruckus



Above: The Ruckus is a 50cc lightweight made for campers and such. With chubby 120/90-10 and 130/90-10 tires, electric starting and a weight of just 181 lbs. dry, it should fill the bill for a portable runabout. Powered by a water-cooled, four-stroke single, it puts its power through an automatic transmission. Priced at \$1899.

2003 VTX1300C

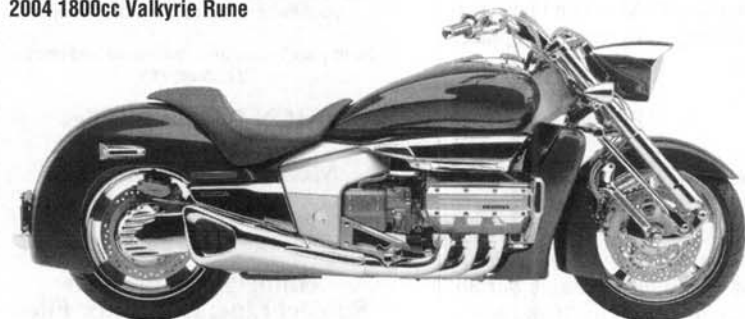


Above: VTX1300C—Based on the Custom version of its bigger brother the VTX1800C, again, you'll have a hard time telling them apart.

Below: Left—The Valkyrie Rune, coming next year, is a near-perfect copy of the most popular Valkyrie Custom from last year's bike shows!

Below Right: The CRF250R & X will contest the 125cc motocross wars.

2004 1800cc Valkyrie Rune



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2004 Honda Valkyrie Rune—an 1800 six!



2003

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The rumors that Honda would replace its CBR600F4i sportbike in 2003 did not come true. Instead, Honda launched a radical new CBR600RR rocketship that will be offered *in addition* to the popular CBR600F4i. Inspired by the RC211V five-cylinder bike currently dominating the MotoGP series, the CBR600RR features an all-new liquid-cooled, 599cc in-line four with a 15,000-rpm redline, Dual Staged fuel injection with two injectors per cylinder and a center-up exhaust system under the seat. The unit Pro-Link rear suspension and swingarm share the RC211V's design, and a centrally located fuel tank keeps the frame compact and centralizes mass. The CBR600RR's Line Beam headlight uses a unique three-piece reflector design that Honda says is the first in the world. The addition of this new Honda, a revised Yamaha R6 and two new Kawasakis to the 600 class mean it will really heat up in 2003.

We've already covered



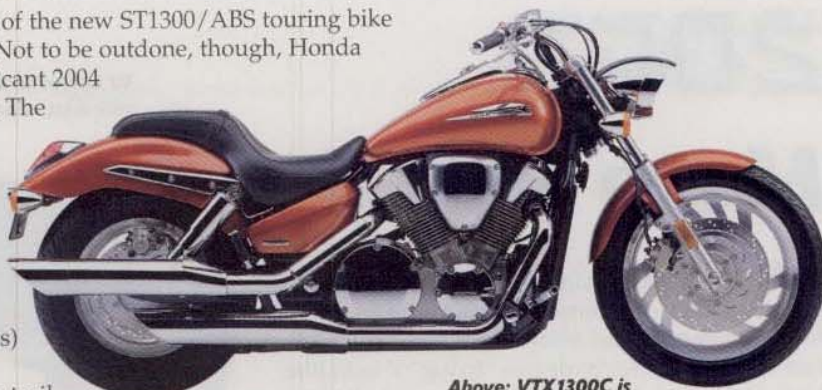
Above: Honda's fast, competent and good-looking CBR600F4i returns for 2003 along with the super-serious CBR600RR (left).

Below: Make way for the Valkyrie Rune, a 2004 model to be released in late 2003.

Based upon the GL1800 flat six, it stretches 69 inches between axles.

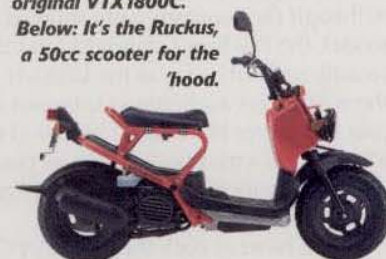


Honda's other big 2003 news in road tests of the new ST1300/ABS touring bike and VTX1300S cruiser in previous issues. Not to be outdone, though, Honda caused quite a stir by revealing two significant 2004 models at its September 2002 dealer show. The real wowzer is the 2004 Valkyrie Rune, a wild custom with a 69-inch wheelbase based upon the GL1800 flat six. In addition to its rad styling, the Rune (any of the oh-so-mysterious alphabetic characters sometimes believed to have magic powers used by ancient Germans and Scandinavians like those hairy Viking guys) has a diamond-shaped aluminum-alloy frame, RC211V-inspired rear suspension, a trailing link in front and the largest disc brakes ever fitted to a Honda motorcycle. If



Above: VTX1300C is smaller version of original VTX1800C.

Below: It's the Ruckus, a 50cc scooter for the 'hood.

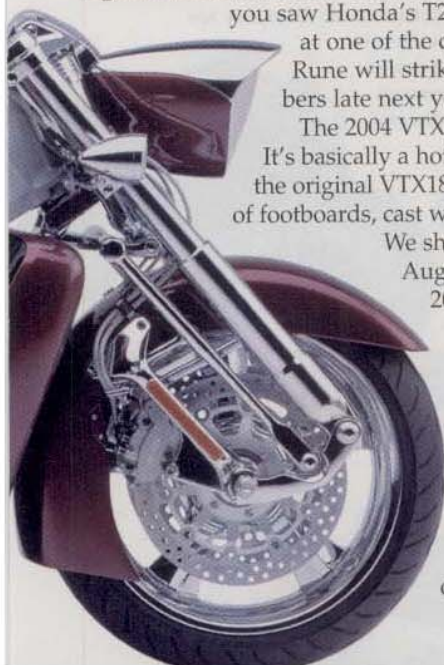


you saw Honda's T2 concept bike in the May 2001 issue of *Rider* or at one of the consumer motorcycle shows in 2001/2002 the Rune will strike a familiar chord. Look for it in limited numbers late next year.

The 2004 VTX1300C is slated to debut in early summer 2003. It's basically a hot-rod-styled version of the VTX1300S similar to the original VTX1800C, with shorter dual exhaust, footpegs instead of footboards, cast wheels and more abbreviated fenders.

We showed you the rest of Honda's 2003 lineup in the August 2002 issue with the exception of the new 2003 NPS50 Ruckus, a 50cc scooter with fat tires and a rugged design that reminds of us of the lawn-mower-engined machines we built in our youth. The Ruckus will probably start reliably, though, and you won't have to jump off it when the police come the other way....

CBR600RR ups the ante in the 600 class.



RAD RUNE

First came the Valkyrie, Honda's six-cylinder stab at super-cruiser Valhalla. Now we have the Rune, a street-going spin-off of the Valkyrie-based T2 concept bike ("Custom Fever," May, 2001). Named for an early Anglo-Saxon word meaning "mystery" or "secret," the Rune differs from the "tribal tail-dragger" T2 showbike by way of new paint (Candy Black Cherry, Illusion Blue or black) and lack of tattoo-style graphics. The twin-spar aluminum frame, single-sided swingarm, trailing-link fork, massive exhaust and fat radial rubber, however, still feature prominently. Lending production authenticity, turnsignals, reflectors and a license-plate holder are now in place, with taillights cut into the wraparound rear fender. Look for the NRX1800 Rune in dealerships this coming spring as an early release '04 model.

—Matthew Miles



PHOTO BY JAY McNALLY

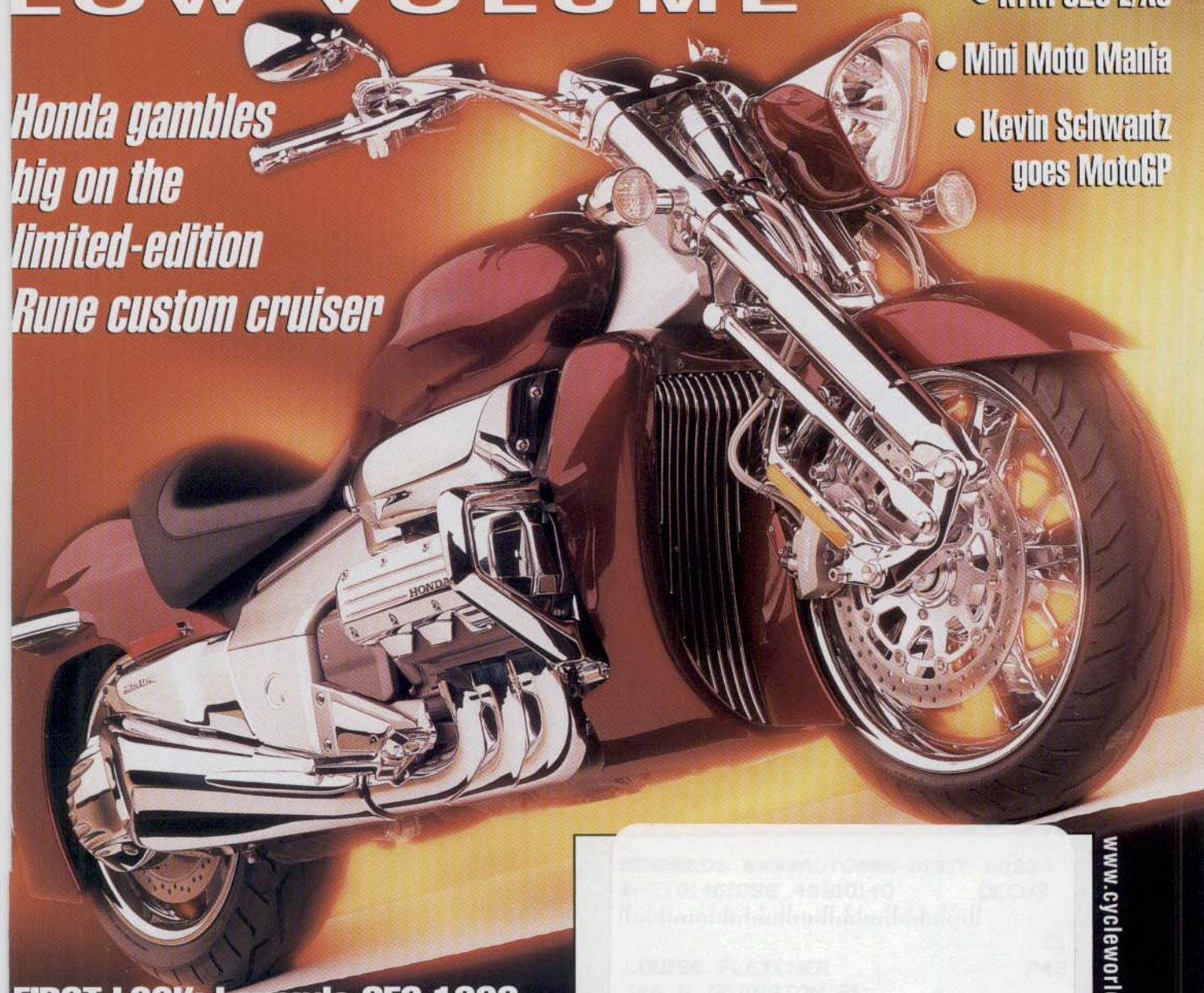
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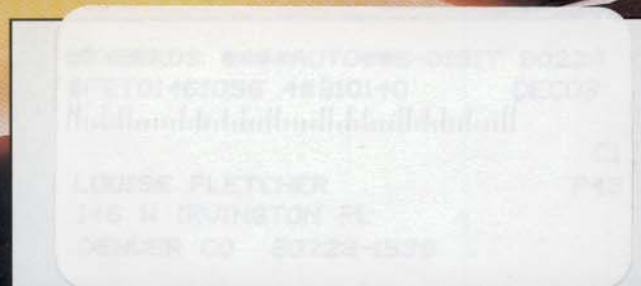
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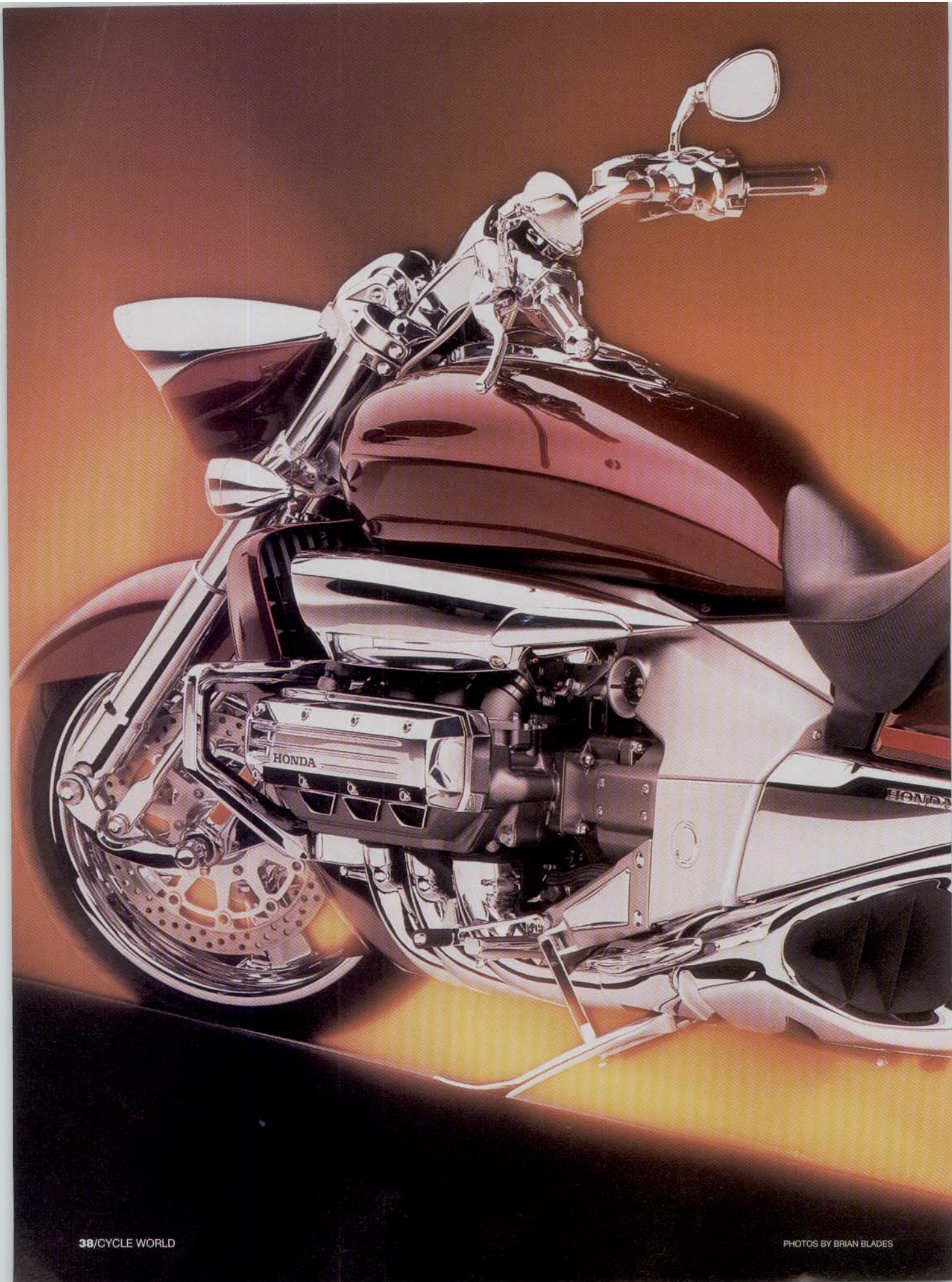
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ELEMENTS OF STYLE

**Different kind of
cruiser, different
kind of Honda**

BY DAVID EDWARDS

ALLOW US, PLEASE, TO introduce the motorcycle industry's newest maker of limited-edition boutique bikes. Little outfit out of Tokyo, Japan, the Honda Motor Company, Ltd. You may have heard of it...

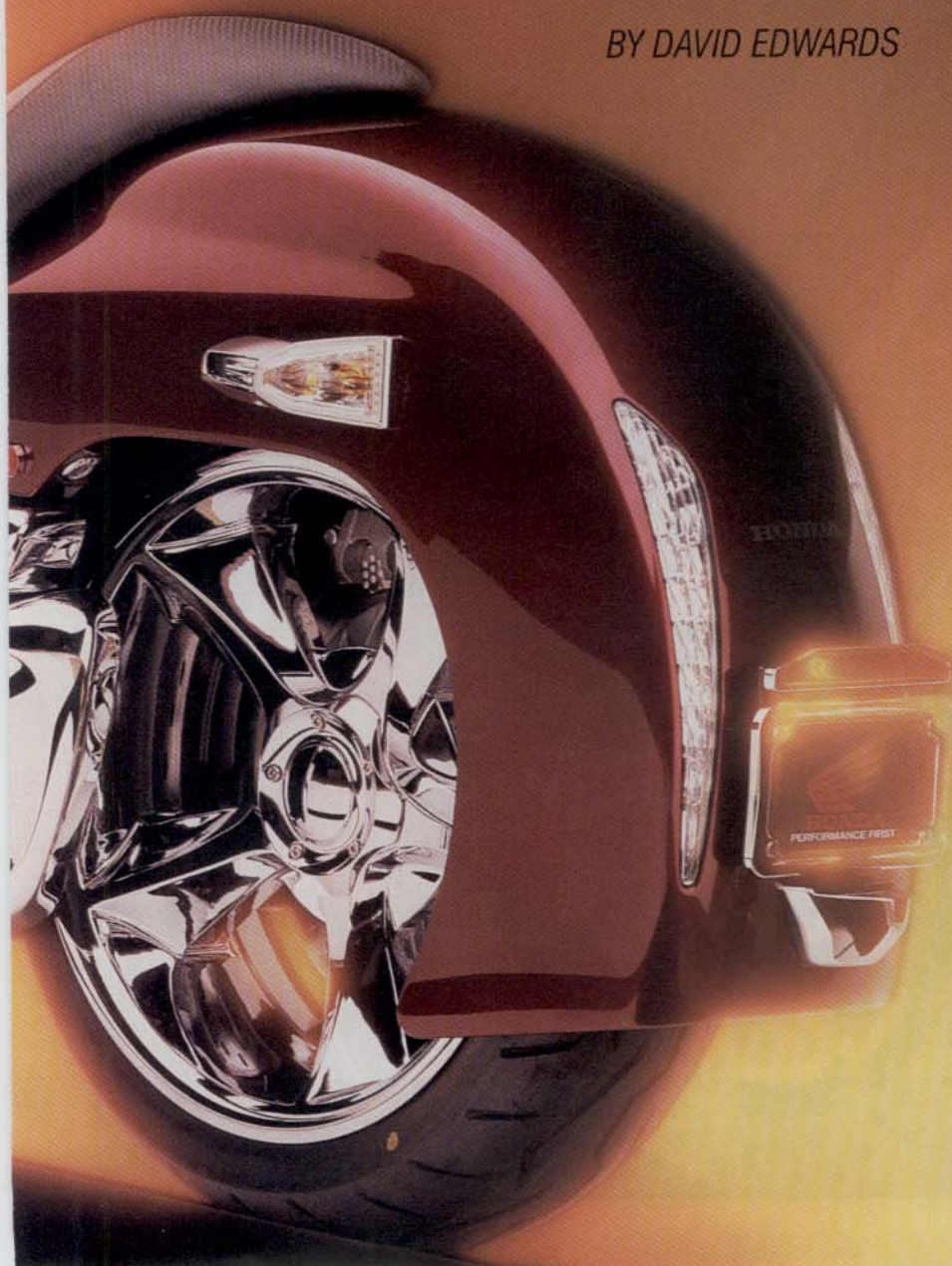
And just how did the world's largest motorcycle monolith, a company that just rolled out its 35 millionth Cub 50 step-through, come to be selling a hoity-toity, low-run, large-bucks designer item like the NRX1800 Valkyrie Rune?

It's a strange story.

Designers are a cranky lot. You would be too if most of your work never saw the light of day. By the time a concept machine has been vetted by management, marketing, manufacturing, engineering, accounting and the long-faces in liability, the end-result often is all but unrecognizable to the people who thought it up.

"You put a lot of things out there," says Martin Manchester, head of HRA, American Honda's design wing. "You're lucky if one-third make it to production."

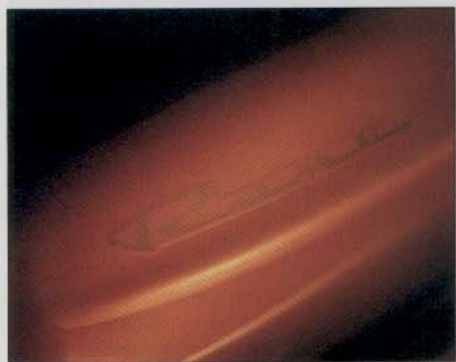
Tony Schroeder, senior designer, nods in agreement. "Concept bikes do not go into production," he says. "Bits and pieces, yes, maybe some of the styling, some of the technical features, but they're mostly blue-sky stuff."







"Instead of giving customers the usual classic V-Twin, we tried to create something they didn't know they wanted," says Honda design chief Martin Manchester. That process resulted in the "T-bikes," full-size mockups. Originally all-yellow, T2 and T3 were treated to new paint for the 2001 show circuit and magazine photo shoots. "The response was overwhelming," says HRA's Tony Schroeder, especially for T2, which with few changes became the production Rune. Colors will be Candy Black Cherry, Double Clearcoat Black or Illusion Blue. T4, by famed Cobra car guy Mike McCluskey, was pure eye-candy, not buildable.



With the Rune, however, blue sky has reached the assembly line. In largely unadulterated form, this is a concept bike you'll be able to buy when it hits Honda

showrooms this spring as an early-release 2004 model.

"A designer's dream," states Manchester. "I can't believe we actually did it."

"The number-crunchers didn't get in the way," explains Schroeder. "We didn't have to sacrifice, to water down, any of the design elements."

Signature item among those design elements is the massive trailing-link fork assembly, an outgrowth of another Honda concept cruiser, the Zodia showbike of 1995. In R&D ever since, the fork as fitted to the Rune runs about 4 inches of wheel travel. Those meaty front tubes are merely sliders. Tie-rods translate suspension action from the lower link to an upper rocker arm attached to twin enclosed shocks—one for springing, one for damping—mounted behind the chrome-peaked headlight. Anti-dive properties could have been part of the package, but the fork is configured to react conventionally under braking. Speaking of which, the front 330mm rotors are the largest ever fitted to a Honda streetbike.

Turns out its front end leads the Rune in more ways than one. American Honda officials first saw the productionized trailing-link setup attached to an early prototype of the VTX1800 power-cruiser.

"It was so cool," says Ray Blank, VP of motorcycles, and the man who is principal in green-lighting any new U.S. project for production. "We loved the look, but it cost too much for the VTX, which had to come in under \$15,000."

About this same time, Honda was in a quandary about its Valkyrie cruiser. Internally, the bike was a favorite because of its trademark 1520cc flat-Six motor, borrowed from the previous-generation touring Gold Wing. But the model seemingly had reached its sales saturation point. The Interstate version, with fairing and hard luggage, would soon be dropped. Ditto the Tourer bagger. Things did not look particularly good for the remaining base version, either.

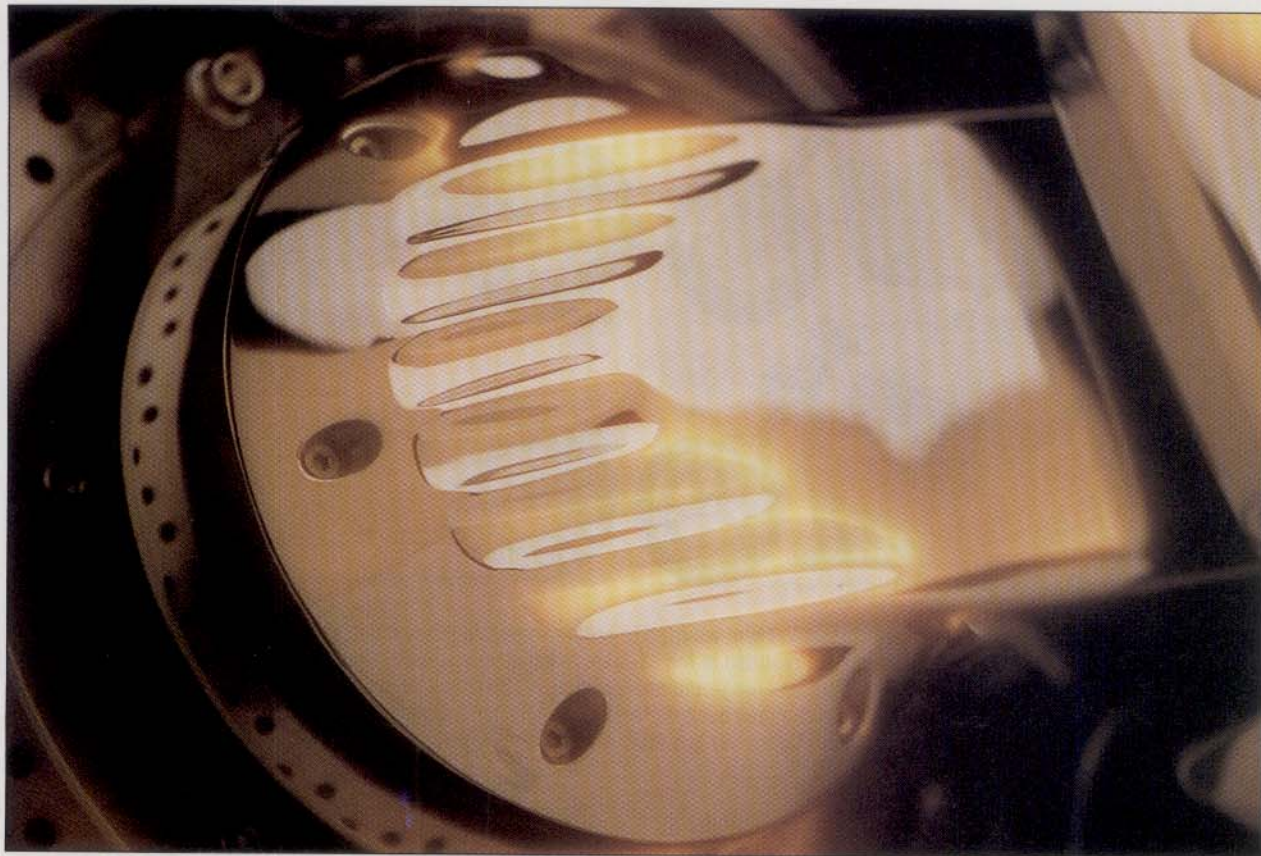
"The Valkyrie never became mainstream," says Blank. "But it had a strong following. As soon as the rumor hit that the bike was in trouble, we started getting tons of e-mail—*Please, do not let the Valkyrie die!*"

He remembered that proto VTX with the link fork. "Could it work on a new Valkyrie 1800?" asked Blank. "Can we do something really special?"

Of course, said the designers at HRA, already at work on various concepts and sketches for a second-act Valky.

Enter the T1, T2 and T3 design mockups, rolled out for public consumption at the Long Beach motorcycle show in December of 2000, all sprayed a bright lemon yellow so that paint schemes weren't an influence on opinions about the bikes. Clipboards in hand, researchers mingled among the crowd, taking notes. Live-wire cruiser-types were invited to participate in later focus-group sessions.

ELEMENTS OF STYLE



These took place in the HRA compound, a lock-down facility on the American Honda campus in Torrance, California. Confidentiality agreements signed, participants were ushered into a room where moderators led the free-wheeling, sometimes argumentative discussions. Behind mirrored glass, a video camera and

more note-takers. "It can get emotional," says Manchester. "You want to know what they like and how much—you're measuring the 'love'."

What soon became clear was that one of the bikes, T2, was generating more love than the others. This was pleasing to Manchester and Schroeder. While T1 and T3 had been overseen by HRA, the actual building was farmed out. T2 had been conceived, clay-modeled and constructed in-house. It had an aluminum frame, single-sided shaft-drive swingarm (running a Unit Pro-Link shock, just like Rossi's RC211V!)

and the new GL1800 engine, hot-rodded to produce more than 100 rear-wheel horsepower and 100-plus foot-pounds of torque. T2 also had Blank's leading-link fork.

Asked to explain the bike's appeal, Schroeder credits what he calls its "Neo-Retro" feel, as in new technology, new design but with style overtones that borrow paradoxically from the streamlined art-deco movement *and* American hot-rod cars of the 1950s. The latter is evident in the chromed valve covers jutting out for all to see; in the multi-bar radiator grille, looking very '32 Ford; in the overdone, almost cartoonish Lakes-style exhaust pipes; in the Halibrand-lookalike wheels, the rear complete with a faux knockoff spinner—though Honda's liability nannies, apparently quaking at the thought of Ben Hur-inspired lawsuits, axed the spinner for production.

"It's like a slammed '51 Mercury," enthuses Schroeder. "Very American."

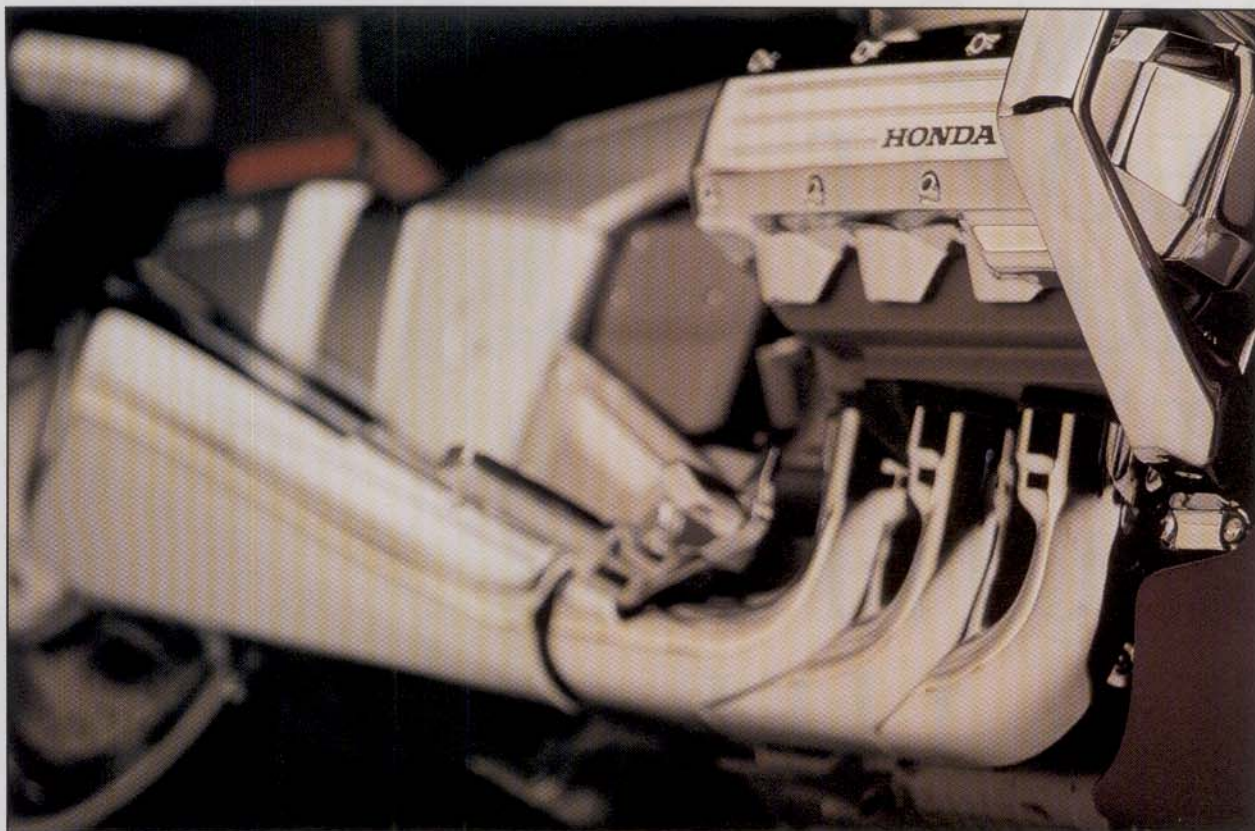
"Of course, the T2 was our favorite, the one we wanted to win, the way we wanted to go," admits Manchester, but it was the focus groups' strong reactions that led to some wild thinking at HRA and eventually to the Rune being built with the concept design almost intact.

"They were *very* emotional, *very* passionate about the bike," recalls Schroeder. "And they were adamant: We want *all* of this."

Blank picked up on the enthusiasm for keeping the Rune whole, and liked the idea, but could it be done? Would the big bosses in Japan sign off on something this grandiose? Honda is, after all, an engineering company, a racing com-

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down still holds meaning in Japan. Plus, it would have to be expensive, maybe as much as \$30,000.

"It was a tough sell," Blank says. "It went all the way to the top. This is not the kind of thing Honda does. There's an element of bravado here that's hard for the Japanese to get their minds around. Honda is a cost-conscious, consumer-driven company. The Rune is an extravagant motorcycle."

After hours lobbying ensued, much time sitting shoeless under low tables. "Long dinners is where this stuff gets done," says Blank wryly.

In the end it was his argument that the Rune would be "the most special production custom any company has ever built" that won the day.

"Everybody knows we can do it with sportbikes," he argued, noting the NR750 oval-piston and the RC45. "But we need to express how much passion we have for this kind

pany, but here was a two-wheeled peacock of the highest magnitude, uncomfortably ostentatious. The old proverb about the nail that sticks out getting pounded

of motorcycle. We should do this because we can, not in a bragging kind of way, but just to show what Honda is capable of."

He was so persuasive, in fact, that Japan set up a special committee just for the Rune, where hours were spent discussing different types of metal finish, the deepness of chrome, how various lines and radii interacted with each other. All very Zen. "It was draw and erase, draw and erase, draw and erase....," relates Blank.

Nobody at Honda is talking price or production numbers. Between \$20,000 and \$30,000 was as close as we could determine, and one Rune per dealership would put the U.S. allotment at 1200 bikes, but a big, fat "No comment" was all we got in response to that suggestion.

"We won't make many—we don't want to, and besides, we can't," says Blank. "We have no mass-production capabilities for this bike."

"Our goal is to make a few people very happy," says Schroeder.

"Not everyone will understand this bike, but the ones who do, the ones who buy it, will be out in the garage every day waxing the thing," adds Manchester.

A local, long-time dealer thinks demand will far outstrip supply, telling us, "At first, I thought, no way, this is too weird, too much money. But I've sold three sight-unseen, with no guarantee that I'll get that many and no idea what the final price will be. I'm now in the position of turning down \$500 deposits."

What a concept...

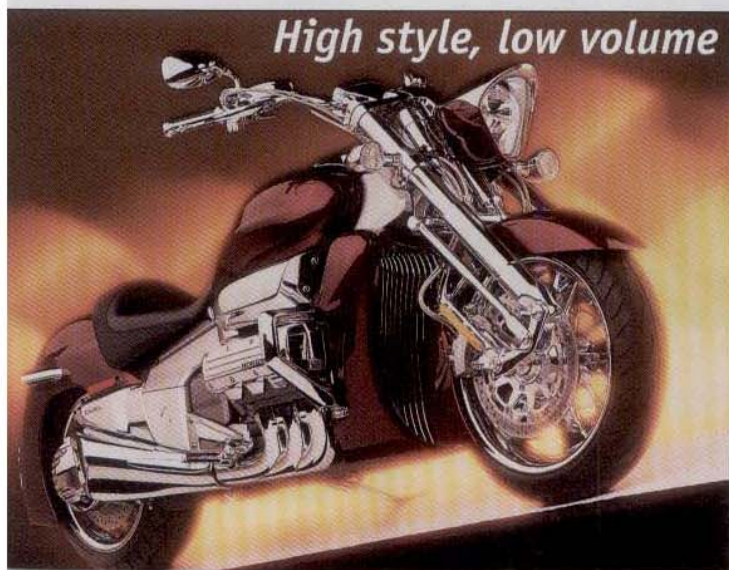


ELEMENTS OF STYLE

Honda Valkyrie Rune

SAY HELLO TO A DIFFERENT KIND OF CRUISER AND DEFINITELY a different kind of Honda. The new NRX1800 Valkyrie Rune is a "boutique bike" from the world's largest mass producer of motorcycles, a big-bucks, limited-edition machine scheduled to hit showrooms later this spring.

High style, low volume



The Rune broke cover late in 2000 as a concept mockup meant to gauge public reaction, but it was not intended to be built. Says Tony Schroeder, senior designer for American Honda, "Concept bikes do not go into production. Bits and pieces, yes, maybe some of the styling, some of the technical features, but they're mostly blue-sky stuff."

Lately, though, blue sky has a way of making it to assembly line, especially in the auto world. The Plymouth Prowler, VW's New Beetle and the Audi TT all were concept cars swept into production in largely unadulterated form by tidal waves of favorable public opinion. So, too, the Rune. On the show circuit and in focus-group sessions, passion for the bike was unbridled, but the "Runies" were adamant: "We want *all* of this."

Asked to explain the bike's appeal, Schroeder credits what he calls its "Neo-Retro" feel—as in new technology but with style overtones that borrow from the streamlined art-deco movement and American hot-rod cars of the 1950s. The latter is evident in the chromed valve covers, the tubular radiator grille, the side pipes and the mag wheels.

"It's like a slammed '51 Mercury," enthuses Schroeder. "Very American."

But very Honda high-tech, too, with a breathed-on, 1800cc Gold Wing flat-Six motor producing some very *un-cruiser-*

like numbers—more than 100 horsepower and 100 foot-pounds of torque at the rear wheel. Wrapped around that powerhouse is an aluminum frame mated to a single-sided swingarm, also alloy, that contains the driveshaft and works through a Unit Pro-Link shock, just like on Honda's MotoGP roadracers.


Signature item, though, is the massive, trailing-link fork assembly. How's it work? The axle attaches to the rear of the lower links, which pivot on the bottom of the long fork tubes. Tie-rods between axle and pivot then translate suspension action from the links to an upper rocker arm attached to twin enclosed shocks—one for springing, one for damping—mounted behind the elaborate, chromed headlight.

Amazingly, all of those components and most of the concept Rune's styling will make it into production. "The number-crunchers didn't get in the way," explains Schroeder. "We didn't have to sacrifice or water down any of the design elements."

Nobody at Honda is talking price or build quantities. Somewhere between \$20,000 and \$30,000 was as close as we could determine, and one Rune per dealership would put the U.S. allotment at 1200 bikes. But in response to that suggestion, all we got from Honda representatives was a big, fat "No comment."

"Our goal is to make a few people very happy," is all that Schroeder would say.



If you want to count yourself among those fortunate few, an immediate trip to your local Honda shop, deposit check at the ready, is highly recommended. 

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THE RAVE THAT IS THE **Rune**

Honda's extreme new cruiser
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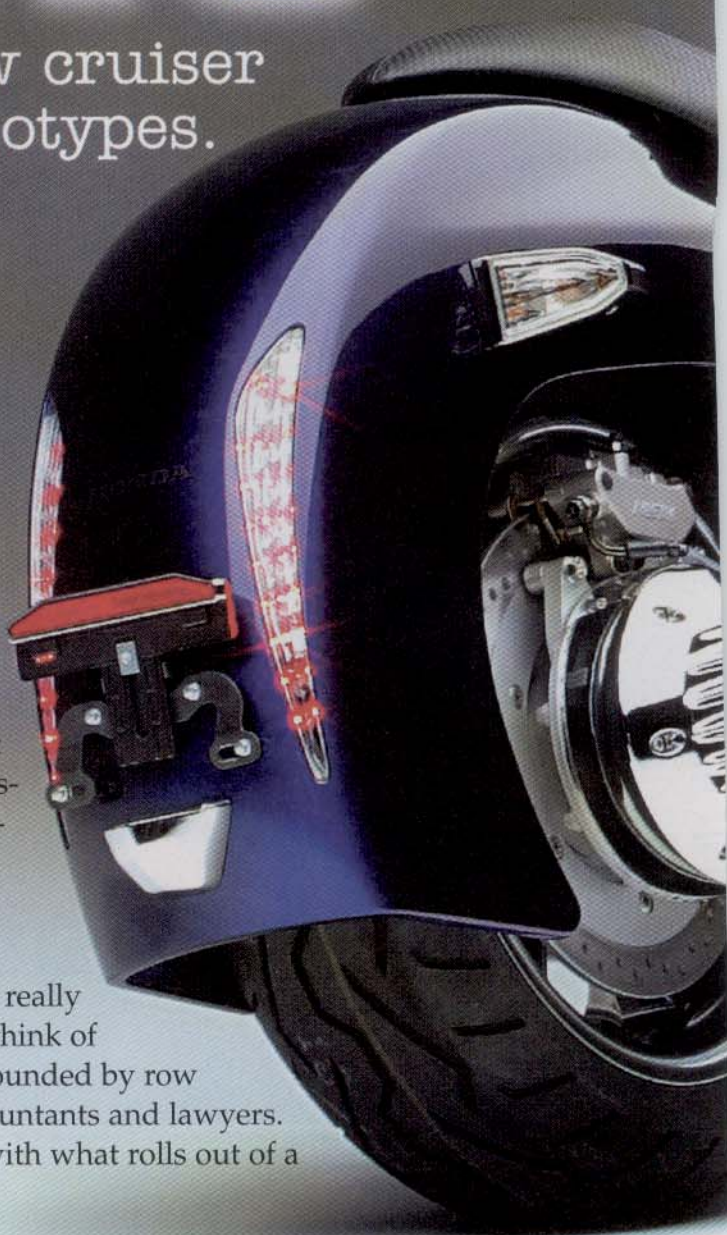
by Bill Heald

photography by Kevin Wing

The styling of a custom

motorcycle can really elicit a strong emotional response from people. Like you, I've seen grown, erudite Chamber-of-Commerce types ogle a tank that is seductively shaped, and get all glassy-eyed over a brilliantly curved exhaust pipe. I've even observed a popular Baptist minister drool over a well-detailed engine in a motorcycle, and comment on how it seemed to exude power even when it was parked.

But when it comes to the actual designers and builders of mass-market motorcycles, you never really conjure up an image of such deep passion. You think of company IDs, white coats and Palm Pilots, surrounded by row after row of computer terminals and lots of accountants and lawyers. The motorcycles they build are dull compared with what rolls out of a lot of private garages.





In the case of Honda, the company has a reputation for building some of the most reliable, innovative and best-performing machines in the world. But as great as they are technically, The Ride Red crowd is often accused of being too tame, too conservative and too "corporate" in their styling choices.

The 2004 Valkyrie Rune thumbs its massive chrome nose at such a notion. This is a motorcycle that is so far off the page of conventional production motorcycle design that it's hard to believe that *any* big company would build it, much less a practical one like Honda. But they are cobbling this rolling example of "performance art" together as we speak. Not only that, they're doing it deep in the heart of Marysville, Ohio, right alongside the Gold Wings, VTXs and Shadows we all know so well.

How did this happen? Has Honda lost its precise and well-polished bearings?

"A lot of folks have been asking why we're putting the Rune into production, and I think the short answer is because we can," commented American Honda's Gary Christopher. "We're probably the only company out there that can actually build this bike."

And what is it they're actually building? It's a cruiser best described by the term "yikes." The styling of the Rune is modern, yet retro. Neo-Classic is the term Honda uses. The headlight is enormous, the wheelbase vast, the tank box-only bodacious. There's also technology, in the form of Honda's 1,832cc flat-six riding in a massive alloy frame, tastefully carried by a colossus-in-chrome trailing-link front fork and an ultra-trick rear suspension borrowed from a World Champion GP racebike. I know, it looks and sounds like a concept bike you might see rotating slowly on a pedestal, and that's where the story gets really interesting. A concept come to life is pretty much exactly what the Rune turned out to be, much to the surprise (and delight) of those both inside and outside of the company.

Martin Manchester has the enviable title of Executive Designer at Honda R&D Americas Inc. You've seen his name on these pages before—in the past he's graciously let us in on the design process that takes place deep within the hallowed halls of Honda. He told us the Rune looks like a concept bike because, for really the first time, a production bike has been created that is almost a carbon copy of the design exercise from which it was derived (called the T2, by the way—see sidebar). This, to say the least, is an unprecedented occurrence.

As with all motorcycles, the heart and soul of the Rune is its engine. You might think that this machine could have been a V-twin, for after all, this is a signature mill for the whole cruiser genre (and Honda has the mighty 1,800cc VTX motor available in-house). But like the Valkyrie, the Rune is designed to be in a class by itself and needs something very special at the center of its chassis.

"The flat-six engine is very unique and exclusive to Honda, and it's really a showcase of our technology," explains Tony Schroeder, senior designer at Honda R&D Americas. "We wanted to continue using this engine as part of our technology theme, but create something fresh and new that made it very different from the standard Valkyrie."

"We've got a lot of projects going on and we've been heavily involved with the development of the VTX," Manchester added. "But in this particular case, we were looking for a future direction with the flat-six concept. There's a strong following for the Valkyrie out there with some very loyal and enthusiastic customers."

Speaking of this engine, when you see it you can't help but also think of the GL1800 Gold Wing to which it is closely related. And when looking at the Rune you might make the mistake (as I did) of thinking that its massive alloy frame is taken from this mighty tour machine as well. It isn't.

"There was really no looking at the Gold Wing for design inspiration," confirmed Schroeder. "The alloy frame was done because it's a technology that you

How did this happen? Has Honda lost its precise and well- polished bearings?



Top and above: Rune's trailing bottom-link front suspension transfers loads through pushrods and linkage to two upper shocks—one housing the main spring and one a sub-spring and damping system. Linked, triple disc brakes are the largest ever fitted on a production Honda. Remote steering lock is actuated by a lever with key in off position; it unlocks automatically when ignition is turned on.



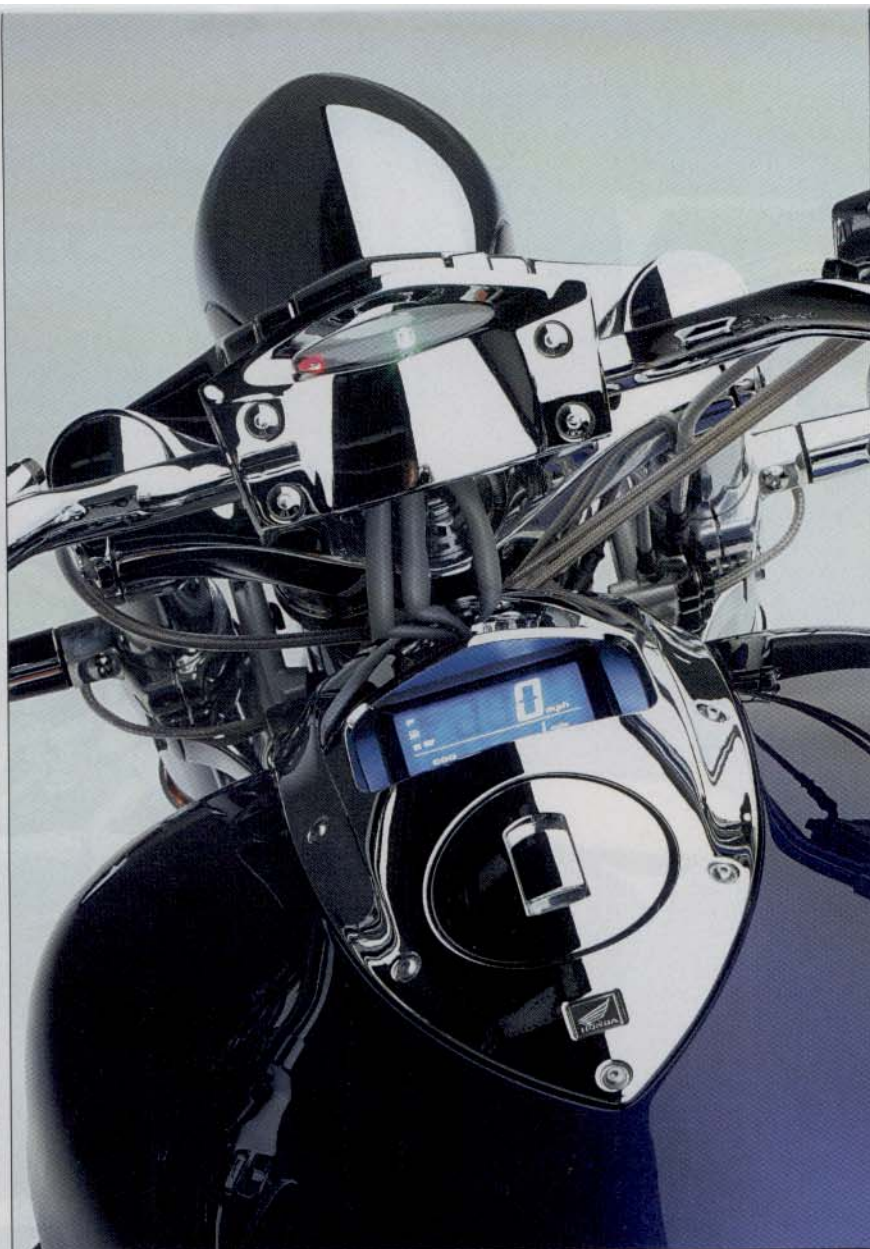
Above: LED taillights are flush-mounted in rear fender for a Neo-Classic look. **Left:** Rune rider goes it alone on the low gunfighter-style seat, the better to paddle the bike's 770-pound claimed dry weight and 68.9-inch wheelbase (the longest in Honda's lineup) around.

Right: Those stainless-steel-mesh throttle cables and brake hose are a first for Honda on a production bike. Digital tank-mounted instruments are recessed and have a non-glare digital readout.



Top and above: Who needs fishtails? Six-into-two exhaust exits here; don't stand too close. Rear tire is a sportbike-sized 180/55-ZR17.

Below: Yep, that's a liquid-cooled, 1,832cc Gold Wing flat six, hot-rodded with six individual throttle bodies vs. the GL's two manifold units, among other things.



don't see in a cruiser. With the T2 concept and then with the Rune, we wanted to have a lot of hardware you might not expect. Cruisers are fairly traditional, and we wanted to break that mold with the frame, engine, single-sided swingarm, front fork and other components."

"At Honda, our first level of inspiration is internal," Manchester added. "We like to utilize our own technology, and we can choose it from many categories of motorcycles including sportbikes, touring models and others. For the Rune, we borrowed a lot of technical features that were not necessarily required, but selected because we thought they were interesting."

Using new technologies is something that has to be done carefully, because for a bike to still have cruiser identity there has to be tradition in there somewhere. This is where the Neo-Retro/Neo-Classic themes come into play.

"We wanted to use some classic Americana hot-rod influences to inspire design," Schroeder explains. "We didn't want to copy anything, of course, but we wanted to do a new twist on some old designs, and bring them into this motorcycle. We wanted to give it some of that retro look, but update the styling and include some of the technology we have."

Influences included a lot of classic-car design cues, in everything from the chrome wheels and low-cut fenders (like an old Mercury) to the headlight and the radiator. That last piece of hardware is always a pain to deal with on a stylish motorcycle.

"It's really hard to design a nice-looking radiator," laughs Schroeder. "So if



there's a way to cover it and include it as a styling aspect of the motorcycle, we'd do it. And we did."

If you haven't figured this out already, when the rubber hit the road (and the pencils hit the pads in the accounting department), the Rune's designers were given a much larger target price from Honda, which helped free them up creatively. But that doesn't mean you can just create a dream concept and roll it out, slap on a license plate and go. There are certain constraints when you move from a design exercise to a production bike, and things like rational ergonomics have to be considered. But here's where one of the most interesting facts about the Rune appears—they really didn't have to mess with the T2 concept

much at all to create a workable motorcycle in the Honda tradition.

"Ultimately you have to have a motorcycle you can ride," observes Schroeder. "With the T2 concept bike—which ultimately became the Rune—it really wasn't designed for production when we did it. We're designers and we like to cheat, so the seat was a little bit low for production, the handlebars were a little too far way. But part of the magic that happened as





Honda is calling the Rune a limited-production bike, though it hasn't defined what that means just yet. We're guessing one per U.S. dealer, or about 1,200. Price will probably be between \$25,000 and \$30,000.

we went from T2 to the Rune was that we were able to keep almost everything in the concept and bring that image to production intact. Visually the Rune looks almost identical to the T2, but we were able to incorporate all the technical aspects that we needed and fixed the things we cheated on quite easily. This was a wonderful surprise, because with concepts you think of bringing bits and pieces to production, never an entire model."

This goes further than just the pure styling aspects, for the higher level of fit and finish in a concept usually can't be transformed into production because of cost. But the Rune's higher price point helps allow a cleaner, more custom look that cruiser lovers crave.

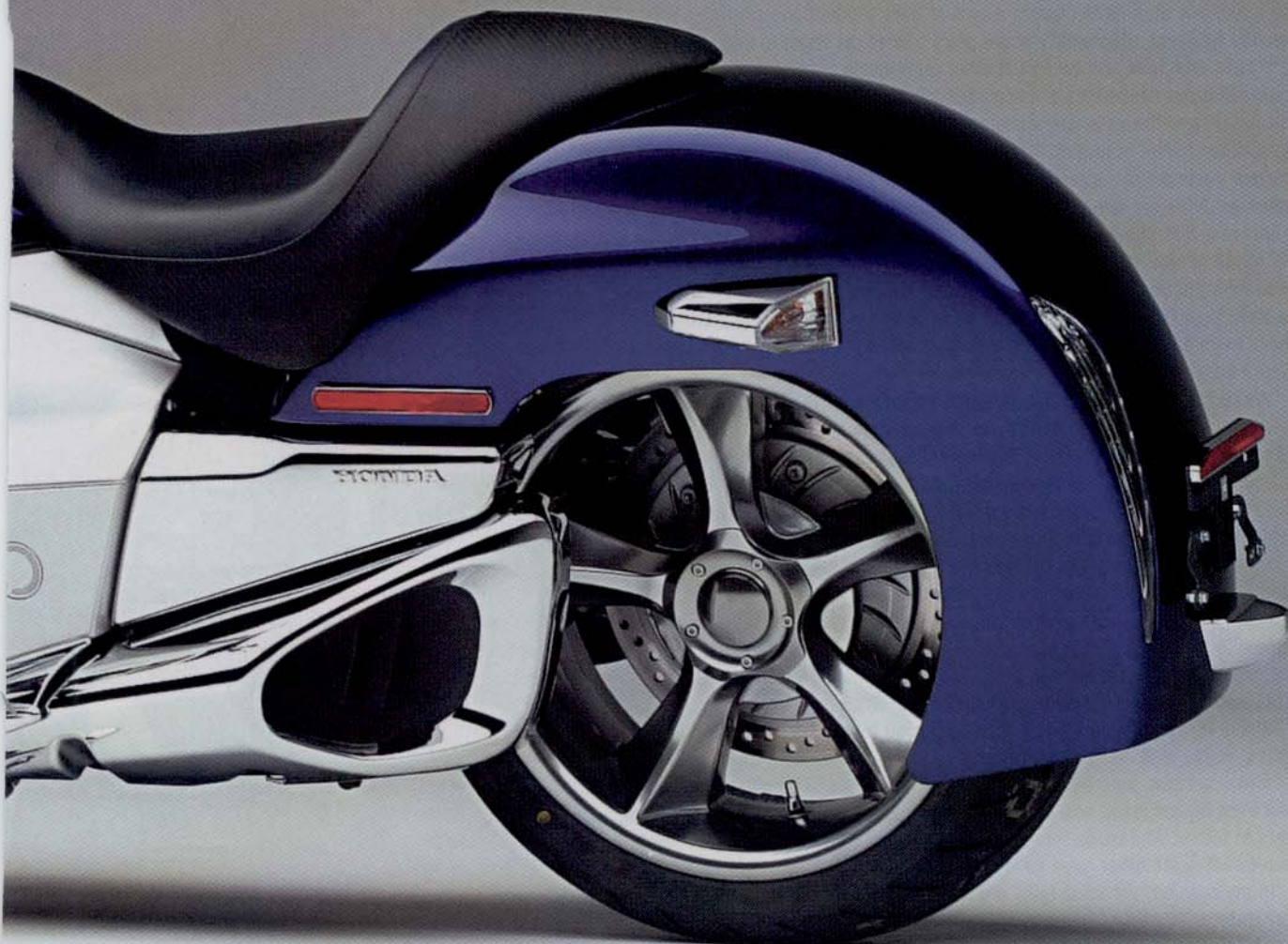
"If you look at the work of custom bike builders, almost all the wires and plumbing are hidden," explained Schroeder. "By doing things like running the wiring inside the handlebars, we were able to accomplish a much cleaner, more elemental look."

All these elements combine to make a very intriguing motorcycle, a limited-production machine that even some folks at Honda are surprised was given the thumbs up from the company's brass. But it will be on sale at selected dealers this summer (at under \$30,000 we're told), and it makes a very bold statement in more ways than one.

"This is a special bike," reflects Schroeder. "The person who owns this motorcycle is going to have an emotional bond to it, and be passionate about it."

Emotion. Passion. These are not the type of things that often get associated with pragmatic Honda. But any company that puts such an extreme concept out there and then has not only the will but the technical expertise, infrastructure and confidence to build it, is not just any company. Conventional people do not build such unconventional motorcycles, and these folks are downright passionate about the

Rune and what it means for the Honda nameplate. 28



Building a Dream Bike

The American Rune.

Part of the mystique around the Rune has to do with the fact that even though it's a custom machine that looks hand-built, it is actually a true production piece that comes to life on an assembly line just like an "ordinary" street bike. Sounds simple, right? Just build the bike like any other motorcycle, only it has to look like it just rolled out of a designer's studio. This is a challenging prospect to say the least.

Enter Honda's Marysville Motorcycle Plant (MMP) in Marysville, Ohio. Since 1979, this facility has been a major contributor to Honda's reputation for outstanding fit, finish and build quality. As Honda's big bike plant (and the long-time home of the Gold Wing), the responsibility of making the Rune a showroom reality is theirs exclusively. It's a big project, but one the plant is more than ready to tackle. And as you can imagine, building any new bike takes a lot of planning, innovation and design cooperation.

"Once a new model is decided on for production, Honda R&D has to make parts drawings that will keep the styling of the bike intact but also be functional and manufacturable," explains Tom Briggs, staff engineer in the New Model Group at MMP. "Then as the first running prototypes are going together, the factory gets involved. In the case of MMP, we go to Japan with our team and help assemble a unit. From here on we are involved in refinement of the final design, based on making it something that can be built at a production level."

In the case of the Rune, MMP came on board in August of 2001. Key reasons why Marysville was chosen include that it makes the 1,800cc engine the Rune will use; it is in the primary market for the bike (the good ol' USA); and it's Honda's premier big-bike facility. Now all MMP had to do was make this incredible custom a part of their production capability. While this is a challenging task, the inherent adaptability of the plant allows the Rune to slide right into the existing program.

"Really, the Rune will be just another motorcycle to us because the design of our assembly area is such that our associates are incredibly flexible," explains Briggs. "Our line is really not very automated, and the associates are so good at what they do we don't really run into changeover issues from model to model. When a final batch of VTxs or GLs is finished (usually a lot of 20), different parts pallets appear and the next model is built without any real downtime. A lot of major sub-assemblies are done off-line, which greatly simplifies the process as well."

This is a wild thing to ponder in this roboticized day and age, but MMP's greatest strength is the skill of the people who build the bikes. In addition to adapting from model to model on the line without breaking stride, complex things like the aluminum frame of the Gold Wing (and now the Rune) are welded by hand. The plant's history of problem solving when confronted with new models means even an elaborate, limited-edition machine that has to look hand-built can be dealt with using a bit of ingenuity.

"We've had to modify the way we do a few things for the Rune," explains Briggs. "The painted surfaces are really large, and I think there may be more chrome just in the front suspension than most cruisers have on the whole bike! There are lots of opportunities to scratch things during assembly, and it's a fact of life you can bump something when using hand tools. So to protect all these surfaces we have all kinds of fitted covers and special plastic material in rolls that almost look like perforated paper towels. The extensive use of these protective covers is now part of the assembly process itself."

Another big aspect of the Rune is the fact that so much wiring and plumbing is hidden, and this again has proved no problem for the MMP folks.

"Piping and wiring was an area where we had the opportunity to work with the designers early on to improve the layout and ease of assembly. The biggest challenge was running wires through the handlebars, but we handle that through a sub-assembly process which solves the routing problems off-line."

Oh, and that massive flangeless tank? No problem.

"We've invested in some new manufacturing technology to do the welding in question, and it's working really well," explains Briggs.

As you can see, building a machine like the Rune will take the facility's fit and finish reputation to an even higher level, and set production quality standards that will be tough for other manufacturers to follow. And while Tom Briggs is very proud of how MMP will handle this project, he had to compliment some other guys as well.

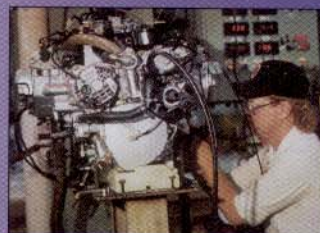
"In my opinion, the R&D folks did a fantastic job of maintaining the concept all the way through to production," he said. "The bike is really close to the concept bike, and that is quite an achievement." *Bill Heald*



Honda Marysville Motorcycle Plant associates hard at work building and assembling GL1800 Gold Wing engines and chassis.



Some of the complex welds on the Wing's aluminum frame are done by skilled hands rather than robots.



Photos were not available at press time, but the Valkyrie Rune will probably involve even more handwork.



Marysville makes the 1,800cc engine that the Rune uses, and the USA is the bike's key market.



Fewer robots and a more flexible assembly line accommodate limited-production machines like the Rune quite well.

HONDA VALKYRIE RUNE

Here's a different kind of cruiser, indeed, a different kind of Honda. Born as a concept bike, the Rune (it means "mystery" or "secret" in ancient Anglo-Saxon) will make it from show circuit to production line largely unadulterated—much like the car world's Plymouth Prowler hot-rod. That's appropriate, because the Rune's styling was inspired by custom cars. There's a chromed radiator grille that harks back to '32 Fords, and side pipes just like the old lakesters used to run. Like what you see? Hurry on down to your Honda dealer after first stopping by the bank. The Rune will be a limited-edition and expensive bike, probably somewhere in the \$25K range.

List price	na
Engine type	sohc opposed-Six
Displacement	1832cc
Carburetion	EFI
Transmission speeds	5
Final drive	shaft
Front brake	dual disc
Rear brake	disc
Wheelbase	68.9 in.
Seat height	27.2 in.
Fuel capacity	6.2 gal.
Claimed dry weight	770 lb.



BUYER'S GUIDE 2003/83

RESPONSE

Valkyrie Rune

I really liked the article *The Rave That is the Rune* in May's issue but can't help but think Honda has fallen short. While the Rune is sexy, unique and expensive, it's not the bike the Valkyrie is. The Valkyrie is a sexy, eye-catching bike perfectly suited as a boulevard cruiser, twisty runner or cross-country tourer. The VTX doesn't match the Valkyrie for ride, comfort or diversity of purpose, nor is the engine as smooth. Personally, I see many of the same design elements in the VTX as I do in the Rune. Honda should look to the initial response to the T1 as stated in Bill Heald's article and again at the wish list of the Valkyrie riders. Bring back the "all things" form and function of the Valkyrie, updated of course, with the 1800 engine and add cruise control at a price everyone can afford.

Then sell the *%#! out of it.

Kevin Warren
Atlanta, Georgia

OK, the Rune is radical, visionary, yadda yadda yadda. That's great, but what's so visionary about a '70s springer fork mounted backward? Yuck.

Keith Palmateer
San Diego, California

The date: March 31. The place: My kitchen. The conversation: My wife (looking at the cover of my newly arrived May issue of *Rider*): "Is that the new Honda?"

Me: "Yeah, I think it's funny looking. It looks like a caricature."

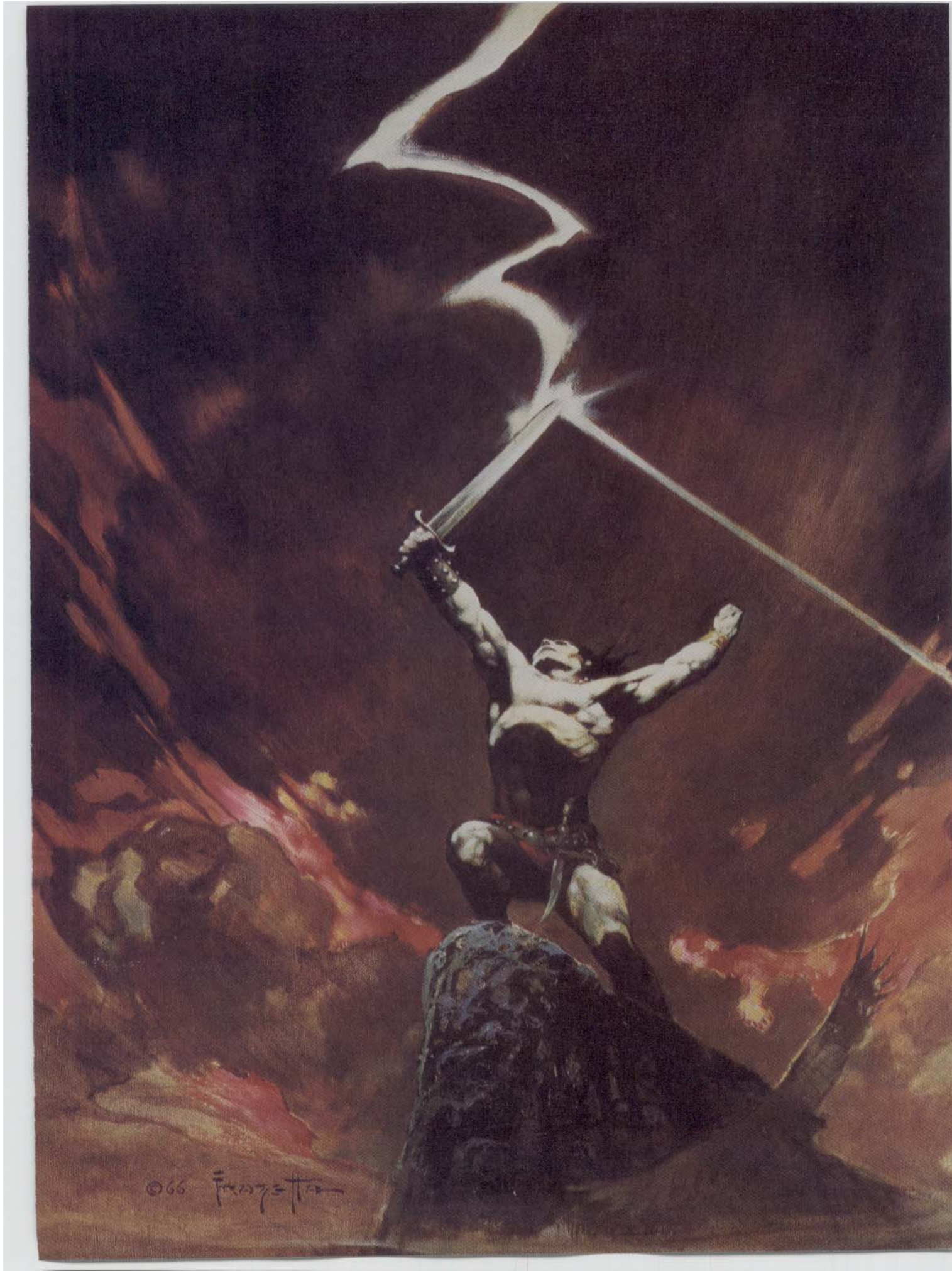
My wife: "I think it's cute. It looks like a McDonald's toy."

I think she summed it up pretty well.

JRC1
St. Paul, Minnesota



PHOTO BY KEVIN WING

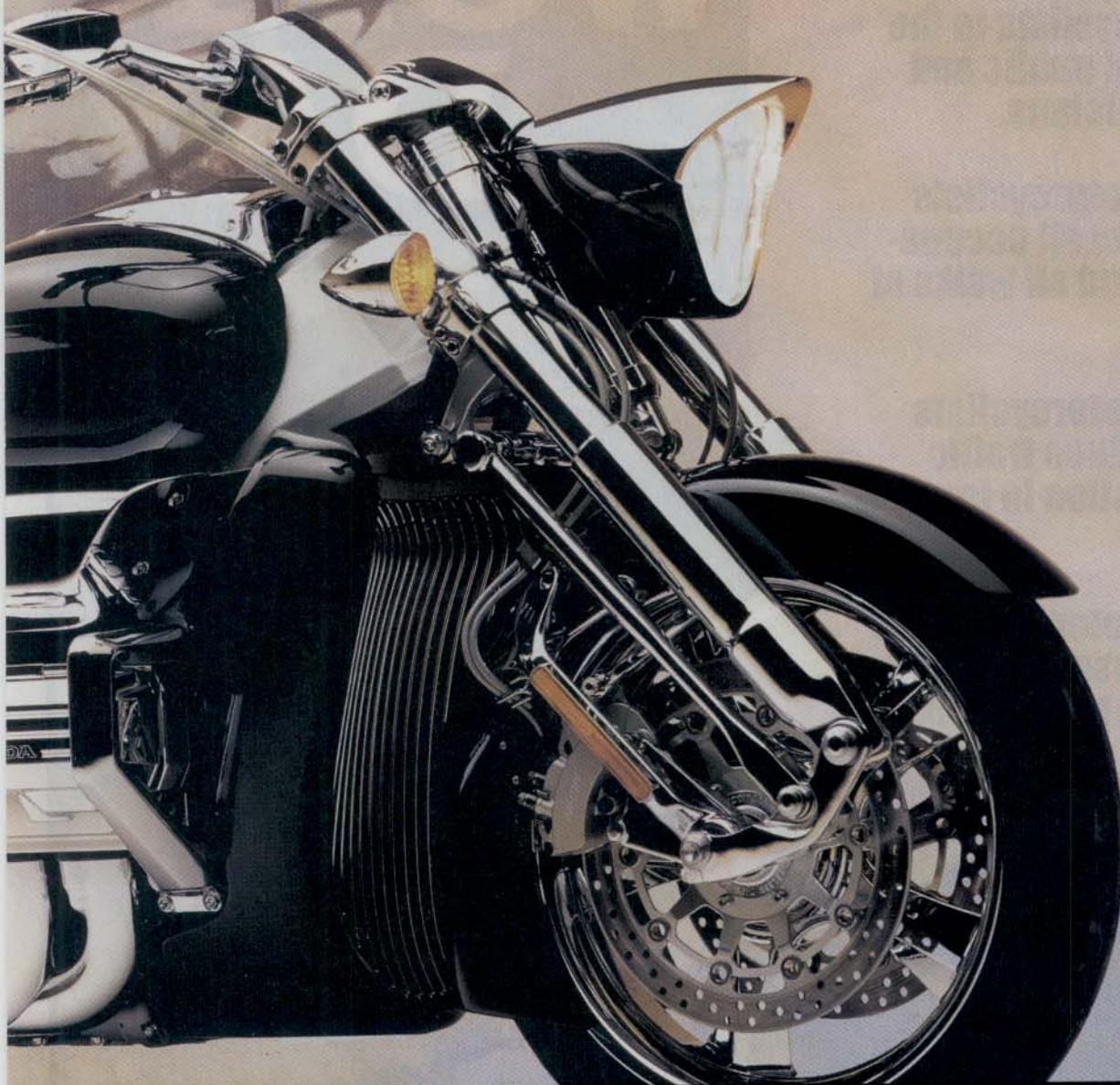




FORGED FROM THE SOUL OF A VALKYRIE.

honda.com ALWAYS WEAR A HELMET, EYE PROTECTION AND PROTECTIVE CLOTHING. NEVER RIDE UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF DRUGS OR ALCOHOL, AND NEVER USE THE STREET AS A RACETRACK. PLEASE READ OUR SAFETY MESSAGE FOUND ELSEWHERE IN THIS MAGAZINE. Obey the law and read your owner's manual thoroughly. Specifications and availability subject to change without notice. California versions may differ slightly due to emissions equipment. Rearview mirrors are standard equipment on all Honda streetbikes. When you buy

Rune



 **HONDA**

a new Rune™ before December 31, 2003, you'll receive a complimentary membership in the Honda Rider's Club of America® entitling you to reimbursement for MSF rider training. See your Honda Dealer for complete program details. For a free brochure, see your Honda Dealer or write: American Honda, P.O. Box 3976, Gardena, CA 90247. Rune™ and Honda Rider's Club of America® are trademarks of Honda Motor Co., Ltd. ©2003 American Honda Motor Co., Inc. (5/03)

WHAT WE WANTED," said Martin Manchester, Honda's Chief of Design, "was to build a bike that was essentially a one-off custom, yet rideable." Then, as a quick afterthought he added, "And serviceable."

Anyone who has seen the Valkyrie Rune in the flesh—or in the chrome, I guess, in this case—would have to agree it meets the first criteria—but is it really rideable? To find out, I wrangled an all-day ride with Honda's press manager, Lee Edmunds, up the Pacific Coast Highway and through the Malibu canyons. I would have liked to take the bike home and really wring it out for a few days, but with only two running models in the country, and several hundred press people begging for rides, Honda was having to be very stingy with the saddle time.

We have, however, been promised a Rune for long enough to do a full evaluation in a few months, when the regular production bikes start rolling out.

Naturally, the first thing you notice when you mount the beast is its size. With a wheelbase of 68.9", the Rune is the longest motorcycle Honda has ever built, and with the long, Zodia-inspired headlight and that enormous trailing link front suspension sitting out in front of you, you almost feel like you're looking out over the bow of a speedboat. The illusion is further enhanced by the extremely low seat (only 27.2"), which places you more "down-in" than "on top" of the bike. But, once you get under way, and learn to tear your eyes away from all that hardware, you'll find that despite its size, the Rune has handling manners on a par with, or better than, almost any large cruiser on the market today. In fact, after only an hour or so of familiarizing myself with the bike, I was throwing it around in the twisty canyon roads with an ease I would not have imagined only that morning. Granted, lean-over clearance is somewhat abbreviated, and I scraped several millimeters of metal off the peg feelers, but hey—that's what they're there for, right? By comparison, I'd say the Rune can lean over farther than a VTX1800, a Fat Boy or a Royal Star, but not quite as far as a Warrior. The whole machine feels very tight, and I never noticed the slightest twitch or wobble, no matter how hard I pressed it through a turn. For this I credit Masanori Aoki, the Rune "LPL," or "Large Project Leader"—the same sportbike genius that gave us the incredible-handling GL1800. Masa-san seems to have a knack for turning impossible dreams into

2004 Honda Valkyrie Rune

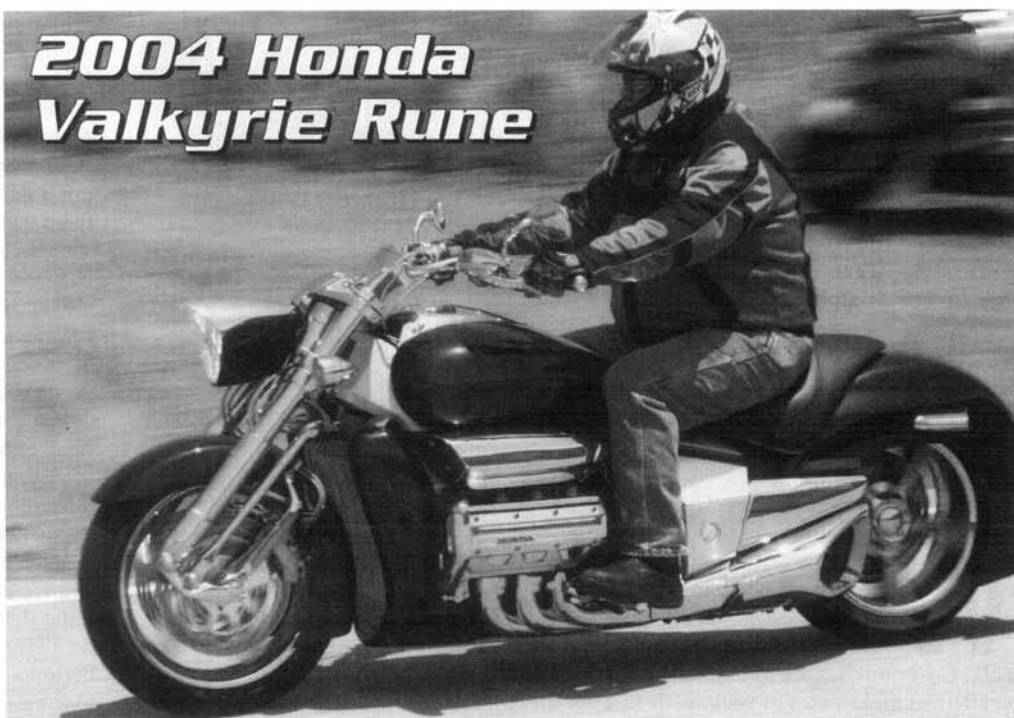


PHOTO BY CHRIS RUBINO

real-life hardware, and he has worked his magic once again with the Rune.

The important thing to remember here is that the Rune was essentially developed backwards from the normal procedure for creating a new motorcycle. First came the design—the T2 concept bike that was paraded around at cycle shows a couple of years ago and unanimously praised by motorcyclists everywhere—then Masa and his engineers were given the task of turning the design into a working motorcycle. But with one caveat that engineers are virtually never given: *You can't mess with the design. You must work within it.*

Masa admits he originally thought the project was impossible. And he wasn't the only one. Design and engineering experts from all over the world, not to mention thousands of talented amateur enthusiasts, all told Honda the same thing: "Great design. Too bad it could never actually be built."

That didn't stop Honda's vice-president of the motorcycle division, Ray Blank. Ask anyone who knows him and they'll tell you—Ray is a corporate executive second, and a motorcyclist first. A true enthusiast to the core, and the man with the power and drive to see that the Rune didn't end up as just another styling exercise. Ray invoked Honda's marketing mantra, "The Power of Dreams," and exhorted his staff to "dare to live the dream." With Ray as their cheerleader and a blank check from Honda R&D to "make it happen," Masa, Martin and all the other talented folks at the world's largest motorcycle company set out to build a dream.

Back in the Malibu canyons, I was riding their dream, and having a few of my own.

Most notably, the low, grumbling exhaust note of the Rune was evoking memories of a Chevy SS396 I drove my freshman year in college. Like the SS, the Rune doesn't make a lot of noise, and it doesn't have to. The sound it emits is the unmistakable rumble of barely-restrained horsepower, threatening to burst forth any moment. Any hot-rodder knows that sound—it's intoxicating. And it's not just an illusion—the big Valkyrie pulls so strongly that all you really need is first gear to take off and fifth gear to cruise. The rest are just for showing off.

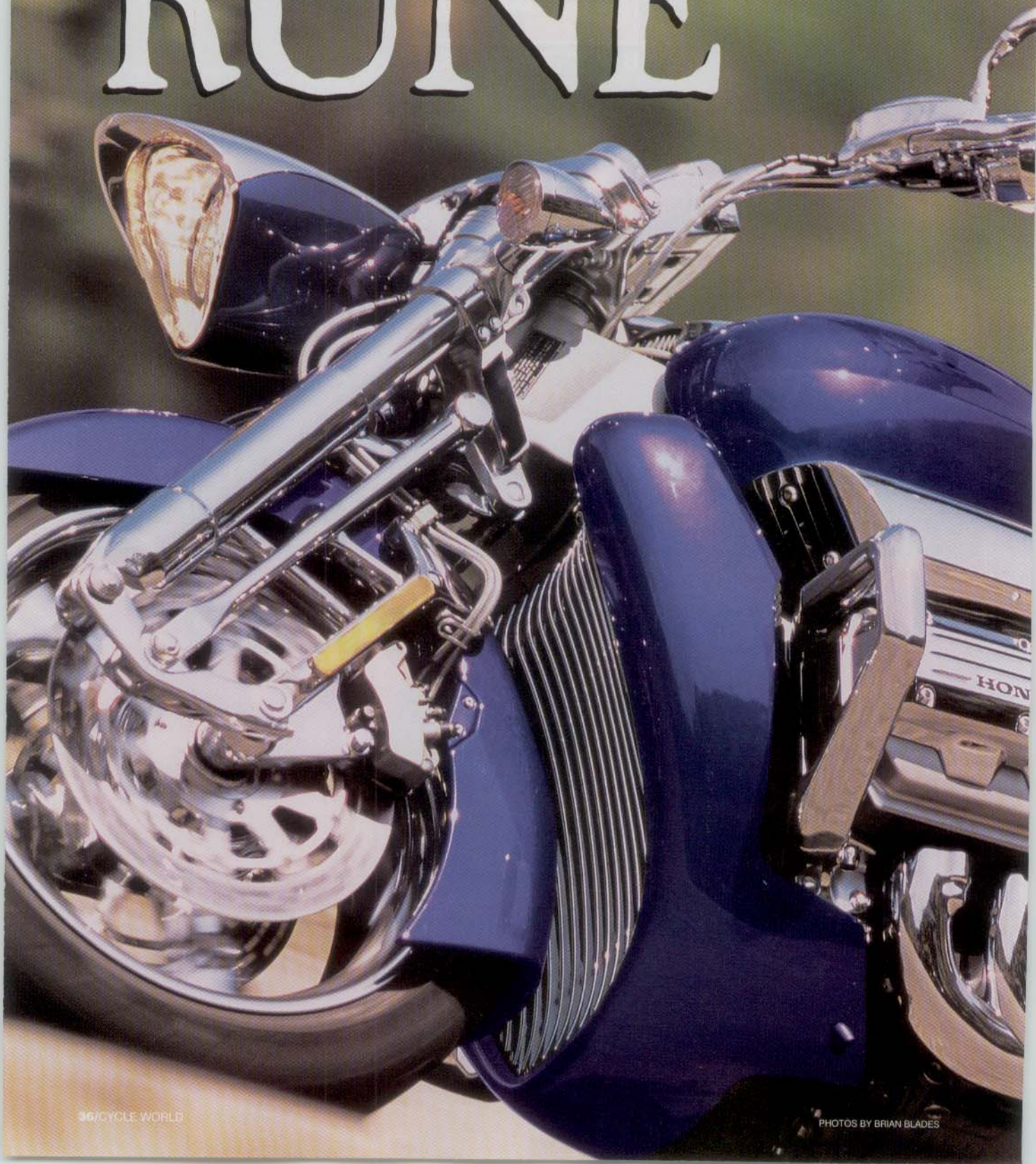
The suspension is more than adequate, and even quite comfy, so long as you stick to fairly smooth roads. However, get into some rough stuff and the combination of a long wheelbase and short suspension travel conspire to start the bike "pogoing," or bouncing back and forth from the front to the rear like a giant rocking chair. It's not severe, only annoying, and you'll never experience it so long as you stay on good paved roads, which is where the Rune lives, anyway.

Like the suspension, the seat is adequate, but more for style than comfort. Anything more than about 50 miles at a stretch will have you rubbing your cheeks for relief. However, the Rune is available with two different styles of handlebars, and I found that the more pulled-back style (shown) allowed me to sit up straighter, and I could tolerate the seat a bit longer than with the shorter bars.

The Valkyrie Rune will sell for about \$27,000 and should be at your dealer by the time you read this. There probably won't be more than one or two per dealer, though, and I imagine they'll sell fast. Dreams that become reality are rare.


—Fred Rau

HONDA RUNE



36/CYCLE WORLD

PHOTOS BY BRIAN BLADES

A full-page photograph of a person wearing a black helmet and leather riding gear, sitting on a blue and chrome Honda Rune motorcycle. The rider is looking forward, and the motorcycle's handlebars and mirrors are visible. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape.

**Every decade or so,
Honda flexes its muscles
and kicks sand in the
face of its competition.
This time around,
though, it's not with
engine technology.**

BY STEVE ANDERSON

THE CB750. THE CBX. THE CX500 Turbo. The NR750. Every so often, Honda produces a motorcycle that is pure corporate testosterone, a declaration about who is really at the top of the two-wheel food chain. "See this bike and quake," is the statement to its competitors. "We can design and build *anything*, just because we want to."

The latest addition to that extremely select list is the Rune, and it's also a first. While every one of its predecessors was about record-setting engine technology—the first mass-production Four of the modern era, the first Japanese inline-Six, the first mass-production turbo with sophisticated electronic controls, the first (and last) production oval-piston engine—the Rune makes do with a visually enhanced and only slightly torquier version of the 1832cc flat-Six that has powered Gold Wings for the last three years. No, the Rune isn't about engine technology. It's about style and appearance. It's the Honda showbike that made it to the production line with all its character intact.

The Rune had a long and complex gestation. According to Ray Blank, VP of Motorcycles for American Honda, its roots reach back to off-site meetings at Laguna Seca Raceway held more than a decade ago and attended by employees from American Honda and Honda Research of America (a separate market research and design company owned by Honda). Blank says that the purpose of those meetings was to answer two questions: 1) In a production setting, what is a custom motorcycle? 2) Does Honda have a custom motorcycle? "At the

H O N D A R U N E



time, we didn't feel we had a custom machine that was exclusively our own," Blank remembers.

After that, Honda derived the six-cylinder Valkyrie from the first six-cylinder Gold Wing, resulting in a unique machine that developed a loyal following. When the GL1800 Gold Wing replaced the GL1500, most assumed Honda would upgrade the Valkyrie, as well. But, says Blank, the replacement had to be something special. Honda was watching a limited market develop for \$30,000-plus customs built on Harley-Davidson platforms, machines designed by true custom builders. The dream was to move the Valkyrie's successor in that direction as far as possible to become the ultimate contradiction in terms: a true production custom.

That was what Martin Manchester, head of motorcycle design at HRA, was charged with creating. The design teams came up with three initial directions, prosaically labeled T1, T2 and T3. T1 was a Valkyrie hot-rod. Many of its styling cues, notes Manchester, went into the VTX series, "diluting the styling strength." The T3 was a more drag-style custom, fitted with an externally exposed, round-tube frame. But it was the T2 that fired up the designers. It had a 1930s *stream-line moderne* theme that Manchester describes as "Neo Retro." It very much picked up on the interplay between those early designs, and what modern hot-rod car builders do

to those traditional shapes. The T2 had full fenders for the "slammed" look, a low, long appearance that can be readily seen at such venues as the Oakland Roadster show, where cars are lowered so much that their fenders all but hide their tires. Similarly, the T2's radiator grill, a complex and curvaceous form, picked up on the 1930s automotive themes.

The T2's visually complex trailing-link front suspension was derived from the Honda Zodia, a 1995 showbike that had been far

too radical for production, but inspired American Honda to push the envelope farther for the Valkyrie replacement. On the Zodia, the trailing-link front struts were an even more outrageous design element, with a flowing, scimitar-like shape. On the T2, the designers dialed that back a bit and made each strut look like a fork leg with a false step mirroring the interface between a conventional tube and slider. And they raked the tubes far more extremely than the steering head, the same trick Harley used on the V-Rod to give it an extremely raked-out look without achieving true chopper anti-handling.

There were obviously different factions within Honda pushing for alternative designs. The T1 hot-rod was easy for the non-Americans to understand, and relatively easy to put into production. According to Masanori Aoki, the engineer who served as the LPL (Large Project Leader) on the Rune and the man responsible for moving the Valkyrie replacement from concept to production, "We were hoping the T1 mock-up would be the most popular [at the 2000 *Cycle World* motorcycle show in Long Beach, California] because new-model development had already begun based on the T1. But people at the show who saw the T2 mock-up expressed a most unusual degree of excitement. The customer response was so strong it was difficult for many Japanese to understand such enthusiasm. The T2 was more than four times more popular than any of the other designs. It was far and away the overwhelming favorite."

The enthusiasm at the show and in Honda focus groups cemented the decision: Honda would build the Rune based on the T2 design. According to Blank, "R&D said the bike couldn't be built on an assembly line, and that dealerships couldn't service it. But to be a Honda, it had to be serviceable, reliable, something you can ride in a



H O N D A

torrential downpour.” Eventually, Blank says, word came down from the top that the crazies at American Honda “were dreaming, and that’s what we want them to do. We want to build the Rune.” The only problem was in figuring out how.

That was Aoki’s job. He lists 11 new technologies that Honda had to create or adapt to make the Rune producible. Some were relatively straightforward, such as the steel-braided brake lines and throttle cables (watch for those on other Honda models, says Aoki). Others were more involved, such as the chrome-plated wheels that are still giving the production department headaches with high rejection rates. But there were also a few fundamental difficulties in translating the T2 design—it had been done by stylists with little engineering input, after all—into a running motorcycle.

“I thought it would be impossible to mass produce without changing the styling design,” says Aoki. “As an engineer, I thought the process was completely backward.” Honda usually engineers motorcycles, and then gives the stylists engineering constraints under which to work. For the Rune, the process was exactly opposite.

The three main issues that had to be dealt with were the cooling system, riding position and exhaust. The radiator size the stylists had chosen was adequate for 22 horsepower, slightly less than the 118 the Rune is said to produce. It had to grow, but careful work by the designers in cooperation with the engineers preserved the T2’s general look while yielding

R U N E

the necessary greater cooling capacity. The riding position was more troublesome. The designers had given the T2 a boomerang-shaped aluminum handlebar/wing that also incorporated the instruments. The low, stretched-out look and six-cylinder engine placed the rider well back on the machine, so anyone on the T2 had to reach and lean far forward. It was not a riding position that was going to work for a cruiser. But the boomerang bar looked awful if it were stretched to bring the grips back farther. This is one area where the designers gave way, opting for a conventional handlebar and relocating the speedometer into a recess in the gas tank. The short, triangular exhausts were a key of the T2 design, and it was here the stylists refused to compromise. So, Aoki and his team found engineering solutions, including an amazingly expensive one: The difficult-to-form muffler end caps are one-piece investment castings, surely a first for a motorcycle muffler. In the end, engineering and manufacturing at Honda moved mountains to keep the Rune true to the T2 design.

Of course, all of this meant the Rune was not really a Valkyrie replacement, because the no-compromise design pushed the price (\$24,499 base, \$26,999 with chromed wheels) out of Valkyrie territory. And even then, when asked if Honda was likely to make a profit on the Rune, Blank snorts, “God, no!” The Rune will be produced in sufficient quantity to fulfill existing deposits and so that every dealer will receive at least one, but it’s not intended to be a



H O N D A R U N E



volume leader. Blank even hints that it might only be produced for a couple of years. It's about making a statement.

So, what's this statement like to ride? First, the Rune looks different in metal than in the pictures: smaller, lower and longer, and incredibly well-finished and detailed. When you sit on it,

it feels lighter than its 794-pound claimed dry weight, and you notice immediately how low the 27.2-inch seat actually is. The engine fires instantly and revs quickly. If you listen closely, you can tell that Aoki was having fun with the exhaust; he's routed the pipes from cylinders 4-5-2 to the left muffler, from cylinders 3-6-1 to the right, which means three impulses reach the left followed by three impulses hitting the right for the closest approximation to a V-Twin beat that any Six will ever make.

That said, the Rune doesn't run like any V-Twin. Six individual throttle bodies help it make more mid-range torque than a Gold Wing (which makes do with two throttle bodies). It pulls hard from absurdly low rpm—you can lug it well below 1000 rpm in top gear and still pull smoothly away—and then revs out harder yet. Carrying as much weight as it does, the Rune is not going to be fast by sport-bike standards, but it feels quick and strong compared to any cruiser this side of a Yamaha V-Max. And it almost goes without saying that the Six is eerily smooth.

The first thing you notice as you ride away is the immense length that stretches out in front of you; there's almost the

full length of a Buell Lightning starting at the rear of the Rune's seat and extending to the tip of its headlight. There's very much the feel of steering a large ship with a tiller, and it takes more than a few turns to get used to that. But the Rune rolls easily in response to slight bar movements, and once you adapt to its unique characteristics, handling is reliable and stable. You can feel the massiveness of the front suspension in very low-speed maneuvers, much as you feel the added weight of the Springer front end on the Harley Softails that are equipped with it.

On the road in top gear, you can admire yourself in the handlebar clamp, which has a convex, shiny surface that mirrors the rider's head perfectly. Top-gear roll-ons are fearsomely quick. This is one machine you won't bother to shift often. The riding position remains somewhat compromised by the design, with the pegs rather close and even the longer bar on the chromed-wheel version requiring a very slight forward lean. Similarly, relatively short suspension travel leads to a ride that's adequate most times, but harsh over larger or sharper-edged bumps.

Overall, though, the Rune impresses with how seamlessly it goes about normal motorcycle business. The fuel-injection provides smooth response, the linked brakes stop the machine strongly and securely, and the handling, within the 32-degree lean limits allowed by the low design, is confidence-inspiring. The Rune may be an attempt to build a true custom, but it remains a Honda first and foremost.

The Rune, then, is a visual statement that works as a motorcycle. It's a stylistic extreme, and will attract some riders as strongly as it repels others. This is exactly what Honda intended. The Rune says Honda can build a true custom that, by definition, is not going to be the machine for everyone. ☐





RIDING THE **Rune**

Putting the whip to Honda's wildest motorcycle, the **2004 Valkyrie Rune.**

by Mark Tuttle Jr.

photography by Kevin Wing



Its wheelbase stretches a mighty 68.9 inches, the longest in Honda's lineup by more than an inch. With six gallons of the premium fuel it requires aboard, the bike weighs 878 pounds, two *more* than the Honda GL1800 Gold Wing.

Its flat six with six throttle bodies and those two huge mufflers deliver 109 pounds-feet of torque to that fat 6-by-17-inch rear wheel, and it has the largest front and rear brake discs ever fitted to a production Honda. Well, guess it had better, eh?

We're talking about the Valkyrie Rune, of

course, easily the wildest production motorcycle to come along in decades. You've seen the Rune in magazines and at the motorcycle shows—*Rider* even published a series of detailed articles about the bike, its styling, development and manufacture back in the May 2003 issue. In addition to simply showing off its styling and engineering muscle, Honda's goal with the Rune was to establish a successor to the Valkyrie and future direction for the flat-six family, which is unique and exclusive to Honda. And it has clearly succeeded. But we've been staring at, sitting on and speculating about the bike and its future with Honda designers, PR types, Hollywood celebrities and fellow motojournalists since we saw the first pictures last summer. Enough talking, scratching and sniffing—how does the Rune run and ride?

As a limited-production machine there were few press bikes available, so American Honda was even more discriminating than usual about releasing Runes for testing. *Rider* was among the few magazines that were allowed to ride off with one for more than a day. In addition to putting the behemoth through its paces, this allowed us to weigh it and run it on the dyno back-to-back with a stock 2003 Honda GL1800 Gold Wing.

The Wing's liquid-cooled, fuel-injected, 1,832cc opposed flat six-cylinder engine with single overhead cams and two valves per cylinder is the basis for the Rune's mill. Six individual 32mm throttle bodies feed the cylinders instead of the Wing's two 40mm units, however, and the Rune engine's growl and slightly uneven lope at idle confirm additional changes to its cams, ignition...and of course exhaust. Keep small children and pets away, please.

With the Gold Wing mill already cranking out enough power and torque to smoke the back tire and pull wheelies riding two-up and fully loaded, it's no surprise that Honda didn't hot-rod the

Rune more. Outrageous power was not really the idea for this rolling sculpture, and would have required an even larger pair of radiators to keep the temp gauge in the black. Some of the

Wing engine's user-friendly traits—32,000-mile valve adjustment intervals, easy regular service and accessibility—may have had to be sacrificed to make room for more ponies, too. Though the company definitely wanted to build a bike unlike anything that's come before, Honda also meant for the Rune to be a rider's bike, not a trailer queen.

And a rider's bike it is, though the first few moments on the big, \$26,000 Rune still require a pretty stiff upper lip. Swing a leg over, reach for the bar and settle into that low 27-inch solo seat, maybe paddle around a bit, and the Rune's girth and chrome Superbowl-trophy headlight nearly three feet in front make you feel like you've straddled a top-fuel dragbike, or perhaps something out of a James Bond movie. Q might have even designed the remote steering lock lever back by the ignition switch, which releases automatically when you turn the ignition on.

The Rune's engine fires with a growl that sounds a bit like a Porsche race car. At low speeds the bike doesn't hide its weight, weaving a bit at a walking pace as the nearly 6-foot wheelbase searches for gyroscopic stability from the wheels. Once well underway, though, the pounds melt away and the Rune handles and steers much like any big cruiser, albeit one with a rocket motor. Twist the grip to the stop in the midrange and the bike leaps forward like a locomotive in one of those speeded-up vintage movies. Against a 2003 Gold Wing GL1800 on the dyno, the Rune made about one percent more peak torque (see the chart), and slightly more horsepower and torque overall in the low- and midrange from 2,000–3,750 rpm. Above 3,800 rpm the Wing makes about five percent more horsepower and torque.

As you might expect of the Honda six, vibration is virtually nonexistent, and except for the sometimes abrupt throttle response the bike runs like a snarling 100-horsepower refrigerator. Shifting the five-speed is clean and smooth, with just a hint of driveline lash from the shaft final drive.

Comfort is surprisingly good on the Rune, and the 6.2 gallons of fuel in that seamless tank give it decent range. The thin gunfighter seat is really the only limiting factor. In addition to the optional chrome wheels, our Candy Black Cherry test bike



Left: Stock up on the chrome polish. Trailing bottom link front suspension is sturdy, supple and a styling TKO. **Right:** Cornering clearance is similar to VTX's.





Single-sided swingarm shows off wide, chrome rear wheel. Solo riders only need apply. Even at our 34-mpg average that seamless 6.2-gallon tank will take you over 200 miles.

Honda also meant for the Rune to be a rider's bike, not a trailer queen.



Flush-mount LED taillights.

had one of two available handlebars with 2 inches less pullback, placing the rider in a slight forward lean when reaching for the stainless-steel grips with soft, knobby rubber inserts. In the interest of clean styling you won't find any lever adjustments or unnecessary switches on the bar, and the chrome master cylinders have an integrated design complemented by stainless-steel mesh covered cables and hoses. Nearly every external part is only used on the Rune, says Honda, and we believe it.

Under most riding conditions that robotic looking, chrome, trailing bottom link front suspension provides an amazingly supple ride. The axle load is transferred through pushrods and a link to two upper shocks, one housing a main spring and the other a sub-spring and damping system. No adjustments are provided, and bigger bumps and/or spirited riding can sometimes overwhelm the front end slightly, but it's more than stout enough for normal riding.

The single-sided swingarm in back uses a compact single-shock suspension setup borrowed from Honda's RC211V MotoGP race bike, in which the top shock mount is in the swingarm itself, allowing for a low seat height with almost 4 inches of suspension travel on the Rune. A remote reservoir offers compression damping adjustment, and the ride in back is pretty good for such a big cruiser, though it gets a bit jouncy on uneven pavement and can jolt the rider over big, sharp-edged bumps. Rebound damping is a touch light for aggressive cornering, too, though the bike runs out of cornering clearance (similar to the VTX1800's) before it runs out of stability. Linked, triple-disc brakes haul the Rune down hard, with good feel and strength at the lever and pedal.

Don't look for any storage space on the Rune, but you will find an integrated security system and complete instrumentation (except for a tach) on the handlebar and in a non-glare LED display on the tank. Honda only plans to build about two Runes per dealer for 2004, and is taking a wait-and-see attitude toward 2005. So if owning the biggest, baddest, wildest-looking custom of the millennium thus far is your goal, you had better not wait. **29**

2004 HONDA VALKYRIE RUNE

Base Price: \$25,499

Price as Tested: \$26,999 (Chrome wheels)

Warranty: Three yrs., unltd. miles

ENGINE

Type: Liquid-cooled, longitudinal opposed flat six

Displacement: 1,832cc

Bore x Stroke: 74.0 x 71.0mm

Compression Ratio: 9.8:1

Valve Train: SOHC, 2 valves per cyl.

Valve Adj. Interval: 32,000 miles

Fuel Delivery: PGM-FI fuel injection w/ automatic choke

Lubrication System: Wet sump, 4.9-qt. cap.

Transmission: Five-speed, hydraulically actuated wet clutch

Final Drive: Shaft, 2.917:1

ELECTRICAL

Ignition: Computer-controlled digital w/ 3D mapping

Charging Output: 1,100 watts max.

Battery: 12V 18AH

CHASSIS

Frame: Aluminum diamond w/ tubular-steel seat subframe and single-sided aluminum swingarm

Wheelbase: 68.9 in.

Rake/Trail: 29 degrees/4.9 in.

Seat Height: 27.2 in.

Suspension, Front: Trailing bottom link w/ 3.9-in. travel

Rear: Unit Pro-Link w/ single shock & 3.9-in. travel

Brakes, Front: Dual floating discs w/ 3-piston calipers

Rear: Single disc w/ 2-piston caliper

Wheels, Front: Cast, 4.0 x 18 in.

Rear: Cast, 6.0 x 17 in.

Tires, Front: 150/60-VR18

Rear: 180/55-VR17

Wet Weight: 878 lbs.

Load Capacity: 275 lbs.

GVWR: 1,153 lbs.

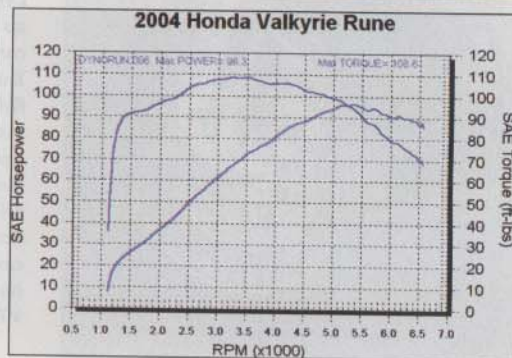
PERFORMANCE

Fuel Capacity: 6.2 gals., last 0.8 gal. warning light on

Average mpg: 33.8

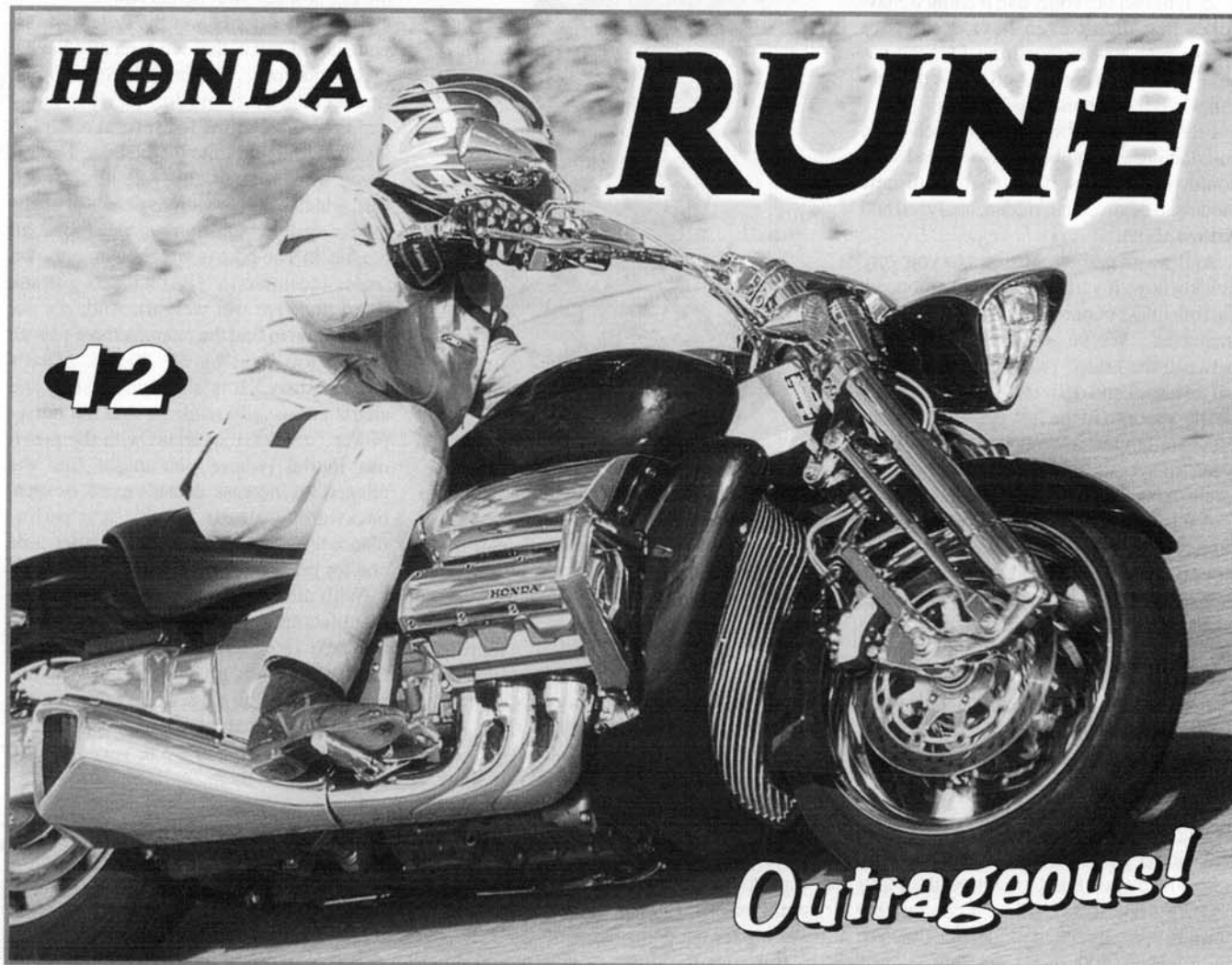
Estimated Range: 210 miles

Indicated rpm at 60 mph: NA



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\$7.00



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Rollastand

2004 VALKYRIE RUNE

by Dave Searle



FANTASY COME ALIVE. It was never originally intended to be a production model, just a really cool custom concept, to dazzle show-goers. There were four Valkyrie customs that shared Honda's center stage at the Long Beach bike show in December 2000, and you were asked to vote for your favorite. Simply designated T1, T2, T3 and T4, it happened that the T2-version was such an overwhelming favorite that Honda had to ask themselves if it should be built, and then if it even *could* be built.

There were doubters, of course, but the challenge of making their corporate motto, "The Power Of Dreams," a reality, motivated them to do something unprecedented, not just to build something that vaguely resembled the T2, but to build a replica, true to the original. For once, the engineers and designers were told that cost was not a consideration, the Rune was to be Honda's first all-out factory custom.

Reality Intrudes

But, as a custom that had to be converted to real world utility, the T2 had some problems: Its radiator was so slender that the engineers determined it couldn't handle over 22 hp; also the distance from the seat to the handlebars had been penned for style, not function; and lastly, the short mufflers, so crucial to the T2's look, were so small it was feared they couldn't provide the volume necessary to make decent hp within legal sound limits.

But the problems were resolved. Two larger radiators were artfully captured behind a radiator shell with a grill of sweep-

ing chrome bars that suggests a '32 Ford hotrod's—gorgeous. The T2's dramatic wedge-shaped handlebars were replaced by equally good-looking conventional tubular designs. Two are offered, one set 20mm higher and 50mm farther forward than the other. After trying them both from the rider's seat at the Rune's unveiling, we asked for the more sweptback set on our test model. However, the muffler thing took an unusual solution that we'll explain a little later.

Engine

Based on the GL1800's L6, 1832cc flat six motor, the Rune's engine has been appropriately hot-rodged. Six individual 32mm throttle bodies replace the shared pair on the GL1800, and each is fitted with a Denso 12-hole injector to provide highly atomized fuel for optimum efficiency. The airbox holds 6.9 liters to supply sufficient air for good response. The camshafts are also more aggressive, giving a stronger midrange (2500–4500 rpm) than the big GL touring machine.

However, despite their best efforts, the restricted exhaust volume was unable to muffle the engine's sound adequately beyond 5250 rpm, so a softer limiter has been set to reduce power from 5250 rpm until the hard limiter engages at 6400 rpm. The result is that the Rune actually makes no more peak horsepower than the GL.

Chassis

An all new aluminum frame has been created to rigidly mount the massive engine.

The wheelbase, at 68.9", is the longest Honda has ever put on a motorcycle. Naturally, there is much you can't see, but the rear suspension is the latest Unit Pro-Link type that was developed for the Moto GP bikes. The upper end of the mono-shock is actually held by a bridge in the swingarm, eliminating the typical upper support structure, and allowing a very low, 26.75" seat height. The swingarm itself is a single-sided type that Honda calls a Pro-Arm, allowing the left side of the rear wheel to show off its wheel spokes, just like a custom car.

The most striking feature of the Rune, in our opinion, is the massive front fork. A trailing link design said to have been inspired by the Zodia concept bike of 1995, it appears to be radically raked, yet a close examination of the structure indicates a more conventional geometry. The forward elements appear to be oversized telescopic units, but this is an illusion, they are fixed in length and

their ends support the front pivots of the trailing arms. Behind these are a smaller pair of arms that cantilever off the trailing arms to push on the middle of a leading arm arrangement above that pivots behind the lower triple clamp. At the forward end of this lever are attached what look like two massive chrome billet shocks. However, only one of these is actually a damper. The other contains the main front suspension spring. The front axle is at the end of the lower trailing arm, which also provides support for the brake calipers and fender in such a way that the fender moves with the tire, keeping a tight custom fit. The whole business is a dazzling combination of aluminum and chrome surfaces crowned with the most outrageous headlight shape yet.

Brakes & Tires

We measured the Rune's full-tank wet weight as 877 lbs., a scant four pounds lighter than the GL1800. Stopping the behemoth are the largest discs Honda has ever used; a pair of 330mm units up front and a 336mm diameter in back. A linked braking system utilizes a pair of triple-piston, single-acting front calipers up front and a two-piston single-action rear. The front brake lever works the outer two front pistons on each front caliper. And, using just the rear pedal, the system adds the inner front pistons while a delay valve engages the rear caliper first.

The tires are low-profile Dunlops, a 150/60-18" in front and a 180/55-17" in back. Neither is 'Z' speed rated, as the bike doesn't require it.

Special Features

With our Rune priced at \$26,999, Honda felt it was only fair to give the bike an anti-theft system. A device called 'HISS' indicates its presence in the right-hand side of the upper light cluster. Similar in concept to the immobilizers offered by Ducati, the bike will only respond to a special ignition key (two are provided). A computer chip in each one informs the engine's ECM to operate, and no hot-wiring or other kleptomaniac tricks will work. Also, a remote fork lock, which is located above the ignition key (located on the left side, beneath the seat) also can not be disengaged without the ignition key in place.

When mentioning special features, we'd be remiss not to make note of the LED tail lights, which make such a fitting end to a grand design. Always a favorite of onlookers, they are flush with the rear fender, possible only because of the bulbs' shallow depth.

Riding Impression

Thank heavens the flat-six engine carries its weight down low. The bike is not as difficult to manage as you might expect, but the steering does feel ponderous at very low speeds. Out on the road, the first thing that demands your attention are the chrome handgrips. They feature projecting lengthwise rubber ribs to keep your hands from slipping, but the throttle grip immediately gave us hand pain and cramping on the freeway. Apparently, when the serrations are aligned to fit the folds of your hands they're fine, but the degree of rotation needed to maintain freeway speeds had them cutting into the wrong parts. The clutch side was never a problem.

The Rune's ride is very plush on the freeway, as you might expect from something that has the 'road hugging weight' of a Cadillac. And as you ride, you can see the lower front suspension link, moving up and down slightly (the motions you see are a fraction of the actual wheel travel, due to the leverage employed).

Only 3.9" of travel is provided on each end, and the suspension feels underdamped (especially in rebound) so the bike bounces considerably underway. On a bumpy road, even the full travel is insufficient to prevent bottoming and topping, but the limits don't produce any banging or clanging. Because the wheelbase is so long, the bouncing can't really get out of control. Sometimes the right series of bumps can get the front and back ends oscillating in opposition and you might be able to make that worse with a clumsy throttle hand, but you'd really have to work at it.

On a warm day, you will notice that the left side cylinder bank, which is offset further to the rear, makes your left leg a bit warmer than your right, but it's not too uncomfortable.

The power of the reconfigured motor is more than up to the job, and nice and linear in delivery. But the retuning has also increased the engine's response enough that the motor is slightly jerky in responding to small throttle inputs, something we don't find on the GL. We were also surprised by the lack of engine compression braking, as you'd sometimes find the bike speeding up on slight downhill in spite of a closed throttle—a byproduct of all those little 300cc cylinders perhaps.

But the sound the Rune makes, on the other hand, is truly thrilling. A combination



of big block, glass-pack, hot-rod rumble at the bottom that passes through a distinctly twin-cylinder-sounding midrange (the product of clever header routing that makes the three cylinders that fire each revolution alternate sides) finally transforming into a Ferrari-like, almost V-12 wail at the top. It totally complements the visual impression of the bike and is very impressive to hear...and to play with at stoplights. Despite our abbreviated time with the bike, we couldn't resist the way it sounded when we blasted away from a stop and counted ourselves lucky not to attract a drag racing ticket. The clutch is also very controllable, making handling the massive weight that much easier.

The long wheelbase makes the bike feel very steady, and even on canyon roads, although it does bounce around, you don't get the sense that either end wants to lose traction. The low-profile radials offer a lot of grip, with good feel, and you feel safe cranking up the massive torque. However, the front tire's profile must be partly decorative, as even spirited cornering within the bike leanover clearance will leave perhaps an inch and a half of untouched tread on the sides. Cornering clearance is actually quite adequate. But, then again, it was 'improved' during its stay with us as the peg feelers

were completely ground away, and we then began beveling the bottoms of the peg tips. The exhaust system was not touched, thankfully, as the mufflers' intricate outer shape is actually a very pricey investment casting, the only way to maintain the original lines of the T2's exhaust pipes.

The innovative forks are perhaps the bike's signature feature. Even better, they resist dive, making the bike feel more nimble than you'd imagine, as the brakes' stay arms are linked to the fixed forward legs.

And the linked brakes work very well. Stopping hard with the rear pedal alone can take a lot of pressure, but the rear wheel will eventually lock if you push hard enough. But the bike tends to squat very evenly front-to-back when only the rear brake is used. Using the front brake will slow the bike very rapidly but dive is more pronounced, and the front wheel can be locked if you try hard enough.

An indicated 80+ mph on the freeway is about as fast as you'll care to go for any length of time, as your torso imitates a spinnaker, but we've experienced worse.

The fit and finish is beyond reproach. Everything that isn't painted is either satin finished aluminum or brilliantly chrome plated. Even the kickstand is beautifully polished and plated.

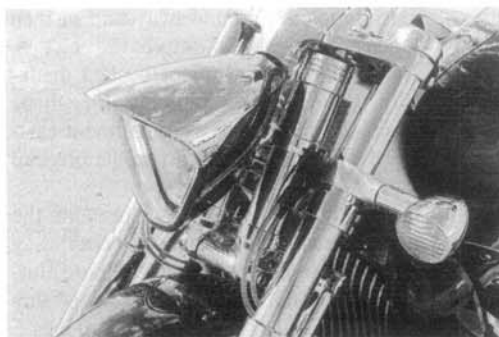
The headlight, sticking way out in front of you, has the appearance of a chromed football, and outlandish as that sounds, it fits perfectly on the Rune. However, the instrument cluster, traditional in its placement, but ultramodern in its shape, works like a spherical mirror to catch sunlight and bounce it into your eyes, as does the rounded edge of the rectangular opening into the instrument panel. The contrast between the chrome dazzles makes the indicators illegible in sunlight and sunglasses are absolutely required on a sunny day.

The fully chromed handlebar controls, with their integrated clutch and brake master cylinders, are another gorgeous touch, but functional, too; the handlebar levers are comfortable, the mirrors are adequate.

The valve covers look very small-block Chevy-like in a modernistic way. In fact, they are redundant overcovers on top of a second set (also finned and chromed) that actually cover the valve gear.

And all of the styling elements flow into a dramatic whole that is visually the most impressive production bike on the planet.

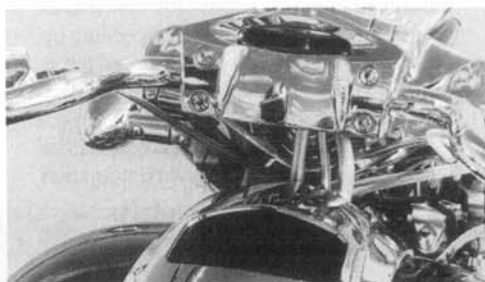
Although it is not the fastest thing we've ever ridden down a canyon road, the Rune is genuinely fun to ride, and that's a pretty good measure of any bike...even without spectators. 🍌



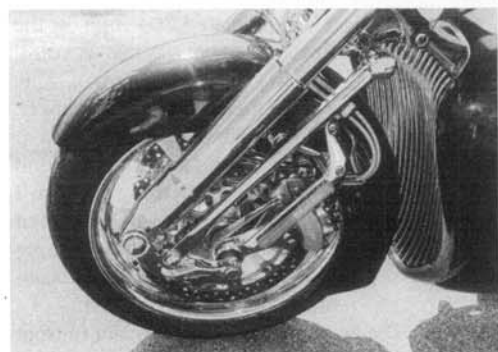
Below: The digital speedo, odometer and fuel gauge reside in the recessed slot on top of the gas tank. The indicator lights live in the top of the upper handlebar clamp, and notice how the surface between the clamp bolts forms a mirror so the rider is constantly aware of his image as it commands the 877-pound Rune. The glare is fierce on a sunny day. Don't forget your shades.



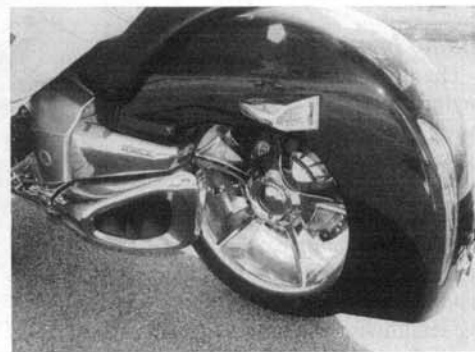
Above and below: Feast your eyes on the most outrageous front fork in motorcycling. Worthy of the best custom shop, the Rune's fork gives the appearance of a bodacious rake while still maintaining surprisingly good control and handling. The alien headlight shape would be completely over the top on any other bike, but here it looks just right, and like a thrusting chrome football from the rider's seat. Note also the radiator, like an inverted '32 Deuce's.



Top: Every detail appears to have been made especially for the Rune—giving some justification to the staggering price tag. The handlebar controls with their integrated master cylinders are beautiful and the levers and grip finish the effect. However, we found the raised rubber serrations could be difficult to hold if the throttle's rotation didn't allow the raised edge to match the folds in your hands—a problem only at freeway speeds.



Right: The deeply valenced rear fender has perhaps the most custom taillights in the business, two rows of LEDs illuminate sculpted spears on either side. Note also the finned final drive cover. The detailing is dazzling, wherever you look.



Top: The overall styling theme owes more to fat-fendered custom cars than it does to motorcycles. The single-sided swingarm allows the five spoke chromed rear wheel to look as if it were lifted off a car. The sexy exhaust outlet shapes are investment castings.

TESTERS' LOG

No doubt about it, Honda's Rune has set a new standard for others to live up to. With flowing lines, tons of chrome and the howl that flows from the six-cylinders' innovative mufflers, the Rune is truly rolling art. Fit, finish, and attention to detail is first class. Heavy? Sure, but as soon as the speed starts to climb, its 877 pounds all but disappear. Long? You bet, the nearly six feet of wheelbase make the Rune very stable in a straight line; but it can be turned with surprisingly little effort. But don't expect to lean it too far before pegs start dragging.

I appreciate the design concept, the flowing lines, the power and I can even accept the lean angle limitations and the lack of practicality. But I haven't been able to overcome the issue of comfort. What little suspension travel there is works well, but due to design limitations, there just isn't enough. Forces not absorbed by the suspension are sent directly to the rider's body and that hurts. I found the seating position awkward and uncomfortable after just a few freeway miles.

I look at the Rune as a 50/50 motorcycle, 50 mph for 50 miles. More than that and I've had it. But, let's not forget the cool fac-

tor. If you spend all week polishing your bike, are happy with a leisurely putt up the coast, and being super cool is important, then the Rune is for you.

—Walt Fulton

Once I'd ridden it far enough to tell you about it, all I could think of was to show it to everyone. Even people who wouldn't give a motorcycle a second glance were amazed. If Schwarzenegger gets himself elected, he should ride a Rune to his inauguration, it looks like it was made for a Terminator movie. Indian?...oh, please.

Value? Well, you could buy two Harleys for the price of one Rune. But perhaps if you were considering buying a custom-built street rod, you could save some garage space and get one of these instead; the feeling is much the same. And the way that motor sounds when it's accelerating hard—it's intoxicating. Expect a healthy appetite for rear tires. You've been warned.

Is this the first bike inspired by custom cars, and not other motorcycles? If it is, I can't decide if it's more Coupe DeVille or Deuce Coupe. And Walt's right, that is a 50 mile seat. But remember, your ego has to fit before your body does.

—Dave Searle

2004 Honda Valkyrie Rune

SPECIFICATIONS AND PERFORMANCE DATA

CycleStats™

ENGINE

Type:liquid-cooled, horizontally-opposed six-cylinder
Valvetrain:SOHC, 2 valves per cyl., adjusting shims under buckets
Size:1832cc
Bore/stroke:74.0mm x 71.0mm
Comp. ratio:9.8:1
Fuel delivery:EFI, 6-32mm throttles
Exhaust:6-2

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission:5-speed
Final drive:Shaft
RPM @65 mph/redline: n/a/6000rpm

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase:68.9"
Rake/trail29.0°/4.92"
Ground clearance:5.1"
Seat height:26.75"
GVWR:1153 lbs.
Wet weight:877 lbs.
Carrying capacity:276 lbs.

SUSPENSION

Front:Trailing bottom link fork
no adjustability, 3.9" travel
Rear:Pro-link single-shock,
no adjustability,
3.9" travel

BRAKES

Front: dual 330mm full-floating discs,
LBS 3-piston, single-action calipers
Rear:336mm ventilated disc,
LBS 2-piston, single-action caliper

TIRES & WHEELS

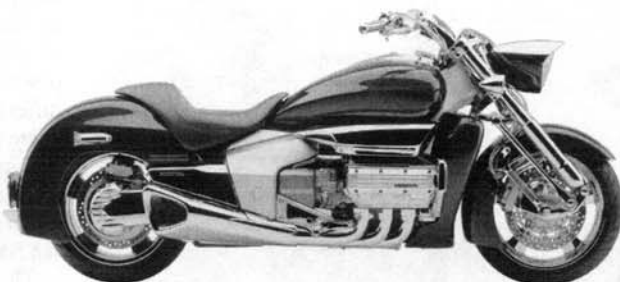
Front:150/60R-18 Dunlop D251F
4.0" x 18" cast alloy wheel
Rear:180/55R-17 Dunlop D251
on 6.0" x 17" cast alloy wheel

ELECTRICS

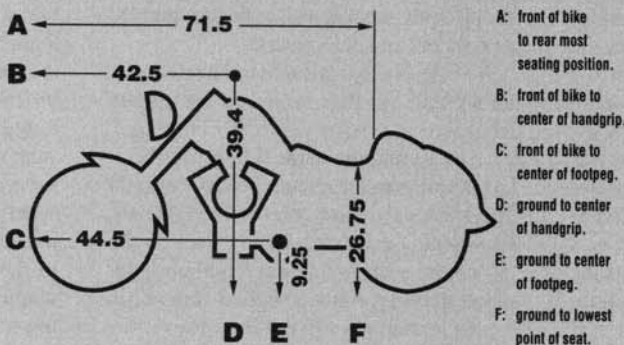
Battery:12V, 20AH
Ignition:3-D digital-mapped with
computer control
Headlight:55W H7/55W H7

FUEL

Tank capacity:6.2 gal.
High/low/avg. mpg:38.8/36.7/37.4



ERGONOMICS TEMPLATE



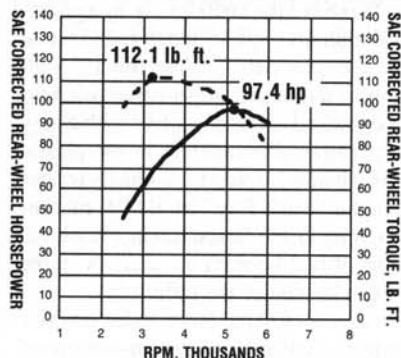
MISCELLANEOUS

Instruments: speedo, tach, odometer, dual tripmeters, clock, fuel, coolant temp., ambient temp., audio modes
Indicators:hi-beam, t/s, neutral, reverse, oil pressure, low fuel, side-stand, fuel injection, cruise control, overdrive, trunk/saddlebag open
Additional: ..H.I.S.S. security system
MSRP:as tested \$26,999 (\$24,499 w/out chromed wheels)
Valve adj. interval:32,000 mi.
Warranty:36 mo., unlimited miles
Colors:Illusion Blue, Double Clear-Coat Black, Candy Black Cherry

Low end ●●●●○
Mid-range ●●●●○
Top end ●●●●○

Not only is the 1832cc flat six enough to propel the 877 lb. Rune with satisfying authority, but the sound it makes is perhaps the most seductive ever to be emitted from a motorcycle. A slightly abrupt response to the throttle was our only little gripe.

DYNAMOMETER DATA



PERFORMANCE

Measured top speed123 mph
0-1/4 mile12.14 sec.
@ 105.92 mph
0-60 mph3.77 sec.
0-100 mph11.32 sec.
60-0 mph125.7'
Power to Weight Ratio1:8.71
Speed @ 65 mph (indicated)61.5

M/C RATING SYSTEM

EXCELLENT
VERY GOOD
GOOD
FAIR
POOR

Open Cruiser

Engine ●●●●●
Transmission ●●●●○
Suspension ●●●●○
Brakes ●●●●○
Handling ●●●●○
Styling ●●●●●
Riding Impression ●●●●○
Instruments/Controls ●●●●○
Attention to Detail ●●●●●
Value ●●●●○

OVERALL RATING ●●●●○

TEST NOTES

PICKS

- Eyeball-popping looks
- Superlative fit and finish
- Exhaust sound is like candy for your ears

PANS

- Floaty suspension
- A 50-mile seat
- A perfect attraction device, but with no back seat

STANDARD MAINTENANCE

Item	Time	Parts	Labor
Oil & Filter	1.0	\$11.98 + \$15	\$60.00
Air Filter	0.7	\$27.51	\$42.00
Valve Adjust	4.0	\$40.38	\$240.00
Battery Access	0.25	MF	\$15.00
Final Drive	0.4	\$4.95	\$24.00
R/R Rear Whl.	1.6		\$96.00
Change Plugs	0.5	\$14.40	\$30.00
Adjust EFI	1.0		\$60.00
Totals	9.45	\$114.22	\$567.00

Note: Labor rates above are best guess estimates at presstime

Honda Rune 1800



PHOTOS BY MARC URBANO

A little incident that tells all you need to know about the Honda Rune: About to performance-test the bike, Don Canet is informed that the 1800cc Six—despite weighing 848 pounds and looking like it should be on the show circuit—does bitchin' burn-outs.

"Really," says the Road Test Editor, who then wicks up the throttle, drops the clutch and proceeds to paint a 45-foot black stripe across the parking lot, cranking in more than a few degrees of handlebar lock for good effect.

Turns out Honda's concept bike that against all odds made it to the street knows what to do when it gets there. You've heard of all-show, no-go? The Rune ain't havin' a bit of it.

On a proper dragstrip, the Rune reels off easy 12.68-second quarter-miles at 106.13 mph. That's down by 1.1 seconds to the more powerful, much lighter Harley V-Rod, but right in the hunt with the rest of the 2003 crop of power-cruisers—we'll have to see how it stacks up against the big-inch mega-motors powering the new Triumph Rocket III and Kawasaki Vulcan 2000.

Certainly the riding experience will be different. The Rune's pancake-Six revs to 6000 rpm, sounding not unlike a Porsche in the process. As measured at the rear wheel, max horsepower is 92.3, while torque peaks at 103.7 foot-pounds at 3500 rpm—hence the parking-lot darkies, aided by a shaft-driver's tendency to unload the back end.

Reactions to the Rune from the public at large were decidedly bipolar. "Proof, in case we needed it, that Mr. Honda is dead," lamented the old Sportster rider. "What a wonderful locomotive," said the Jaguar mechanic. "I love it—no, really, I /ooovve it," from a bike-savvy PR executive. In all, the yeas far outweighed the nays, and universally there was disbelief that this was really a production machine. At intersections, it actually stopped traffic as gawkers rolled down their windows to ask questions, green light be damned.

Of course, given the Rune's low volume and \$26,000 price tag, your chance of owning one is slim. The more interesting question is what shape will Honda's standard-issue mega-cruisers take. Last month we showed you spy-shots of a hidden-radiator VTX1800 bobber. Can a Valkyrie 1800 for the masses be far behind?

—David Edwards

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TRIAL RUN 2004 Honda NRX1800 Valkyrie Rune

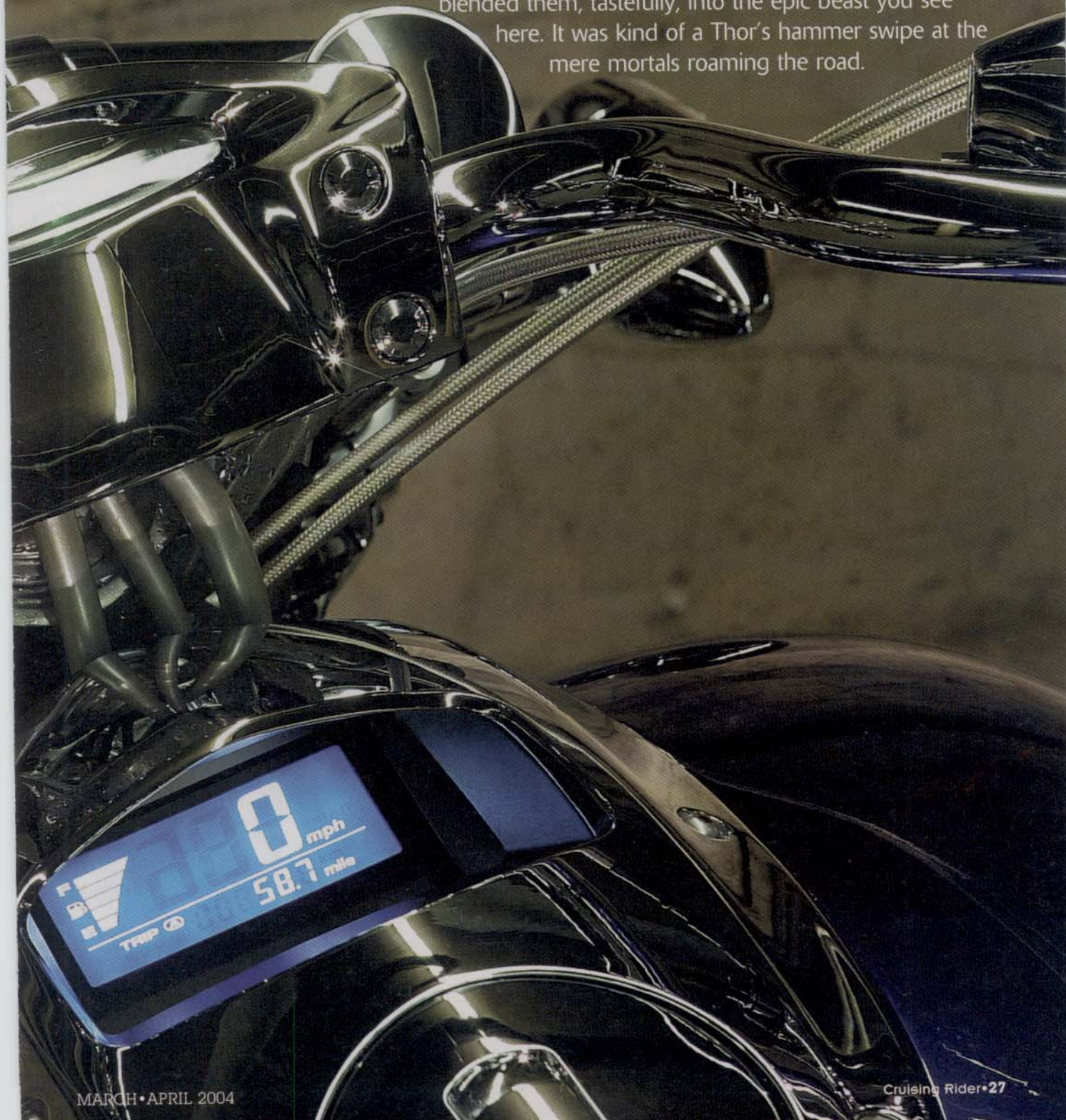
The Kingdom Come Cruiser



By J. JOSHUA PLACA
Photos By KEVIN WING

Amid the thunderous clangor of cold steel swords ringing from a battle between Viking gods and monsters, an irrepressible notion of heroic strength comes to the fore. The Vikings worshiped strength, and apparently so does American Honda Motor Co.

Honda engineers have developed a machine of mythic dimension. Its mass production represents a leap of faith for this normally conservative manufacturer. Released as a one-off factory custom, the 2004 Rune gathered hot-rod styling influences from around the galaxy and blended them, tastefully, into the epic beast you see here. It was kind of a Thor's hammer swipe at the mere mortals roaming the road.



The Rune also comes with a heroic price tag: \$24,500 to \$27,000. The limited-production bike is slated for a single model year. Its small volume, reportedly around 1,500 units, and custom-built profile account for the weighty sticker.

The Rune is the only kin left of the Valkyrie lineage. But for this NRX1800, the lineup has returned to Valhalla.

Honda seems to have built it to show the motorcycle world it could. We noticed. Some pundits called the machine overstyled and another Harley done; others were wowed by the Rune's sleek lines, and muscular profile and performance.

However you view the Rune, it is an impressive machine, combining power and seamlessly integrated street-rod styling cues. There is an interesting aspect about cruiser folk—they crave custom. Nearly everyone who throws an engineer boot over an under-30-inch seat wants a bike that is unique in some way, that will

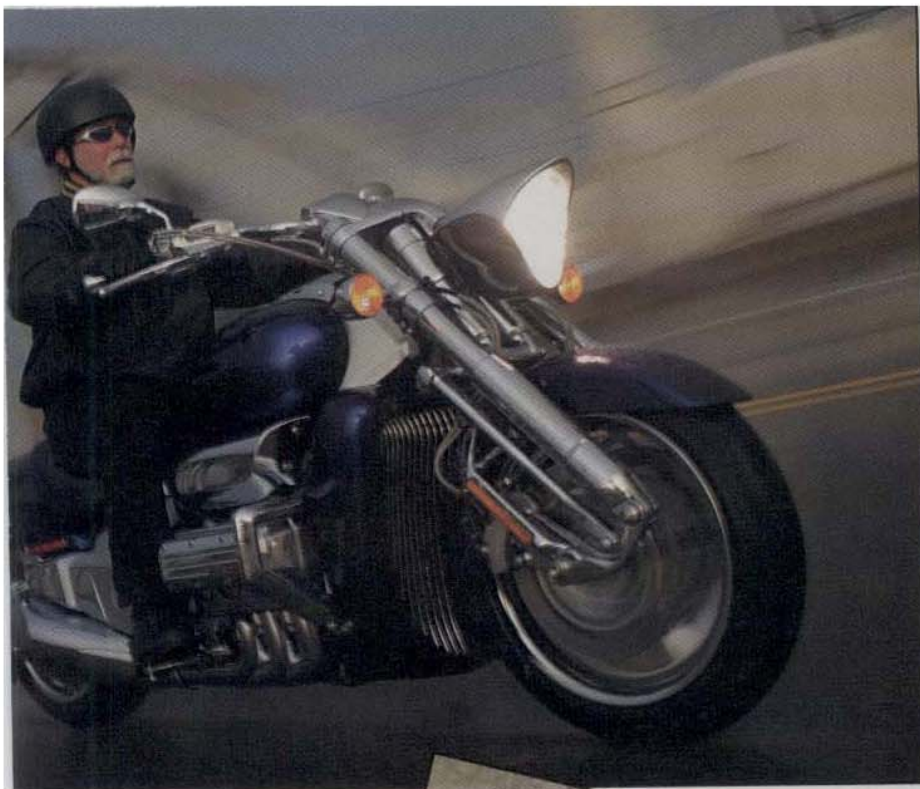


somehow embody their personal notions of cool. There is an adage found at some old, grimy bike shops: "You can't bolt on custom." Honda has done it for you.

Sifting through countless bike show concepts, designers have built a motorcycle you would not want to modify, even if you could, which you can't. At least for now. The look includes an exquisite "frenched-in" or flush-mounted LED tail-light; a seamless (no manufacturing lip) gas tank; chromed clutch and brake master cylinders; dual front radiators with a chromed grille; large-diameter, rubber-



striped, stainless steel handgrips; a stainless steel oil dipstick; stainless steel mesh brake hoses; gunfighter-style seat; an alu-



minum diamond-shaped frame; trailing-link, girder/shock front suspension; and "tail-dragger style" fenders front and rear.

I was not alone in my opinion that this was all cool stuff deftly assembled into an artful expression of what is hip. The Rune commanded attention. At stoplights and corners and even while riding, men and women of all ages yelped compliments at me, or thrust a "Right on, brother!" fist in the air. A swanky looking couple in a convertible gave me a big thumbs-up even after I had cut them off. Come to think of it, maybe it wasn't their thumb.

I was more certain about another occasion: I witnessed a gathering crowd surround the parked Rune with a motorcycle cop standing in the middle of the mass. I thought a car had knocked it to the asphalt. But the Rune was probably never safer, receiving the admiration of the multitude and the officer who only wanted to pick my brain about this exotic machine, for about half an hour. Then he radioed his partner to come take a look.

Of course, I could not take credit for the machine, or even boast ownership. The parts were not custom but stock, and the design was not born of my imagination. My explanation that I was merely test-riding the bike for a magazine article was met with a quite peculiar reaction, I thought.



"You lucky stinkin' bastard!" was spit out by the suit-and-tie crowd and, strangely enough, crusty old men. Young kids just smiled and stuck up, I'm sure, a sweet, innocent thumb.

So there I was, a stinkin' bastard on a hot bike the motorcycle cop called a "Harley wannabe." Although only temporary possessor of

the Valkyrie Rune, and mindful of my sacred duty as a reporter to remain objective and emotionless, I felt obliged to engage the blue meanie in some debate.

While elements of the Rune apparently trace their origin to some American V-Twins, many were not developed directly by Harley-Davidson, but rather aftermarketers and custom bike builders and backyard tinkerers from around the country. It's what looked good on two wheels, not just one brand.

Harley designers also attend bike shows and rallies and have reportedly been known to pluck an idea here and there, if not the whole builder and add him to the fold. Ideas cannot be copyrighted and incorporating good ones into a product is smart business. In the long haul, the manufacturer evolves and the consumer benefits. All makers do it, the



The Rune's power lies more in what I like to call "cruiser grunt," the low and midrange end of the powerband...

ones that survive anyway.

Honda doesn't really make any bones about borrowing its design approaches. It compares the chromed cylinder head covers to a "muscle car" and describes the bike as "...the ultimate in hot-rod style." Hot rods and muscle cars were not invented in Japan, but nor were they built by any one maker in the U.S. These styles were an amalgamation of designs developed over years. Everyone borrowed from everyone else, or stole, depending on how you looked at it.

The most obvious feature of the Rune that has never been seen on a V-Twin is its six-cylinder engine. Honda should be commended for sticking with its own proven engine configuration and not following the Twin trend. In itself, that speaks of independent motorcycling spirit.

The liquid-cooled, 1832cc (112 cubic inches) Flat-Six (F6) power plant churns out approximately 100 hp to the rear wheel, down a few ponies from the Gold Wing, which shares the same engine. The difference, Honda sources said, is in the tuning and four less fuel-injection throttle bodies. The Rune's power lies more in what I like to call "cruiser grunt," the low and midrange end of the powerband, and producing a little less horsepower in the

top end. Or so went the unofficial explanation. No matter, the Rune hauls ass.

The horizontally opposed, laid-flat engine runs low and parallel to the ground, creating nice balance and a low center of gravity. The result is that the big bike handles a lot better than it looks like it should, even at parking lot speeds, the betrayer of many a fat ride.

Six 32mm throttle bodies deliver the atmosphere to an equal number of specially built Denso fuel injectors. The setup makes a fuel mix that is highly combustible for maximized efficiency and power, according to Honda. The parallel twin-valve head uses direct shim-under-bucket valve actuation. Its first clearance inspection is a ridiculous 32,000 miles.

The engine is rigid-mounted to the frame rather than the un-hot-rod-like rubber-mounting commonly found these days. The rubber is employed to create a more cushy ride for the "discriminating" butts of Baby Boomers, who also happen to be the prime market for this bike. Honda described the rigid mounting as another way for the rider to enjoy the "feel" of the mammoth F6. It was the feeling in my own butt and hands that concerned me.

But the Rune pulls through the five-speed gearbox fluidly and with unnotice-

able vibration until speeds hit around 75. That's when the hand-grips begin to buzz. This is likely due in large part to the bike's gear ratios. The Rune's final drive is geared lower than the Gold Wing, a machine far more prepared for the long haul and less for blasting off the line, which the Rune does quite nicely, again and again.

The bike's solo seat and lack of passenger pegs (or even any place to mount them) sends a clear, tough-guy message usually heard as, "I don't need nobody." This is part of the hipster hot-rod profile, of course. There is also nowhere to secure saddlebags or even bungee cords. This bike is too cool to be cluttered with such accoutrements.

The seat is firm and doesn't offer lumbar support, as some stepped seats do, but that's okay because you're tough and so is your ass. Real bikers don't whine about hard seats; they just grimace and stick a pillow under their butts when nobody's looking.

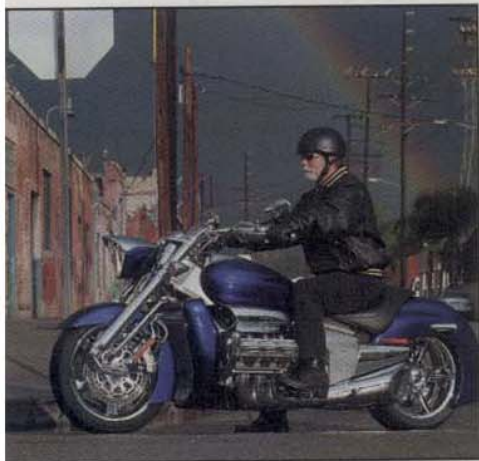
In spite of this, the ergonomics are good. Other than a choice of three colors (Illusion Blue, Double Clear Coat Black and Candy Black Cherry) and a choice of wheels (chrome and silver painted) the



only other option Honda offers for the Rune is the handlebar: Rear-Set and Forward-Set. Since bikers come in different sizes, it only makes sense that so should the bar. The Rear-Set handlebar is 50mm closer and 20mm lower to the rider. At 5'8", the Rear-Set bar offered me an easy reach.

Although the gunfighter-style seat was not very plush, it was low, set at 27.2 inches above where the shoe meets the road. This was due partly to the Rune's rear suspension. The unit is patterned after Honda's RC11V GP racer. The upper shock mount is contained within the swingarm rather than its usual place, the frame. This is supposed to eliminate some shock energy being transferred to the frame, thereby boosting chassis rigidity and improving handling through corners. Yeah, and any old-school hardtail rider will tell you a rigid rear end will help you push a bike through corners. What I liked is that it allowed the seat to sit lower and I could plant both my black boots on the asphalt.

That wasn't the only unusual part of the Rune's suspension. You probably have noticed something quite Rube Goldberg about the bike's front end. Honda took



what is essentially a girder and shock system and cowboy-ed it up. The trailing bottom-link system transfers axle load through pushrods and linkage to upper shocks. It offers 3.9 inches of travel.

The front end works okay but there were a couple of things I didn't like: The fork was just a dummy, essentially steel girders attaching the front wheel to the frame but designed to look like thick hydraulic tubes. The linkage and shock move, not the downtubes. I hate dummy devices, especially on a bike with such an otherwise flowing, functional design. The convoluted array of rods and bars and bolts looks overbuilt, cluttered and heavy and offers no performance advantages over a conventional fork that I could discern.



Dual, full-floating 330mm front and single rear 336mm disc brakes reel in the 790-lb. (dry) bike. The Rune's integrated braking system uses three-piston calipers up front, and a two-piston in the back. When a rider pulls in the front brake lever, the two outer pistons of the front caliper grab the disc. The rear pedal activates both pistons of the rear caliper and the center pistons of the front calipers. When only the rear brake is used, a delay valve "smoothes" the action of the front center pistons.

I guess. This kind of high-tech braking system probably is appreciated more when the going gets wet and grabbing a handful of front brake can lead to a load of hurt. Brakes like this are not found on many hot rods, which tend to keep it clean and simple, if not frugal.

The Rune's beautifully sculptured gas tank holds 6.1 gallons of fuel. At about 35 mpg, that works out to a cruising range of around 200 miles before you're running on fumes, although the bike's gas gauge wasn't so optimistic.

Pictures are too flat to allow you to fully appreciate the Rune's lush curves; the bike is far more impressive in 3D. From the well-matched, swooping, tail-dragger fenders, 1950s-looking chrome radiator grille, five-spoke wheels wrapped in low-profile radial rubber, and hidden handlebar wiring, to the scalloped shaft-drive hub cover, the lines of the Rune flow like butter over a hot bullet. Sitting in the cockpit, the view of the Flash Gordon-like headlight and turn signals made me feel like I was aboard a rocket ship blasting off from a 1960s B-movie. Even the exhaust pipes are so seamlessly circuted into the bike's design they appear to

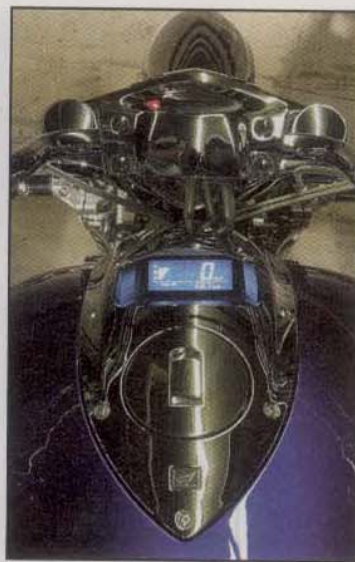
embrace the machine.

The bike's low production numbers and Honda's pronouncement that the Rune will be available for only a single model year have reportedly sent the lofty price higher into the stratosphere as dealers nationwide adjust to "market value," which is a capitalist phenomenon usually associated with Harley dealers. This appears to actually inspire fat-walleted collectors to get their moneyed mitts on as many Runes as they can. Celestial figures such as actor George Clooney bought a garage full of Runes well above sticker for himself and his buds, according to the bike cop, who knew such things.

To help protect George's investment, the factory has developed H.I.S.S., the Honda Ignition Security System. Under the left side of the seat is a lever that locks the front wheel and engages the electronic system, which prevents the ignition from being hot-wired or the ignition switch module from being swiped out. A little red



styling and power, but in something you too often don't find in a custom, even an absurd \$70,000 custom. The bike works. You can ride to the next town or the next



light on the dash blinks its subtle back-off signal.

The Rune's appeal lies not only in its warm

much ensuring the factory custom remains faithful.

We can only hope the Rune's platform will be expanded to include some models for people who don't know George. From Viking mythology, runestones were a tool; alphabetic magic rocks that could predict the future. Perhaps Honda will give them a toss and make the namesake the shape of things to come. **CR**



country confident your cool ride won't leave you begging for help, which is very uncool.

The planned rarity of the bike will discourage aftermarketers from developing parts, and even Honda has no room in their catalog for it, thus pretty

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Rune



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 **HONDA**

► Honda Valkyrie Rune (May/October 2003)

Honda likes to dazzle us with a machine like the Rune once in a while just to remind everyone that its well of engineering capability is nearly bottomless. An amazing motorcycle, to be sure, but too limited and expensive to get our vote for MOTY. Bike of the Decade, maybe?



R 6/04

BEST CRUISER Honda Rune



PHOTO BY BRIAN BLADES

If at the heart of a cruiser beats a need to be noticed, then no other bike brings on the *ooohs* and *ahhhs* quite like the Honda Rune. More than simply an evolution of the GL-powered Valkyrie model, the Rune is the result of big dreams and intense focus groups. Breaking the mold of what people have come to expect of production-built Hondas, all 1832cc and 794 pounds of this \$26,999 beast are about making a statement. For Honda, that would be proving its ability to enter the growing high-dollar custom market without sacrificing the reliability and serviceability its customers demand. As for Rune riders? The answer to what motivates a person to be seen on such a machine is something owners are sure to become very adept at delivering.

CW 7/04

Ridden & Rated
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K1200S Sportbike



Eco-Trekker
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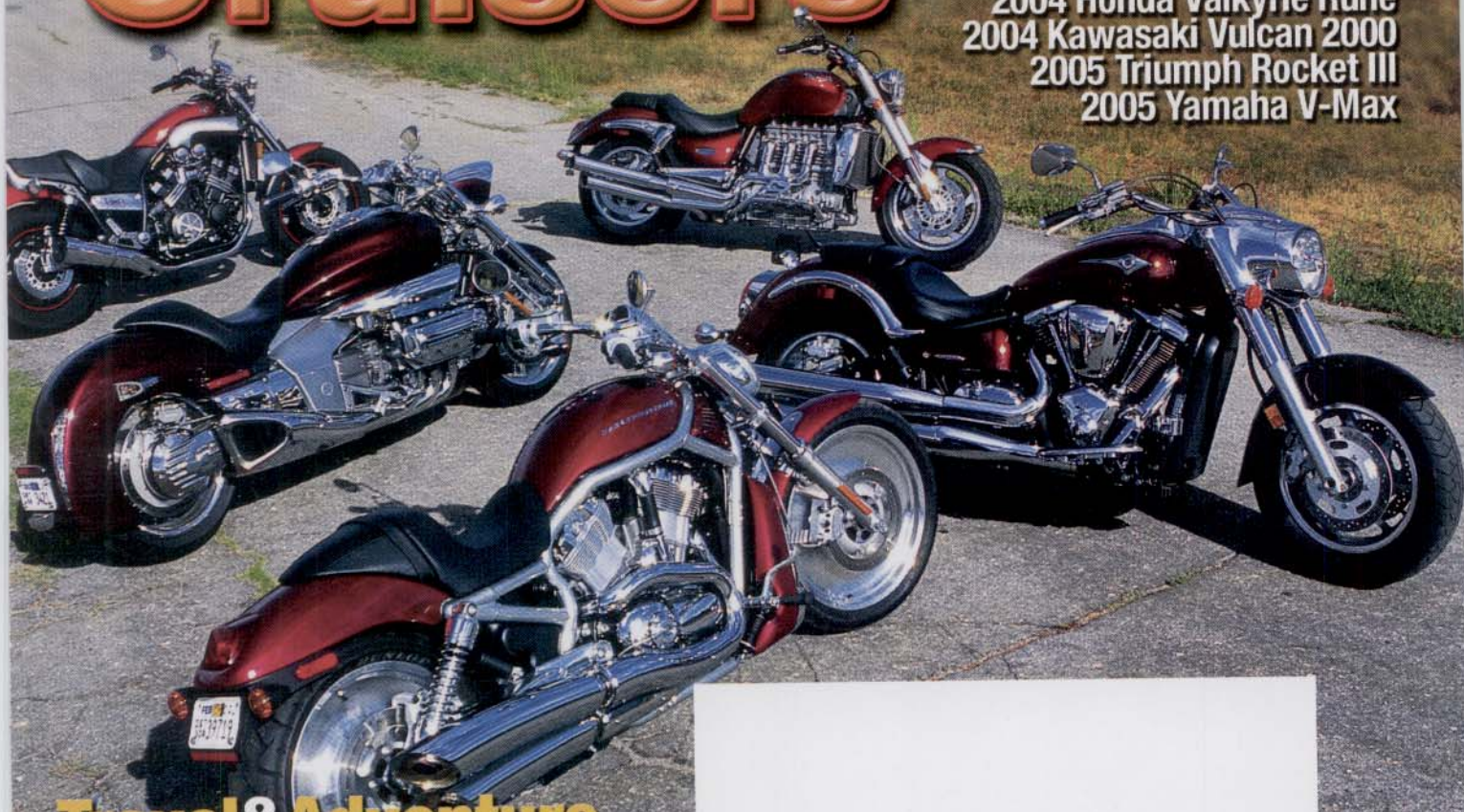
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CENTURY CLUB.**

BY BILL STERMER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICH COX/
SLIDE ACTION



2005 **HARLEY-DAVIDSON** V-ROD
2004 **HONDA** VALKYRIE RUNE
2004 **KAWASAKI** VULCAN 2000
2005 **TRIUMPH** ROCKET III
2005 **YAMAHA** V-MAX



“

...THESE PERFORMANCE CRUISERS WILL BLOW YOU RIGHT OUT OF YOUR FRINGED LEATHERS AND FINGERLESS GLOVES.”

This is America, where we want it big. We know that bigger is better. It's the way we are, and it's part of why we're so successful. We want 20-ounce steaks with supersized drinks. We want fries with that. We want Ford Excursions, Hummers, 45-foot motorhomes, Viagra; we want to appreciate Dolly Parton from a front-row seat. And we want big motorcycles.

In the world of cruisers there's a new wind a-blowin'. It's the wind of the giants, of performance cruisers that are growing ever larger in size and displacement, and ever more powerful. If you still think of cruisers as lazy thump-thumpa V-twins for a laid-back, easygoing sort of riding, these performance cruisers will blow you right out of your fringed leathers and fingerless gloves.

In the past year Honda, Kawasaki and Triumph have all introduced new mega power cruisers that have shaken, not stirred, the cruiser market. The smallest has a displacement of 1,832cc, and to make it even more interesting each has a different engine configuration.

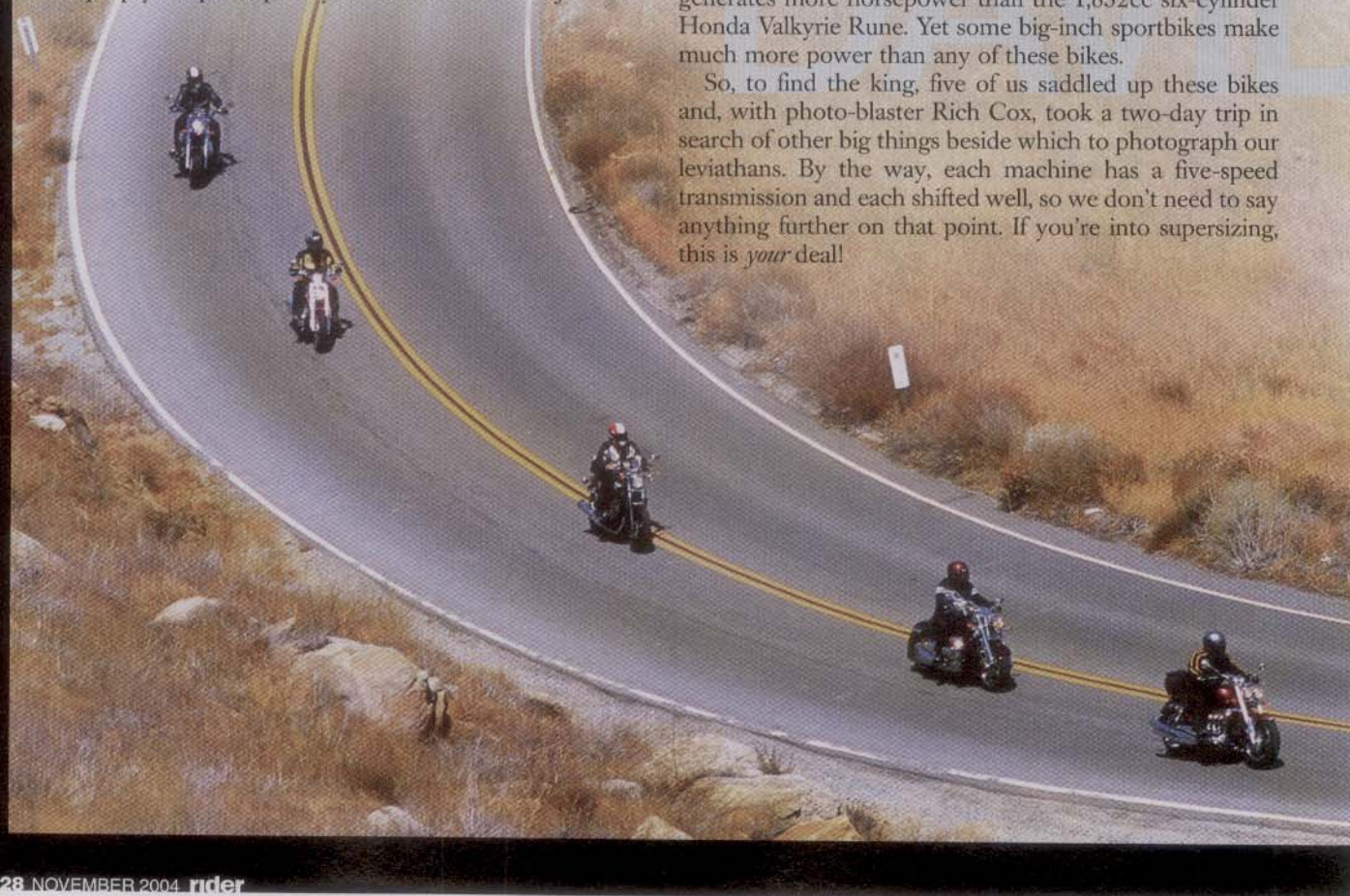
In our search to bring you the best in motorcycling—and to bring ourselves some exciting rides—we decided to throw a little soiree. To it we have invited the gentlemen of the Century Club—the five power cruisers (including those three new models) that generate more than 100 horsepower, or more than 100 lb-ft of torque—or both—at the rear wheel. We're here to identify the king of power cruisers. So why don't you pull up an overstuffed chair, heap up your plate, pour yourself a double and join us?

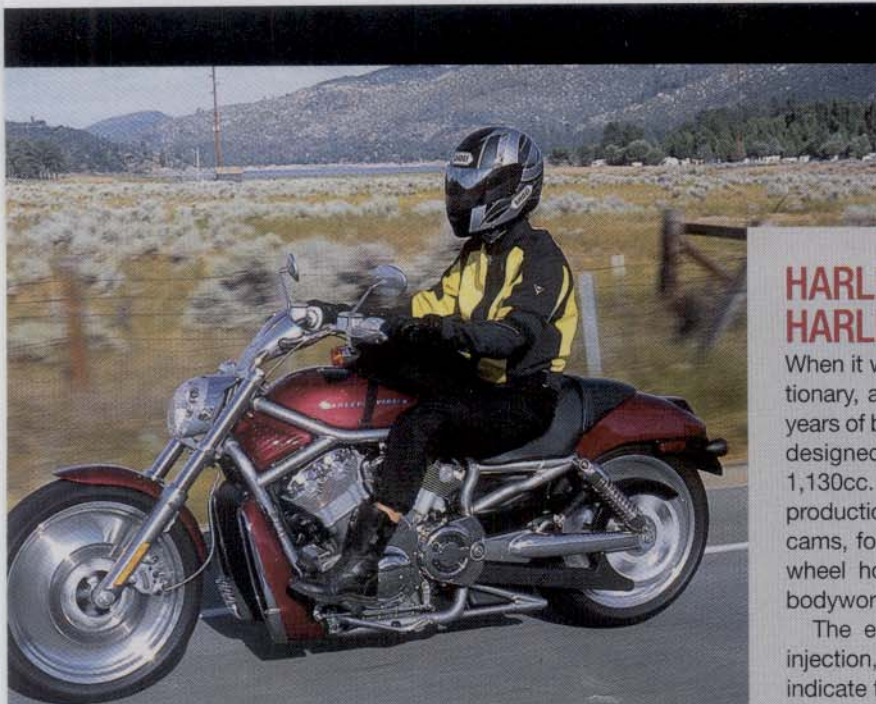
GENTLEMEN CONFIGURED

For starters, the gentlemen of the Century Club represent four engine configurations. The Harley-Davidson V-Rod and Kawasaki Vulcan 2000 are V-twins, which provide the traditional look of a narrow, big-inch engine. Now in its 20th year, Yamaha's graybeard V-Max is a V-4 that still packs a surprising wallop. The Honda Valkyrie Rune's flat, opposed six is not only technologically interesting, but it's also the smoothest engine here. And perhaps most curious of all, new for '05 is Triumph's Rocket III, an in-line triple with the crankshaft running longitudinally along its frame and displacing 2,294cc.

Remember when your uncle rode "a big ol' Harley 74" that displaced 1,200 cubic centimeters? Well, folks, now that we have engines twice that size, the days of calling a 1,200cc engine "big" are officially over. However, with that said, large displacement does not necessarily translate to enormous power. For example the Harley V-Rod, which displaces a mere 1,130cc (and is the smallest in our group), generates more horsepower than the 1,832cc six-cylinder Honda Valkyrie Rune. Yet some big-inch sportbikes make much more power than any of these bikes.

So, to find the king, five of us saddled up these bikes and, with photo-blaster Rich Cox, took a two-day trip in search of other big things beside which to photograph our leviathans. By the way, each machine has a five-speed transmission and each shifted well, so we don't need to say anything further on that point. If you're into supersizing, this is *your* deal!





HARLEY'S VISION HARLEY-DAVIDSON VRSCA V-ROD

When it was introduced for 2002, the V-Rod was revolutionary, a true departure for The Motor Company. After years of big-inch, air-cooled motors, here was a Porsche-designed, 60-degree V-twin engine displacing just 1,130cc. It broke new ground by being the first standard-production Harley with liquid cooling, dual-overhead cams, four valves per cylinder and more than 100 rear-wheel horsepower. And with that anodized-aluminum bodywork, the bike looked clean, fresh, high-tech.

The engine features electronic sequential port fuel injection, and its bore and stroke figures of 100 x 72mm indicate that it's going to be a revver, rather than a traditional tons-o'-grunt Harley. It's all housed in a tubular-steel, double-cradle perimeter frame with a cast-aluminum swingarm, 67.5-inch wheelbase and belt final drive. Our current model cranks out 105.6 horsepower, but only 71.9 lb/ft. of torque, which confirms its revvy (rather than torque-monster) nature. On the road it delivered 38.6 mpg. And now, H-D is offering painted versions of its V-Rod.

We suspect that Harley-Davidson used those big binoculars in the background to look into the future and design this bike for a new generation of riders.

HARLEY-DAVIDSON V-ROD

Straddle the V-Rod, grab the grips atop their long risers, and you'll have to hunt for the pegs. Oh, they're way up front. The V-Rod's seating position is one of the strangest in motorcycling. Imagine a rowing machine, with a sliding seat. As you're rowing, at one point your legs will be stretched out in front as your hands are pulled back near your chest. Hold that pose—you're ready to ride the V-Rod.

The V-Rod feels the lightest of our group, and has a futuristic instrument pod. Fire it up and that Porsche-designed engine exudes a wonderful high-tech whine. Launch it down the road and, with only 71.9 lb-ft of torque, the silky engine has to wind up to where it hits with a hard, seamless rush. Wow, this is way too smooth and powerful to be a Harley!

But that marvelous engine is not well served by its chassis and riding position. In the twisties the bike feels very narrow and tall, and the fork wants to flop in turns. The bike does not hold a line well; steering becomes progressively heavier as the turn tightens. It's just not a confidence-inspiring ride.

Left: Function, comfort, coolness and plain raw power—these power cruisers deliver it all. Above and right: Harley's V-Rod: liquid cooling, sleek styling, a tube-steel frame, 100-plus horsepower and a very strange seating position. Well, four out of five ain't bad.





THE RUNE'S MESSAGE IS WHY SPEND YOUR TIME AND SPARE CHANGE CUSTOMIZING YOUR VALKYRIE, WHEN HONDA CAN DO IT BETTER?



HOT DOG! HONDA VALKYRIE RUNE

Besides huge displacement and horsepower, the other big thing going on with cruisers is customization. The Rune's message is why spend your spare time and spare change customizing your Valkyrie, when Honda can do it for you better? And perhaps they have. While all previous Valkyries were based on the GL1500 Gold Wing engine, the Rune is powered by a slightly hotter version of the 1,832cc engine that powers the Gold Wing 1800. It's fed by six 32mm throttle bodies, and despite being only a two-valve-per-cylinder SOHC engine it delivers 96.3 horsepower and 108.6 lb-ft of torque to the rear wheel via a driveshaft. It's all held together by an aluminum diamond frame with a high-tech, single-sided aluminum swingarm.

The result is a huge motorcycle that weighs 878 pounds wet and has a 68.9-inch wheelbase. It's tarted up with that very functional springer-style fork, stretched tank, radiator grille, tail-dragger rear fender and solo seat. Its 37 mpg isn't bad!

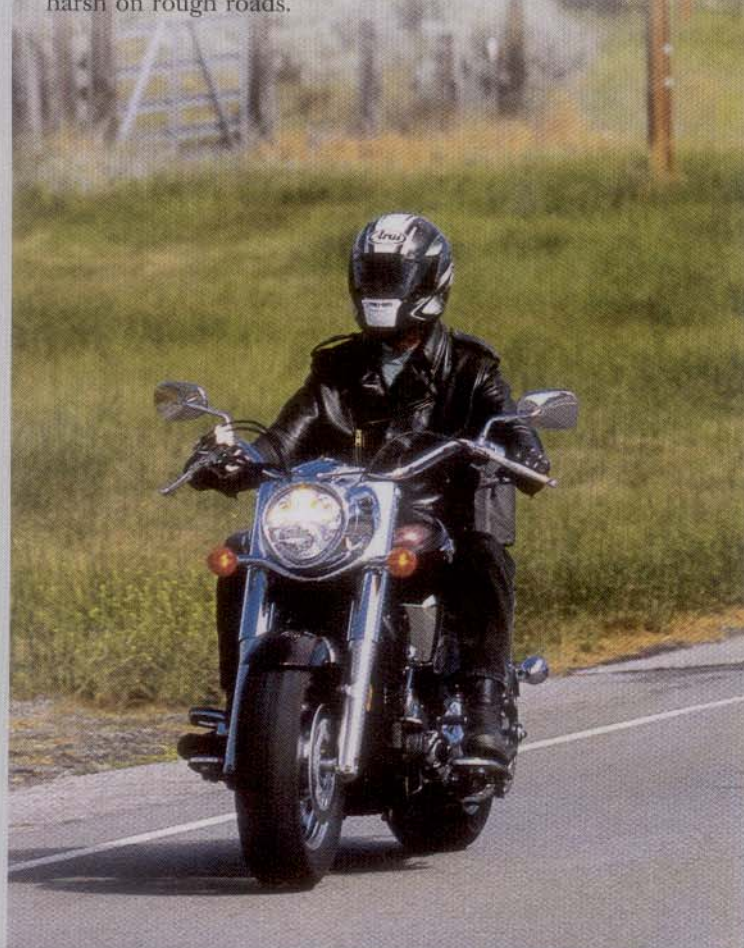
In sports, a "hot dog" is one who plays with a conspicuous amount of flamboyance. Is the well-dressed Rune a hot dog? Well, we shot it at the Tail O' the Pup....

HONDA VALKYRIE RUNE

Honda's Valkyrie Rune, with its six-cylinder engine, is a model of technical sophistication, smoothness and style. The rider sits low on a long, firm, dished seat just 27.2 inches off the ground. It's a long reach to the grips and pegs, so the rider feels somewhat jackknifed. While the seat is firm, it's not uncomfortable. The view forward is of a sea of chrome: chromed bar, risers, fork clamps, tank nacelle, fork caps and that headlight *waaay* out there.

With a sports-car growl the engine comes to life, and as you ride off you'll immediately notice the bike's 878 pounds. That 68.9-inch wheelbase contributes to its massive feel.

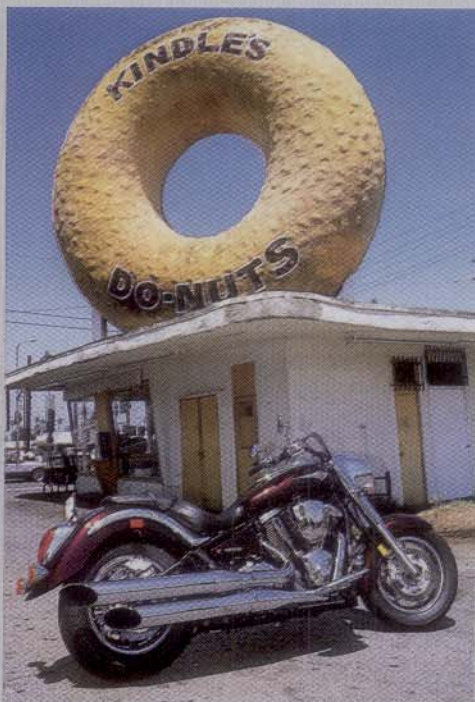
Torque powers it away from stops, and it's a model of engine smoothness. In the twisties its weight causes the cautious rider to steer with deliberation. On the road its springer-style fork works well, but its ride is harsh on rough roads.



Left and right: Style is the Rune's message, but it also delivers in techno points.

Below: Don't let their easy cruisin' mode fool you: These bikes differ greatly in comfort, power and price.





DOLLARS TO DONUTS TO TORQUE KAWASAKI VULCAN 2000

If the V-twin is the quintessential cruiser motor, and if the new 2,053cc Vulcan 2000 offers the largest displacement of any standard-production V-twin, therefore...OK, we get it. Its power, presence, throttle response and pure fun factor caused us to give the new Vulcan 2000 our "Bike of the Year" award. It won the same honor from our sister publication *Cruising Rider*.

Kawasaki's idea was to build a stroker motor, a liquid-cooled, 52-degree undersquare motor with a 103mm bore with looong 123mm stroke that guarantees loads of low-end push power, which is just what a cruiser is all about. Does it work? The result is 96.0 horsepower, with 119.4 lb-ft of torque, and a real grin when you goose it.

Kawasaki keeps it all together with a tubular, cast and box-section steel double-cradle frame with tubular-steel swingarm, belt final drive and 68.3 inches of wheelbase. And it turned 41.1 mpg.

Though some of the bikes in our test weigh as much as the Vulcan, none feels as hefty, thanks in part to the Vulcan's overly short sidestand. Perhaps Mr. V. spent too much time at the donut shop.

KAWASAKI VULCAN 2000

A performance cruiser should deliver a good dose of controllable power, and should not distract from the rider's ability to use that power forcefully—to enjoy the ride. In both of those areas, the Vulcan 2000 scored extremely well.

The biggest Vulcan offers the most spread-out riding position of these bikes, with a very low, wide beach-cruiser-style bar. Its seat is firm, which bothered some—but not all—of our riders. What may be intimidating to some is the short sidestand, which forces the

rider to deadlift the bike once it's parked. The rider's view is of that massive tank and wide bar with the huge, chromed, multilensed headlight.

Underway the Vulcan 2000 makes the most delicious V-twin rumble of our five, and retains that "pulse feel" so basic to cruising. Hard throttle twists will put a grin on your silly mug as 119.4 lb-ft of torque rushes you out of corners. You're always aware it's a massive machine, especially at low speeds, yet it has that compliant, unhurried feel of luxury.

Above and left: The largest-displacement standard-production V-twin on the planet? You're looking at it—Kawasaki's smooth new 2,053cc Vulcan 2000.





Above and below:
Unhand those bars,
Rexy. The Rocket III
is 2 fast 4 U!

TRIUMPH ROCKET III

When one hears of a 2.3-liter engine in a motorcycle, many thoughts leap to mind: a fat, enormous, nasty, difficult, hard-to-control lump. But in the case of the Rocket III, none of those is appropriate. In fact, the Rocket III is lighter than the Rune and Vulcan; pull it off the sidestand and it seems 100 pounds lighter than either.

This triple idles like a typical multi, and has the light clutch pull of a 500cc bike. Around town the big, torquey engine is docile and smooth. But yank the throttle and suddenly it leaps up on that big 240-series rear tire and hauls posterior!

With its seat long, and grips widely spaced, the seating position is more like that of a standard than a cruiser. While steering takes some effort, handling is always predictable. The cushy seat offers uncommon comfort, and overall the Rocket III feels relaxed and understressed.

On the road the Triumph offers a choppy ride on rough surfaces. There are some little vibes in the grips and in the seat at higher rpm, but overall it feels like a very understressed, docile bike...till you whack that throttle.

T-REX TRIUMPH ROCKET III

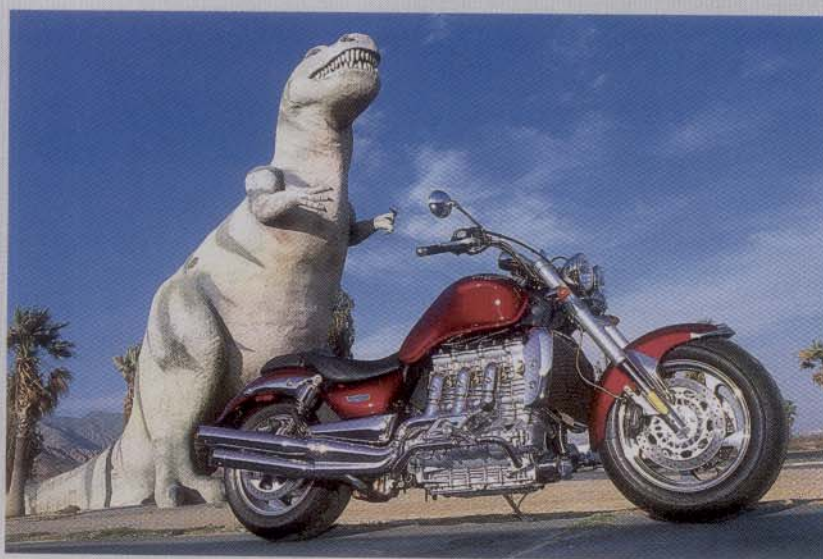
At 2,294cc, this 2005 Triumph Rocket III holds the distinction of having the largest engine displacement of any standard production motorcycle, though its 127.2 horsepower has been eclipsed by many big sportbikes.

What's so unusual is that the Rocket III (Triumph borrowed its name from BSA's past) utilizes a liquid-cooled, longitudinal in-line triple, a configuration that hasn't been seen since dinosaur days—if then. However, with a DOHC design and four valves per cylinder, its layout and internals are quite modern, and it utilizes Sagem electronic fuel injection. It's packaged as a stressed-member engine hung from a tubular-steel, twin-backbone frame with a 66.7-inch wheelbase, and carries Triumph's first driveshaft.

Despite its bulky look and 798-pound wet weight, the Rocket III feels much lighter. Factor in its enormous 140.8 lb-ft of torque, and it flat rips! Power, weight and

torque come at a price, however. The Triumph converted each gallon of liquid dinosaur into only 31.3 miles of travel.

Hey, with this kind of power, torque and appetite, one could say that the Rocket III is the T-Rex of modern-day motorcycles.





DINOSAUR YAMAHA V-MAX

Mister Max has been around 20 years now, and the 2005 model carries a special badge on the tank that calls attention to that anniversary, along with flame paint. When introduced in 1985 this liquid-cooled, Venture-derived, 1,198cc, 70-degree V-four was the world's first power cruiser, a bruiser with dual-overhead cams and four valves per cylinder, all hooked to a drive-shaft. And it has V-Boost, a system that opens a butterfly valve between the two sets of intake runners at 6,000 rpm and allows each cylinder to pull mixture from both carburetors.

What's really amazing is that, in the highly competitive world of

big-inch motorcycles, the V-Max has survived 20 years with few changes. It got a bigger fork and front wheel for '93, and our test unit generated 111.8 horsepower with 79 lb-ft of torque. The engine is still ensconced in that tubular-steel frame with a 62.6-inch wheelbase that seemed lengthy at the time, but has since been surpassed by small cruisers like Yamaha's own 650 V Star line. It turned 37.8 mpg in our test.

In motorcycle years, the V-Max is an old model. How old? Well, when we photographed it with the apatosaurus, the latter said, "Hey Maxie, where you been da last 50 million years? I t'ought you was extinct."

YAMAHA V-MAX

Stylewise the V-Max has the look of a bodybuilder, narrow-waisted and broad in the shoulders. It seems to be all engine, with those dummy air intakes beside the "tank;" fuel is actually carried below the seat.

Aboard the V-Max, you immediately perceive that you're on an old motorcycle, changed little since its introduction two decades ago. While modern cruisers have evolved to long wheelbases with low seats and spread-out riding positions, with 30.1 inches of seat height, the V-Max retains that compact, sit-up-and-beg position of '80s cruisers. The rider is upright, scooted forward by that tilted seat, the weight on the rear of the bum, hands close to the fork.

Turn the key and Mr. Max erupts into life with a heavy, boiling idle. At 626 pounds it's relatively light, which makes maneuvering and handling easier. Its old damper-rod fork is not up to modern standards, and there does not seem to be much difference among its five shock damping positions.

By comparison, handling is light and agile, a gazelle among elephants. Wind 'er up to 6,000 rpm and suddenly the V-Boost kicks in, when Mr. Max want to rip your arms out, till up past 8,000 rpm. As you'll see from our conclusions in the lunge-off, this ol' gal can still bring it on, a whomping good engine stuck in a doddering chassis.

Above and below:
The V-Max's tire size, styling and seating position all scream "1980's Motorcycle!"



THE LUNGE-OFF

The whole idea behind a power cruiser is what happens once you twist that throttle and the brute launches forward. These brutes all lunge, so we performed roll-on contests among them.

First, understand that these bikes fall into two groups, the torquers and the revvers. While the Rocket III, Rune and Vulcan all make more than 108 lb-ft of torque, the V-Rod and V-Max both make under 80. The latter are the revvers, so we ran them against each other first. There, Mr. Max flat ran away from the Harley—very impressive.

Then we faced off the other three, where the Vulcan initially out-grunted the Rune, but when the Kawi hit the rev limiter and shifted, the Rune kept pulling. Then the Rocket III blew both their doors off; as you can see in the photos, neither bike has doors.

In the championship round, 1985 vs. 2005, the Triumph bolted away from the V-Max. Turns out the former really is a rocket, and the roll-on king of our test.

WHADDAWE WANT?

After our ride, I asked each of our test riders to comment on each machine, and to select the one on which he or she would choose to repeat the ride—and which they would designate in second place. There was an amazing amount of agreement among four men and a woman of a variety of sizes and weights.

The general consensus was that the Harley V-Rod was our least favorite. While everyone loved its engine smoothness and power, all commented negatively on the handling and ergonomics. Its feet-forward riding position was awkward—with the hands too close in to the body—and the bike felt heavy and uncertain in turns.

There was a similar amount of puzzlement over Honda's Valkyrie Rune. Sure, its styling turned heads (for \$26,999 it certainly *should*), but the bike felt very bulky, especially at low speeds, and has a rough ride. Its seating position was preferred only to that of the V-Rod.

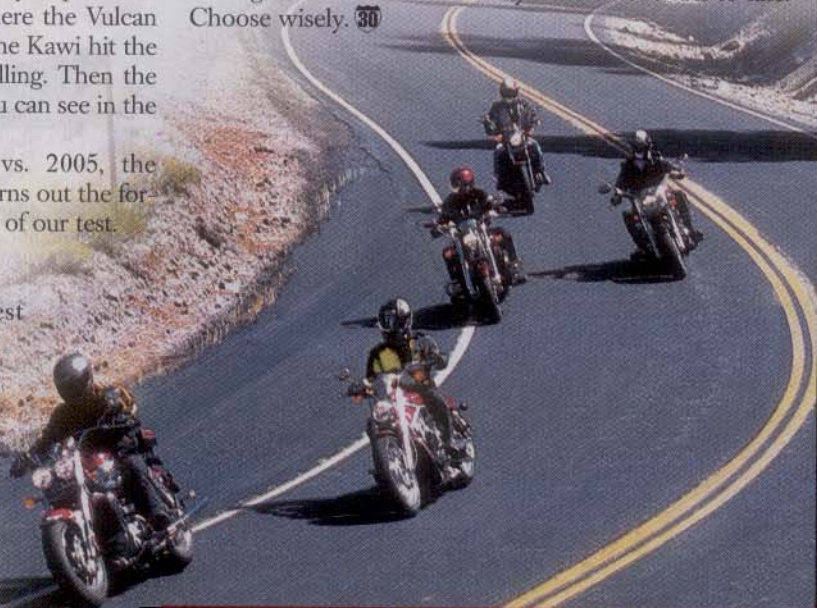
Despite its age we liked the V-Max, particularly when we twisted its throttle hard. While it looks and feels and rides like an old motorcycle, at least it's an old motorcycle with its tail on fire.

The bike that was first or second on everyone's list was the new Triumph Rocket III. Even with its 798-pound wet weight the bike felt relatively nimble. It's got decent cornering clearance, a fairly comfortable riding position, engine smoothness, and its controls make it easy to ride. But what really made us grin was how docile it was, yet with a huge amount of controllable power on tap. And it has wonderful brakes. There is something very appealing about 127.2 horsepower and 140.8 lb-ft of torque, especially when they

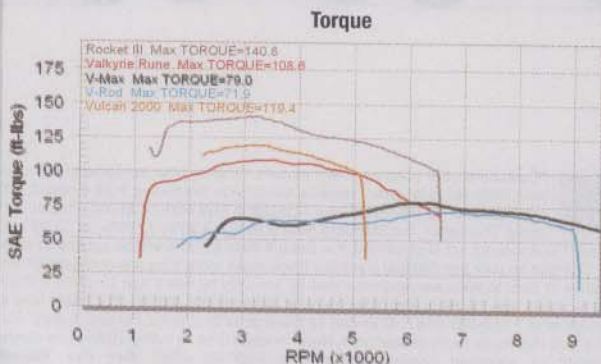
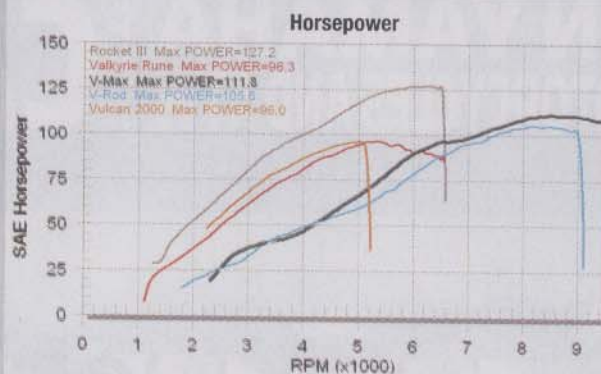
come in such a controllable, friendly form. It's one hoot to ride, and it's the new king of the power cruisers.

In second place we chose the Kawasaki Vulcan 2000 for its torque coming out of corners, its seating position (though we wished for a less-firm seat), that wonderful sound and presence. The bike feels much heavier than it should; that short sidestand has to go. If you want a traditional V-twin cruiser, it's your choice.

You like 'em big; we like 'em big. Among the super-sized gentlemen of the Century Club there's lots to like. Choose wisely. **30**



Power Cruisers on the Dyno



2005 Triumph Rocket III	2004 Honda Valkyrie Rune	2005 Yamaha V-Max	2005 Harley-Davidson VRSCA V-Rod	2004 Kawasaki Vulcan 2000
Base Price: \$15,990	\$25,499	\$11,099	\$16,995	\$14,499
Price as Tested:	\$26,999 (Chrome wheels)			
Warranty: 2 yrs., unlt. miles	Three yrs., unlt. miles	1 yr., unlt. miles	1 yr., unlt. miles	1 yr., unlt. miles
ENGINE				
Type: Liquid-cooled, longitudinal in-line triple	Liquid-cooled, longitudinal opposed flat six	Liquid-cooled, transverse, 70-degree V-4	Liquid-cooled, transverse 60-degree V-twin	Liquid-cooled, transverse 52-degree V-twin
Displacement: 2,294cc	1,832cc	1,198cc	1,130cc	2,053cc
Bore x Stroke: 101.6 x 94.3mm	74.0 x 71.0mm	76.0 x 66.0mm	100.0 x 72.0mm	103.0 x 123.2mm
Compression Ratio: 8.7:1	9.8:1	10.5:1	11.3:1	9.5:1
Valve Train: DOHC, 4 valves per cyl.	SOHC, 2 valves per cyl.	DOHC, 4 valves per cyl.	DOHC, 4 valves per cyl.	OHV, 4 valves per cyl.
Valve Adj. Interval: 10,000 miles	32,000 miles	12,000 miles	15,000 miles	NA
Fuel Delivery: Sagem electronic fuel injection	PGM-FI fuel injection w/ automatic choke, 32mm throttle bodies x 6	Mikuni 35mm CV x 4	Electronic sequential port fuel injection	Electronic fuel injection w/ 46mm throttle bodies x 2
Lubrication System: Dry sump, 5.7-qt. cap.	Wet sump, 4.9-qt. cap.	Wet sump, 3.9-qt. cap.	Wet sump, 4.0-qt. cap.	Semi-dry sump, 3.1-qt. cap.
Transmission: 5-speed, cable-actuated wet clutch	Five-speed, hydraulically actuated wet clutch	5-speed, hydraulically actuated wet clutch	5-speed, hydraulically actuated wet clutch	5-speed, cable-actuated wet clutch
Final Drive: Shaft, 2.846:1	Shaft, 2.917:1	Shaft, 2.851:1	Belt	Belt
ELECTRICAL				
Ignition: Digital electronic	Computer-controlled digital w/ 3D mapping	Digital T.C.I.	Electronic	Electronic digital
Charging Output: 574 watts max.	1,100 watts max.	315 watts max.	494 watts max.	535 watts max.
Battery: 12V 18AH	12V 18AH	12V 18AH	12V 12AH	12V 18AH
CHASSIS				
Frame: Tubular-steel twin-tube backbone w/ engine as stressed member & steel swingarm	Aluminum diamond w/ tubular-steel seat sub-frame and single-sided aluminum swingarm	Tubular-steel double cradle w/ steel swingarm	Tubular-steel double-cradle perimeter w/ cast aluminum swingarm	Tubular, cast and box-section steel double-cradle w/ tubular-steel swingarm
Wheelbase: 66.7 in.	68.9 in.	62.6 in.	67.5 in.	68.3 in.
Rake/Trail: 32 degrees/6.0 in.	29 degrees/4.9 in.	29 degrees/4.8 in.	34 degrees/3.9 in.	32 degrees/7.2 in.
Seat Height: 29.1 in.	27.2 in.	30.1 in.	27.1 in.	26.8 in.
Suspension, Front: 43mm male-slider telescopic fork w/ 4.7-in. stroke	Trailing bottom link w/ 3.9-in. travel	43mm stanchions, adj. for air pressure, 5.5-in. travel	49mm stanchions w/ 3.9-in. stroke	Front: 49mm stanchions w/ 5.9-in. travel
Rear: Dual shocks, adj. for spring preload w/ 4.1-in. travel	Unit Pro-Link w/ single shock & 3.9-in. travel	Dual shocks, adj. for spring preload & rebound damping, 3.9-in. travel	Dual shocks, adj. for spring preload w/ 2.4-in. stroke	Single shock, adj. for spring preload and rebound damping w/ 3.9-in. travel
Brakes, Front: Dual discs w/ opposed 4-piston calipers	Dual floating discs w/ 3-piston calipers	Dual discs w/ opposed 4-piston calipers	Dual discs w/ opposed 4-piston calipers	Dual discs w/ opposed 4-piston calipers
Rear: Single disc w/ 2-piston pin-slide caliper	Single disc w/ 2-piston caliper	Single disc w/ opposed 2-piston caliper	Single disc w/ opposed 4-piston caliper	Single disc w/ 2-piston caliper
Wheels, Front: Cast, 3.5 x 17 in.	Cast, 4.0 x 18 in.	Cast, 2.15 x 18	Cast disc, 3.0 x 19 in.	Cast, 3.50 x 16 in.
Rear: Cast, 7.5 x 16 in.	Cast, 6.0 x 17 in.	Cast, 3.50 x 15	Cast disc, 5.5 x 18 in.	Cast, 6.00 x 16 in.
Tires, Front: 150/80-VR17	150/60-VR18	110/90-V18	120/70-ZR19	150/80-R16
Rear: 240/50-VR16	180/55-VR17	150/90-V15	180/55-ZR18	200/60-R16
Wet Weight: 798 lbs.	878 lbs.	626 lbs.	620 lbs.	814 lbs.
Load Capacity: 489 lbs.	275 lbs.	474 lbs.	402 lbs.	412 lbs.
GVWR: 1,287 lbs.	1,153 lbs.	1,100 lbs.	1,022 lbs.	1,226
PERFORMANCE				
Fuel Capacity: 6.6 gals, warning light on last 1.6 gals.	6.2 gals., last 0.8 gal. warning light on	4.0 gals.	3.7 gals., last 1.5 gal. warning light on	5.5 gals., last 1.1 gals. warning light on
Average mpg: 31.3	37.0	37.8	38.6	41.1
Estimated Range: 207 miles	229 miles	151 miles	143 miles	226 miles
Indicated rpm at 60 mph: 2,200	NA	3,900	4,000	NA

2x2

Honda Rune vs. Harley Screamin' Eagle V-Rod

Style and performance in two high-roller cruisers

BY STEVE ANDERSON

YOU CAN MAKE AN ARGUMENT THAT BOTH THE HONDA Rune and the Harley V-Rod represent the motorcycle most alien to their respective companies' traditions. The Rune is perhaps the first Honda motorcycle styled before it was engineered and one of the few where the stylists held the highest ground throughout its development. In fact, the design process for the Rune was very similar to how Harley-Davidson developed the V-Rod—except at Harley it was Willie G. Davidson holding the engineers' feet to the fire.

But the V-Rod breaks other traditions. It's the first Harley Twin in recent memory to embrace the latest trends

in engine design. Harley hired Porsche to create its engine using Harley's 60-degree VR race mill as a rough template, and the Germans equipped it with liquid-cooling, short strokes, big bores, four valves per cylinder and a downdraft intake system. It's about as far as you can get from Harley's conventional long-stroke, air-cooled, pushrod Big Twin.

For 2005, the V-Rod has become more so, with the introduction of the VRSCSE 1250cc Screamin' Eagle V-Rod, a product of Harley's Custom Vehicle Operations department. As well as all the glitter added (more on that later) by CVO, the engine was thoroughly hot-rodged. It's not easy to get more power out of a V-Rod, because the



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HARLEY-DAVIDSON CVO V-ROD

Price \$24,495
 Dry weight..... 629 lb.
 Wheelbase..... 67.9 in.
 Seat height..... 27.9 in.
 Fuel mileage... 32 mpg
 0-60 mph..... 3.6 sec.
 1/4-mile..... 11.86 sec.
 @ 115.19 mph
 Horsepower... 105.7 bhp
 @ 8000 rpm
 Torque..... 73.4 ft.-lbs.
 @ 6700 rpm
 Top speed..... 131 mph

Ups

- ▲ One fast Harley
- ▲ Narrow and light compared to new mega-cruisers
- ▲ Smooth and refined

Downs

- ▼ Over the top with P&A accessories
- ▼ You have to rev it to use all the power
- ▼ Steering feels as if it wants to fall into corners

engineers have already grabbed all the low-hanging fruit. But the new Screamin' Eagle model increases power and torque both by 10 percent—and no wonder. The new 105mm pistons it uses increase displacement from 1130cc to 1250. Each and every cylinder head is ported by a CNC-milling machine to provide enough flow to support the bigger displacement, and the cases are bored for bigger cylinder liners. According to Mike Kull, CVO team manager of the VRSCSE project, the larger engine went through the same durability testing as the 1130cc V-Rod engine, and meets all Motor Company durability requirements for a standard production V-Rod. That's not true of all CVO Screamin' Eagle models; the 103-cubic-inch Twin Cam strokers, for example, don't have to pass the entire extended durability test gamut.

The Rune, in contrast, borrows its 1800cc, flat-Six engine from the Gold Wing. The retuning is mild, with an exhaust system designed for a more pleasing note, and six individual throttle bodies replacing the one-per-bank used on the Wing. The result is a smooth, low-revving powerplant with the fat low-end and midrange torque curve of a classic American V-Eight car engine. Despite its 1800cc, the Rune is no match for the V-Rod in the peak power department, measuring 97 horsepower on our dyno, compared to the 106 of the CVO V-Rod.

No, it's not in the power department that Honda went wild with the Rune. Instead, it's in the styling. Stretching out on a



68.9-inch wheelbase (the longest in regular production motorcycling), the Rune looks longer yet, with a headlight assembly that reaches far forward of the front axle line and a fender that wraps low over the back wheel. The unusual trailing-link front suspension adds to the stretched look, with a beam designed to (unnecessarily) mirror telescopic forks in appearance angled forward at a much shallower angle than the steering head, and again reaching forward of the axle. The overall style of the Rune might best be described as "ZZ Top Moderne," the smooth rendering of Thirties automotive shapes into almost Bauhaus-simple forms, a style popularized by American hot-rod artists such as Boyd Coddington with his "Cadzilla." The Rune combines these Oakland Roadster Show forms with subtle high-tech, such as the illuminated instrument panel buried in the tank or the flush LED brake lights buried in the back fender.

Despite the Honda's emphasis on style, though, it remains a surprisingly functional motorcycle. When you first lift it from its sidestand, you immediately notice its bulk—at 841 pounds, this single-seat motorcycle is neither for the short-legged nor the weak. A push on the start button has its engine humming to life instantly and smoothly. Acceleration is strong, with the feeling of effortless power available everywhere, from 1500 rpm to redline. Despite what appears to be a ridiculously raked-out front



HONDA RUNE

Price \$26,999
 Dry weight..... 841 lb.
 Wheelbase..... 69.4 in.
 Seat height..... 27.3 in.
 Fuel mileage... 36 mpg
 0-60 mph..... 4.0 sec.
 1/4-mile..... 12.62 sec.
 @ 108.12 mph
 Horsepower... 97.0 bhp
 @ 5300 rpm
 Torque..... 108.8 ft.-lbs.
 @ 3300 rpm
 Top speed..... 123 mph

Ups

- ▲ Unmistakable style
- ▲ Smooth, torquey power
- ▲ Slick detailing
- ▲ Still hard to believe this is production

Downs

- ▼ Unmistakable style
- ▼ Undeniable weight
- ▼ Lots to polish



end (an illusion provided by the trailing-link front suspension), steering geometry is actually cruiser conventional, and steering is linear and reassuring. Indeed, if you're the least bit aggressive, you'll soon have the long pavement feelers on the ends of the footpegs scraping, a sign in this case of limited cornering clearance instead of hero status. But the big machine will carve solidly and reassuringly around a turn while its peg throws sparks. On the highway, the Rune is a comfortable ride, at least up to illegal speeds where the lack of wind protection and the upright riding position turns rider into sail.

Get off the huge Rune and onto the V-Rod and you feel you're entering another universe, a universe where motorcycle riders are slightly smaller than Shaq. The V-Rod, with its 67.5-inch wheelbase and 629 pounds, is far from a small motorcycle, but it feels bicycle-like in comparison to the Rune. With only two cylinders, its engine doesn't have



2 the Honda's turbine smoothness, either, though its idle and general refinement place it in a different league than machines powered by other Harley engines. The V-Rod pulls adequately from low rpm, but if you short-shifted it like a Big Twin, you'd never realize it has performance to burn. It starts pulling hard at about 4500 to 5000 rpm, and then sings to its redline. The gearbox shifts precisely, but with higher effort and more mechanical feel than that of most Japanese machines. The clutch in the Screamin' Eagle has had its capacity increased via stiffer springs, and the lever requires a moderate pull, more than that of the 1800cc Rune.

Handling of the V-Rod requires some adjustment. Willie G. wanted the V-Rod to look like a drag racer, machines that have their front ends raked out for high-speed stability without concern for other handling virtues. Harley engineers made that work, more or less, with offset triple-

clamps that hold the forks at an extreme 38 degrees while the steering angle is only (!) 34 degrees. But when you first take a slow-speed corner on the V-Rod, this steering geometry produces the somewhat unnerving feeling that the front end wants to fall into the corner. Once you've gotten used to this, you'll find the V-Rod capable of cornering harder than the Rune or most other cruisers. And the suspension of the V-Rod absorbs bumps noticeably better than that of the relatively short-travel Honda.

The CVO V-Rod has stepped away from the elemental look of the original aluminum-clad VRSC. The frame is now powder-coated to match the bodywork, and the surfaces that were once clearcoated aluminum are now covered with busy paint schemes. And, in CVO tradition, parts from Harley's P&A catalog have been shoveled on. There's the fuel gauge that always glows at you brightly from the top of the airbox cover (the apparent fuel tank), the bright chrome belt cover and wheels, and then there's that ignition key. Gold in color, inlaid with black and imitation mother of pearl, with an end that looks like it was copied from a Victorian skeleton key, the CVO key is bling-bling that deserves to be dangling from a chain around Tony Soprano's neck, nestling down into his chest hairs. Can you say "over the top?"

In almost every other way, the V-Rod is an admirable motorcycle, a Harley for those who demand more refinement and more performance than provided by the Motor Company's traditional models. Similarly, the Rune delivers more showbike style than any previous Honda. But is one better than the other? Not really. These are two essentially incomparable motorcycles, each so unique in the world of motorcycling that you probably already know if either is for you—or not. □

