

# THE LIGHTEST SHOW ON EARTH (and what Gary did next)

In August 1966, at Pescadero, California, Gary Fisher, who most likely should have been in high school that day, first met The Grateful Dead at the Tour De Mar, a bike race they were supporting. Forty-four years later, he has the poster up on the wall of his bright new apartment just up from Haight Street where The Dead were then living in 'a Victorian', one of those painted wooden houses so redolent of San Francisco, now a place of pilgrimage for Deadheads from around the world.

Gary has recently moved back here to the Haight from Marin County across the Bay to tap into the new energy of the city. He senses change now much as he felt in the mid-60s. But back then? Hippies at bike races? It's not the usual image of the Summer of Love.

"The Grateful Dead were promoting a bike race because bikes were 'a good thing'," says Gary. "The bands liked the idea of bikes. We were all gung-ho to do the right thing ecologically. Back then we were young and we knew what was right. We just knew human beings should re-connect with nature and anyone who didn't see that was stupid. Using bikes instead of burning gas was part of everything that was going to change. That was the message; the bands were the Messengers.

"Well, the bands corrupted themselves, but a lot of the message stuck..."

The list of the San Francisco bands that were about to take that message around the world reads like a Who's Who of rock now. Along with The Dead, there were the New Riders of the Purple Sage, Quicksilver Messenger Service, Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother and the Holding Company, and so on and on. For a lot of them cycling was either ecological symbolism or a fad, or maybe both but for some, like The Dead's Bob Weir, it became an obsession.

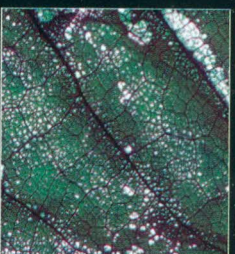
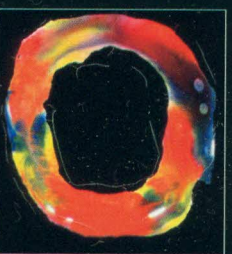
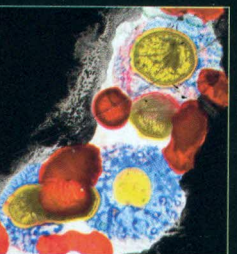
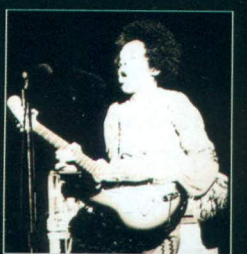
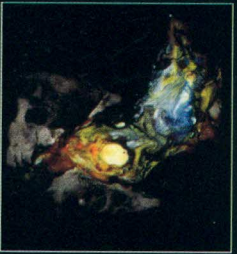
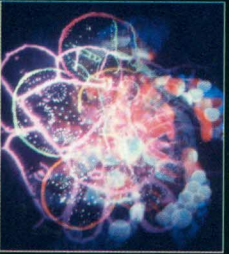
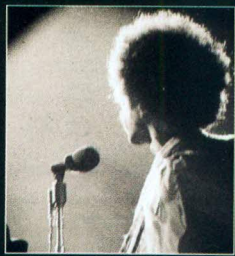
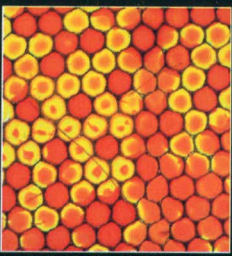
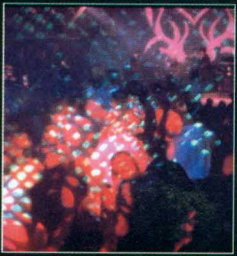
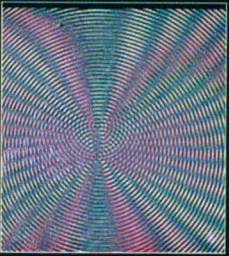
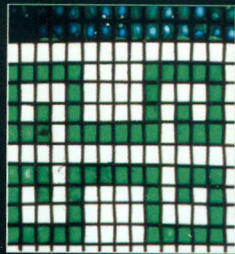
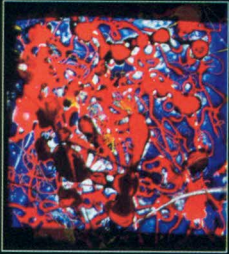
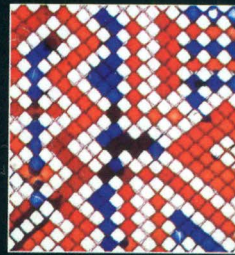
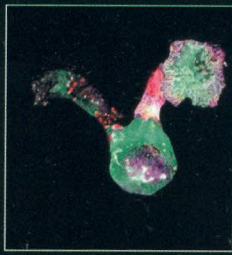
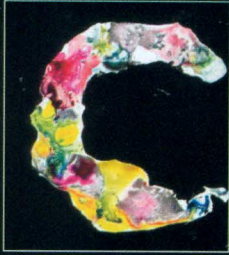
Fisher, then 16, had arrived at Pescadero from a different starting point: he was there, primarily, because he was obsessed with racing road bikes and had been since he was 12. His bubbling enthusiasm appealed to the band and soon he had left home and was rooming with The Dead on Haight Street. Tall and skinny, they called him Spidey.

Gary started operating a light show and was well liked on the developing Haight scene, although not so much appreciated by the American Cycling Federation, who took away his Junior Racing Licence because he had hair down to his waist.

They should have waited a few years. It's all gone now.

The images throughout this article are Gary's - lightshow slides, photos of Hendrix and the like, early road rides, characters and curiosities from his own collection.







**“When the hippies cleared out of San Francisco heading for the hills they took their bikes with them and adapted them to ride away from the cars, the concrete and the cops. The mountain bike is a gift from the '60s and Gary wrapped it.”**

**B**ut the hippies haven't gone, of course. They were the baby boomers, they are still running half the world and their values are now embedded in mainstream culture. Admittedly if you threw a party today with a Summer of Love theme, people would take the piss, dress up in afro wigs with headbands and stagger around stinking of patchouli oil mumbling mystic cant, but there was something mould-breaking happening underneath all that.

It was the beginning of a culture centred on the young; the start of a sexual revolution (both hetero and homo), the beginning of a new democracy in art (both visual and musical), and the first stirrings of the eco movement – an emerging awareness that its burden of people would inevitably destroy the planet.

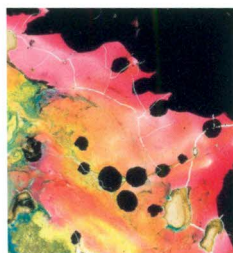
And, ergo, that bicycles are a good thing.

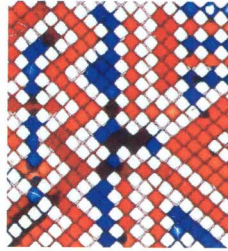
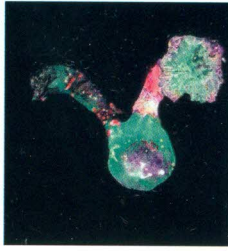
You can overdo these things (maybe I just did). NorCal in the 60s was hardly the French Revolution and jolly Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but most of the things that make dictatorial hard men of both the left and the right choke on their own vomit owe their latest re-invention to those damn hippies.

The San Francisco hippy period is a thing of legend and so much follows from the period that it's hard to credit it all happened in so short a time, and was driven by so few people. The psychedelic drug phenomenon, for example, was effected almost entirely by the novelist Ken Kesey and his magic busload of 'Merry Pranksters', which included some notable old-school beatniks. They travelled around circus-style, supported musically by The Grateful Dead, turning people on to the (then) legal drug, LSD.

Just a bus load. Just a spoonful.

That didn't start until after 1962 when Kesey's book *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* gave him the money to move to California and spread the word about this wonderful substance that could change everything. Ironically, it was the CIA, a body dedicated to the dictum that 'everything' should not change any time soon, that turned him on; they





started testing psychotropic drugs for military applications in 1959 and Kesey was one of the guinea pigs who saw applications that were not in the least military. The Agency has a genius for creating its own worst nightmares – Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Hippies...

So you can say things really got going in 1964. But by 1969, following the Manson murders and the killing of Meredith Hunter during a set by the Rolling Stones at a free festival around a little known speedway circuit, it was pretty much all over. The Dead organised that festival and Gary was involved too.

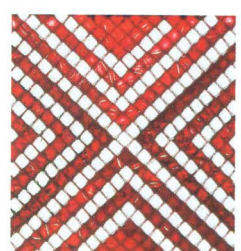
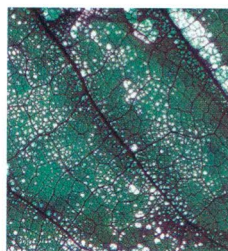
“We really didn’t help by organising Altamont,” he allows. “Afterwards the scene in the Haight sort of exploded and all the original people left town. After the Manson thing and Altamont we just wanted to get away into the hills. You’ve got to remember that most people on the scene knew Charles Manson.”

The hippy demarche from post-war American culture was based, as has been, perhaps, too often mentioned, on love, peace and trust; a state devoutly to be wished but rare in human history. If a loose handful of chemicals really could change ‘homo-not-so-very-sapiens-after-all’ enough to make such a thing possible it would, indeed, have been a wonderful revolution; if, in reality, they didn’t change anything much, was it more than a golden generation, who already had it all, being fantastically naïve?

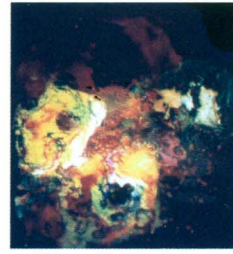
Savants or suckers? The mayhem of 1969 said it sucked.

But the music didn’t. Where there had been rhythm and blues, folk and country music, there was, suddenly, a form of rock which was all of these things and none of them with a melodic edge and a touch of old music hall humour and brio. It was genius, so how did that all happen so fast?

“There were about ten great bands in the Bay Area who all knew each other and heard each other a lot. People copied things, adapted things, sat up all night under the influence of all sorts of drugs trying stuff out. The melody side owes a lot to cowboy music. It’s thought of as redneck music now but in those days it was cool.”








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“Was Gary Fisher a hippy? Yeah, absolutely. I hung with the Dead. I took Kesey’s Acid Test. I went to jail with Timothy Leary’s son Jack. I saw Jack last week, he has three of my bikes.”

Drugged up musicians played to drugged out audiences who needed something to look at, something to do with their bloodshot eyes. And that something was the liquid light show which Gary became heavily involved in.

Remember light shows? I hope so because it’s as hard to explain the light show to anyone under 40 as it is to convince them patchouli oil could be anything more than an insect repellent. That sad thing you may have on your computer, going by the grandiose name of iTunes Classic Visualizer, is an attempt to recreate the light show on your screen, although it dies on its arse in comparison. In the 60s the job was done using oils and dyes activated by the heat from projector lights. The colours expanded and squirmed organically on the walls and ceilings like an idea forming deep in the mind while the music thundered through speaker stacks piled high in tribute to the Tower of Babel, with cavernous bass cabs moving oceans of incense-laden air. The visual result could be anything from lava lamp lame to a cross between an art exhibition and a firework display.

Gary spent a lot of time perfecting his rig. So, in between being an obsessive junior road racer and becoming a first category road rider with an eye on the US Olympic Team, was Gary Fisher really a full on freak?

“When I was 16 or 17 I was. Yeah, absolutely. I hung with The Dead. I took Kesey’s Acid Test. I went to jail with Timothy Leary’s son, Jack. I saw Jack last week, he has three of my bikes...”

As any reader of the essential book on hippies, Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, will know, the combination of Kesey and The Dead on a hippy CV is the equivalent of Eton and The Guards on a posh boy’s.

So what was it like being there then? What did you do in the Summer of Love, Gary?

“I had started doing a light show with some of my friends at the high school. We called it The Lightest Show on Earth. It was all home built, but we really worked at it and I think it got to the point of becoming an art form some nights.

“It was different from what you had in Europe. Over there they used two and a quarter inch slides with the oil and dyes caught between. Over here we used big bowls of stuff and a lot of operators. It was a big deal.

“San Francisco had its own style. I used to know the best: Brotherhood of Light, Heavy Water, Garden of Lights – there was a community of light show people. That was ’67,

"I saw this light show shit was killing me. I loved it but I wanted to get back into racing."

'68, '69, '70: those are the years I did it. The first big breakthrough gig was a place called the Roaring 20s on Montgomery Street. That's where we got our chops down. We did the halls sometimes, like the Filmores, but that was harder because the big bands brought their own lightshows."

How good was the Lightest Show? "Well I recently found a lot of pictures [used in this feature, Ed] of what we did, and had them scanned – after all those years I was impressed. I think it is time for a re-appraisal of the light show as an *art form*. *Back then we were obsessed with making it as good as we could*. It was exhausting and so expensive to do, it was a juggernaut, but we tried to be the best.

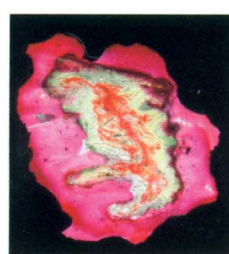
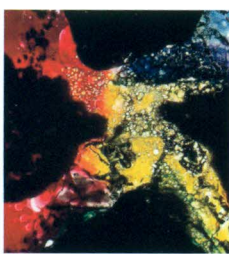
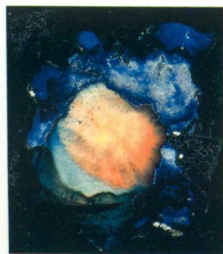
"Our show worked well but it took forever to set up. I needed to spend another \$10,000 to make it the way I wanted, with the equipment in the cases ready to go, but a couple of things took the money out of it and stopped me doing that. First, the bands ramped up their stage lighting so it had more horsepower than the light show, and then Bill Graham [legendary rock promoter at the Fillmore and the Carousel Ballroom which became the Fillmore West] said 'Screw you guys I don't need you!' There were no videos in those days, radio was the way bands filled halls and you don't see light shows on radio.

"Bill needed us for the ambiance in the hall itself, but he'd get cheap, reliable, utility shows to do that and give them backstage access to the bands as a bonus. So these guys were doing it for \$100 a show and, hell, we burnt \$100 of bulbs a night!

"We were living off food stamps."

Lighting up the night in 60s San Francisco wasn't great training for a wannabe bike racer either. "I went down to LA, we rode about ten miles and I had to sleep the rest of the day I was so tired. At 20 years old! I saw this light show shit was killing me. I loved it but I wanted to get back into racing. Which I did, having been kicked out as a junior I came right back to be a first category bike racer."

By then the Haight scene had finished? "It finished for us. The original people moved on, but hordes of lookalike hippies were coming there from all over the world, living on the street, taking bad drugs and everywhere the terrible smell of patchouli oil..."

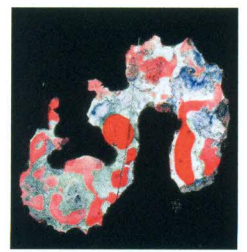
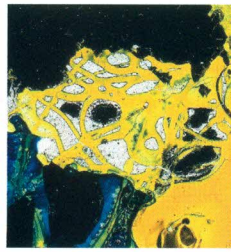
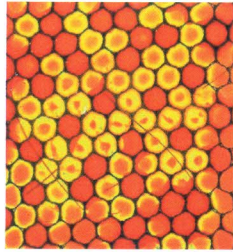








“The basic sensation everyone has when they ride a bike is that marvellous feeling of freedom.”



Where were you living?

“All over. One time I was living with the people from the old Carousel Ballroom. It was bitching. We were sandcasting in brass – bedsteads mostly.

“I was in Santa Venetia, living out of the back of a metro truck for a while. And I met a lot of great bike people. Barry Allen and the Larkspur Canyon Gang had a fat tyre thing going in late 60s, early 70s; they’d get old bikes and ride them till they died. We’d have races – any route down a mountain. And there was Derby night, we’d go up on the mountain with beer and try to stop each other riding, anyone who fell off we’d ride over his bike. Hurt bikes were part of the process. Did a few of those with those guys.

“I was a serious road rider, but we all had had fun at that. One time we did a road bike rides up the coast, camped out, just getting away from the rock and roll scene...”

How did you make money? “I started writing for Bicycle Magazine as a road tester, I worked in a bike shop, worked in a Liquor store and for a guy called Fred Wolf, moving furniture. Fred was someone who got really into mountain biking later on. I wasn’t a spendthrift. One time I lived in Fairfax for \$120 a month which was ridiculous...”

And the road racing? “I started racing again in ’71 and in ’73 I finished second in the Tour of Nevada City to become a Category 1 USCF road racer.”

For all Gary’s hippy credentials, you never get far in conversation with him without realising that he was also, for many years, a tough bastard of a roadie racing across the western States up to the mid-West and down into Mexico. So, under this bike advocacy

#### MYTHICAL BEAST

*Gary Fisher’s story has been told and retold, chopped, diced, seared and souffléd for 30 years, but here are the basics in some sort of order...*

**1963** Aged 12, Gary attaches himself to the Belmont Bicycle Club in Burlingame on the San Francisco Peninsula. “It was run by a Brit, so we did Brit things in cycling, we did time trials”. It was the start of a passion for racing bikes on the road and track.

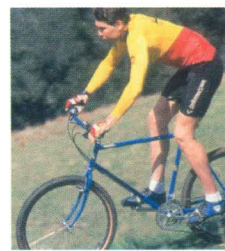
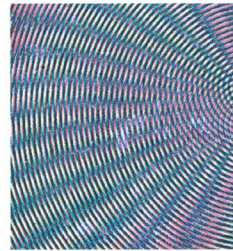
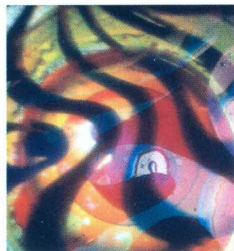
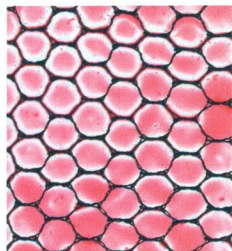
**1966** Gary meets the Grateful Dead at the Tour De Mar, a bike race they were supporting. It was the beginning of an association with the band, which drew him to live in Haight Ashbury, the centre of San Francisco’s hippy scene and the ‘summer of love’.

**1973** Gary finishes second in the Tour of Nevada City and becomes a Category 1 US Cycling Federation road racer. With roommate Charlie Kelly he builds what became a legendary off-road bike rideable up mountains as well as down, based on a Schwinn Excelsior X frame.

**1979** Disappointed in his hopes of being picked for the US Olympic team, Gary joins with Charlie Kelly to build off-road bikes. They name their new company ‘MountainBikes’. “We had the name ‘mountain bike’ but we didn’t know what we had.”



"I wouldn't have wound up the Tour winner or anything but I would have been a tough bastard."



(peace and love), are we right to detect one hell of a competitive ego going for the win? Are we looking at a guy who, from twelve-years-old, was going to be the first American to win the Tour?

"Right! I was riding with Bob LeMond and Greg LeMond, and if I'd really put it together I'd have gone to France with Greg. I could have been a top line domestique. Greg was head and shoulders above everyone. I wouldn't have wound up the tour winner or anything but I would have been a tough bastard.

"To be a top rider was my first ambition. I would have been totally happy to have done the servitude thing. And Greg could have won the Tour a lot earlier if he'd have had the right team behind him like Lance has now."

And if you'd gone that route there would have been no Gary Fisher mountain bike? Maybe no mountain bikes? "Mountain bikes would have happened, but I probably wouldn't have played much part in it. It's no secret: the thing that got me off the concrete and into mountain bikes was the national coach saying I wasn't on the US Olympic Team. The very next day we started the bike company that Charlie Kelly and I had been talking about for years – that was 1979."

All cyclists know, riding on the trails, the streets, or the road, that no matter how polite and considerate you are, there are people out there who really want to annihilate you. Dog walkers, ramblers, pedestrians, cab drivers, truckers, petrol heads – people who like to feel themselves normal, decent, and in the right – can smell the freedom bubble a bike rider lives in and it breathes hatred into their nostrils. That's true in Europe

**1983** Charlie Kelly left MountainBikes just before the MTB takes off leaving Gary to run what quickly became a fast developing company. Fisher Mountain Bikes made some legendary and collectable early bikes, notably the Procaliber: "The first mountain bike that it was comfortable to ride absolutely flat out."

**1989** Fisher produces the CR7, with a steel rear triangle bolted to an aluminum main triangle. The chromoly rear is meant to give a bit of "steel" twang, and also delivers better tyre clearance than oversized aluminium. The Evolution system oversizes everything, although most of the rest of the industry goes with 1.125in steerers rather than Fisher's 1.25in.

**1993** Fisher finally sells what he calls the "leveraged out, poorly financed, mid-sized Gary Fisher Bicycle Company", to Trek. Paola Pezzo wins Olympic Gold in Atlanta three years later and the Fisher brand, with Gary listed as 'chief designer', is used to launch new concepts like 1996 Genesis Geometry.

**2000s** While the Fisher brand, along with everyone else, launches a succession of full-suspension designs, bikes like the Sugar and Cake never quite hit the spot. Towards the end of the decade, though, the highly-regarded Roscoe appears. Fisher also gets heavily into 29ers – big-wheeled bikes had been around for a few years, but only from custom builders and tiny niche brands.

**2010** Going back to his roots, Fisher launches new road bikes and then ceases to be a standalone brand – for 2011 the "Gary Fisher Collection" bikes are all branded Trek. Fisher fans around the world are appalled, but Gary is more enthusiastic: "We were always at arm's length before. Now I've got former rocket scientists to design bikes!"



where the bicycle has been respectable for over a century. In America, in the '50s and '60s, the car had sucked all the kudos out of bikes; bicycles were loser cruisers. So how did an American kid start cycling, Gary? Weren't you considered very weird?

"Oh yeah. We were outcasts. Absolutely! When I was in seventh grade some girl from my school saw me in my outfit and said: 'Oh my God! You farmer!' And for the next six months I was ridiculed in my school. Riding was a secret. I didn't want to tell anybody. It wasn't any of their business and I was already an outcast anyway. I remember riding my bike by Kesey's place in Wahundah and seeing all the Hell's Angels and everybody looking at them and saying 'freaks!' There was a real similarity between us; we were all outcasts who wanted to do what we wanted to do.

"As a kid I started riding with a couple of friends. I had a Raleigh Colt, then my dad bought me a nice ten-speed down the San Mateo bike shop and I was hanging out down there one day when I saw two guys who looked like bike riders and I said 'I want to ride with you'. I was, like, 5 foot 4 inches, weighed maybe 80 pounds.

"They said 'you can't ride with us.' I said 'I can too!' Well, off they went and they couldn't drop me. So they said, 'OK, we'll make you a mascot of the club,' and I was so angry! I wanted to be a regular member. So they made me a member, but the only catch was they didn't have any jerseys that would fit me. My mother had to take all these jerseys in.

"This was Burlingame on the SF peninsula. I became a member of Belmont Bicycle Club. It was run by a Brit, so we did Brit things in cycling, we did time trials. I'd go on club rides when I was 12 and maybe they'd be 65 miles. And sometimes, man, there'd be times when those guys towed my ass back, pushing me and everything. It was great! Larry Walpole took great care of me."

What was the appeal for you at that age? "One was getting out of the neighbourhood and being independent. Two was just a marvellous feeling of freedom. I love it. That's the basic feeling everyone has when they ride a bike, freedom."

First there's the feeling of freedom and, immediately after that and tightly linked, the ecological angle, sympathy with the planet. That is always there amongst bike riders: I've never met one who didn't feel it. But in '60s San Francisco the needs of the fragile natural world were blowing in the wind, the smoke – yes, even the patchouli oil – and the flowers in your hair. If, in some parallel universe, the mountain bike hadn't been spawned from such a collision of factors it would be statistically amazing.

Gary was aware of all that, but, as always with him, an awareness of the bicycle business seems never to have been too far below the surface. "If you go back to 1973





"I put these bikes together for myself and Charlie and I thought they were for athletes only."

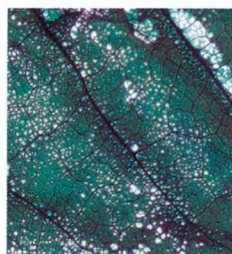
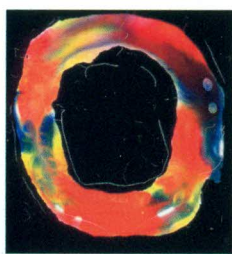
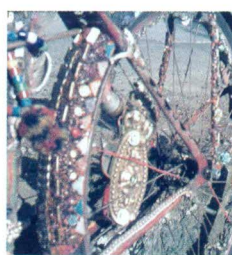
when we formed Velo Club Tamalpais and I was riding with Jo Breeze and his brother, Charlie Kelly, and those guys, everyone was very ecologically correct and knew cycling was the way to go. That was the year world oil prices pushed us to our limits and that showed up the faults in the bike business. It was a great opportunity to get people onto bikes and a freaking disaster! In the US 4.8m bikes were sold in 1972. It was 15m in 1973 but back down to 7.5m in '74. People didn't keep riding the bikes. The bikes that were out there were imitations of the road bike, they didn't suit the populace and there was nothing out there to teach people to ride them.

"And the bike business just sat on its fat ass and whined that the bulk of Americans would never ride bikes. Well, we were beginning to ride bikes off-road around then and the reaction I got from the early mountain bikers was: 'Oh yes, we will!' That was huge and, for all of us, that was the campaign.

"I put these bikes together for myself and Charlie and I thought they were for athletes only. What changed my mind was a rather out-of-shape fireman name of Bob Burrows. Bob came out riding with us and we'd wait forever for him on the climbs. He suffered but he always came back because he really loved it. I realised then this was for everyone."

*Post hoc ergo propter hoc* is the warning that keeps ringing in my ears at this juncture, but if you'll excuse me I'm just going to ignore it. It is true, of course, that because thing B happens directly after thing A it does not follow that it happened because of thing A. But look at it this way: if a bunch of bike-crazy, nature-loving, ecologically sound hippy bikers are driven out of the city by bad karma to live in the sage-scented mountains round about San Francisco and almost immediately discover a way of adapting bikes to ride in the hills away from the cops, the cars and the concrete, it is, surely, very *propter hoc* indeed.

Cricket is an unusual precedent. When Cromwell seized power from and decapitated Charles the First, and there was no longer a Royal Court they cared to attend. English





“Weren’t you considered weird?” “Oh yeah. We were outcasts. Absolutely!”

noblemen, driven back to their country estates by the bad karma and warty Puritanism, developed cricket into a massive game mainly to have something to bet on.

Any glimmer of a clue if we look at the beginnings of the mountain bike from Gary’s point of view? “I was living with this band called the New Riders of the Purple Sage. I met Charlie out riding and we went over to the Grateful Dead office to give our opinions on the band’s album cover. That’s how it was then. Later on we met again and he said, ‘I need a roommate,’ and I said, ‘Let’s do it!’

“Charlie lived above a place called The Church in San Anselmo. Charlie was boss roadie for The Sons of Champlin and this was their practice space. That’s where I made my first off- road bike when I was living with Charlie: 1974 that would be.” [Gary’s Schwinn Excelsior X. With its wide gear range and heavy duty braking, was the first off-road bike that, despite its 42-pound heft, was rideable up mountains as well as down.]

The American bike industry had been producing balloon-tyred, laid back, ultra-lardy bikes for decades, often with false petrol tanks and such attached, in the hope of convincing the kids they were motorbikes. They’d never been much good for anything, to be honest, but, off-road, the tyres and the geometry were just about right. Nothing much else was of course, but there were engineers like Joe Breeze on the team who could handle all that.

“It was down to Charlie and Fred Wolfe that we started taking it seriously – they began instigating rides and suggesting places to go. Then Charlie putting on the Repack events made all the difference because he did it again and again and it became legendary. All most people on the street had ever heard about in cycling was the Repack races.”

The Repack races were a series of downhill time trials, run down the fire roads of Pine Mountain on the flanks of Mount Tamalpais. Very underground, very ad hoc and very illegal, Charlie ran them on a need to know basis from 1976 to 1979. These were the





events that drove the development of mountain bikes beyond the modification of old junk klunkers. Joe Breeze made a custom built frame for Charlie especially for Repack. Gary still has the fastest time on Repack, Joe the second fastest. If you ride the course with those guys you quickly see what it means to them.

“That wasn’t much to do with me,” says Gary. “Most of my time in the mid-70s was travelling to bike races and preparing for bike races. I used to breeze in and ride the occasional Repack. I was lucky that the times I won were important. Like the fastest time on Repack and The Evening Magazine race.”

And so it went on until, in 1979, Gary’s Olympic hopes were dashed. “Next day Charlie and I started our company MountainBike. We had \$650, we went and opened a bank account and started trying to get quality mountain bikes out.”

The rest of this story has been told many times and the ‘Gary Fisher, father of the MTB’ marketing stories have generated their own sub-culture of anti-stories designed to prove that Fisher was never such a big shot in mountain biking as people think he claims to be. Gary is sensitive to all this. He takes great care to include everybody he can think who had a hand in what was done as if regretful that he had ever have allowed himself to be the story. It surprised me at first, after all it was a long time ago and we’re all media-savvy people who realise that good stories are simple stories and good headlines use short words.

But there is a fault line around Gary Fisher. A lot of people on the California bike scene treat him as a hero and will do anything for him, but there are plenty more who make a point of knocking him. Sometimes they’re his oldest friends who know just where to kick him.

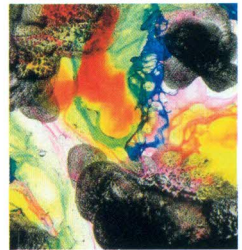
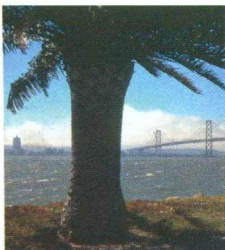
“Like Jacquie Phelan: she goes around saying I’m a bad mechanic because I’ve never built a complete frame, but I know I can so I don’t care...” Is that for the record? “No, I do care, it hurts me. I’m sensitive like that!”

So there you are. The guy who kicked off the whole thing, who in the opinion of the best judges made five of the most important advances in mountain bike design and grew a bicycle corporation big enough to have a team rider win Olympic Gold twice cares what his ex-girlfriend of 30 years says. Well, it was a tight community the early mountain bike crowd, it still is, and you know what they say, every time you hear of a friend’s success you die a little...

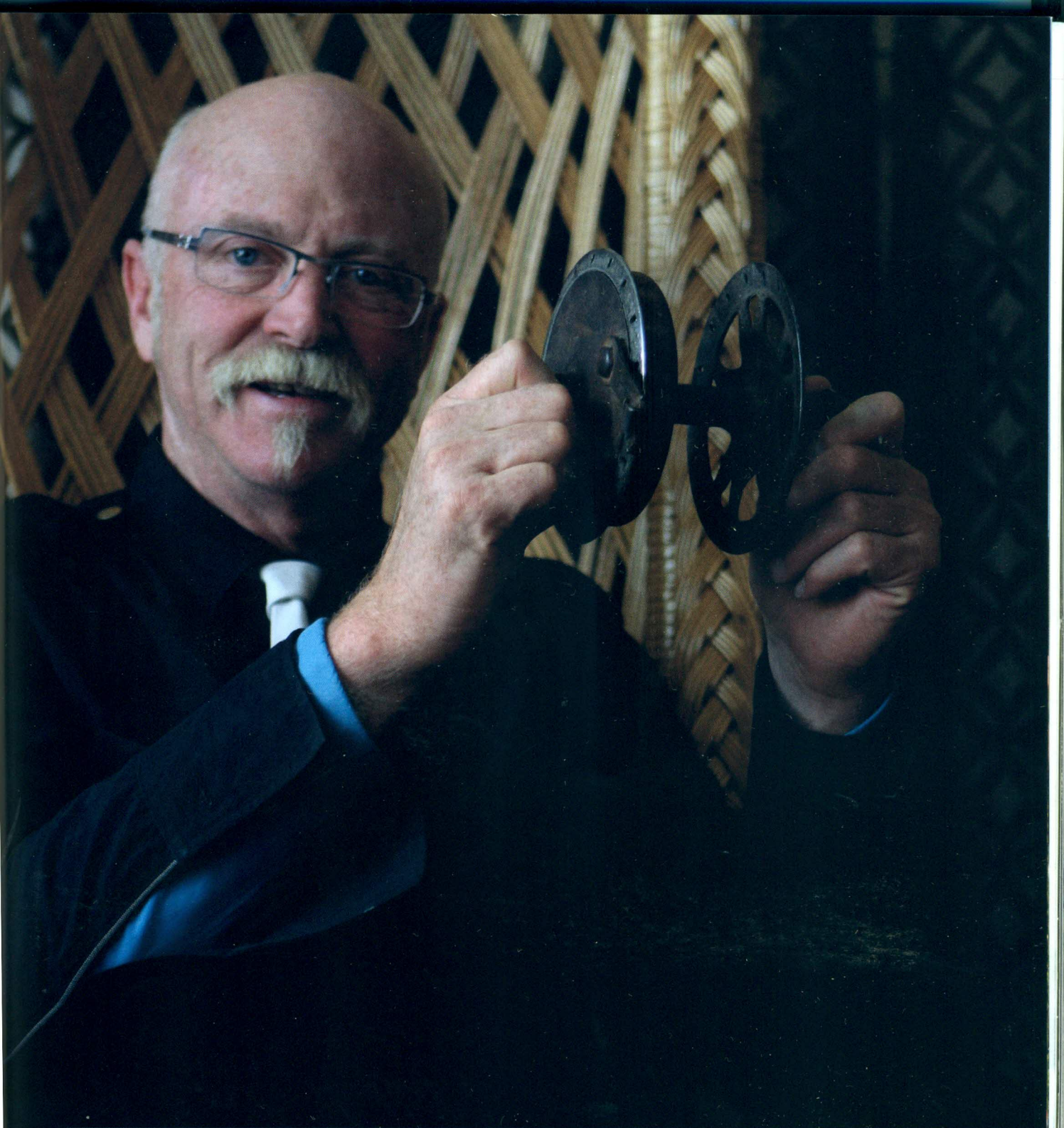
So let’s just ignore all that. You only have to meet Gary Fisher to know that this is the man who combined vision, practical innovation and a genius for self publicity in exactly the proportions needed to take the insanity of riding bicycles down mountains, sell it to the Americans and, through them, to the world.

And any one who cannot see that is one Rizla short of a spliff.

*Tym Manley is Editor of Privateer*







**"And the bike business just sat on its fat ass and whined that the bulk of Americans would never ride bikes. Well we were beginning to ride bikes off-road around then and the reaction I got from the early mountain bikers was 'Oh yes, we will!'"**