

# GARY FISHER KNOWS HOW TO DANCE

FOR DECADES, ONE OF THE SPORT'S PIONEERS HAS BEEN STUCK INSIDE A CONTROVERSY ALMOST AS OLD AS MOUNTAIN BIKING ITSELF—AND STILL PUSHED IMPORTANT INNOVATIONS. IMAGINE WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN NOW THAT THE WALLS ARE COMING DOWN. BY DAN KOEPEL

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**FISHER MIGHT NOT  
HAVE INVENTED THE  
MOUNTAIN BIKE, BUT HE'S  
THE MOST IMPORTANT  
FIGURE IN THE  
HISTORY OF THE SPORT.**

# TWO

hours of riding with Gary Fisher has led to dodged obstacles and narrow escapes. We even got lost a few times before finally reaching our destination—not a windswept peak atop a legendary trail, but a gray warehouse in jet-engine earshot of San Francisco International Airport. There's a package waiting, and since I'm spending a couple of days with Fisher, I've tagged along for a two-wheeled pickup.

The FedEx clerk does a double take when he notices that by all appearances, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century dandy has just pedaled into his office. At 60 years old, Fisher is dressed in peg-leg pants, a dapper vest and shined, pointy-toed boots; his face is adorned with a beard-moustache combo known as an "Imperiäl," popularized by Napoleon III, France's final monarch. The parcel contains a pair of city tires ordered from Germany for Fisher's mom. Mission accomplished, we pedal to a subway station. It comes as something of a surprise that an afternoon ride with the person most publicly associated with the birth of the mountain bike is conducted on pavement—but that's typical for Fisher these days. The bigger shocker is delivered after we exit the train and complete the short spin back to the bike entrepreneur's one-bedroom flat in San Francisco's Lower Haight neighborhood.

What about Marin County? Birthplace of the sport?  
Gary doesn't live there anymore.

No one has ever been able to discuss Gary Fisher over the past three decades without first discussing The Question. It has hung gloomily over the trails of the place Fisher once called home since off-road cycling emerged there in the early 1980s. Whether Gary Fisher was the inventor of the mountain bike has been a source of anger, debate, broken friendships, financial wrangling and lots of magazine articles since not long after he, along with partner Charlie Kelly and frame builder Tom Ritchey, began selling fat-tire machines to enthralled onlookers.

The gist of the accusations over all these years is that Fisher lacks the technical prowess his rivals possess, that his fame is based on appropriation and self-promotion. Fisher claimed to have invented the sport, they sneer, when he really only facilitated it. Other visionaries, faced with similar criticism, respond by simply flicking it away. (Think of Steve Jobs, pilloried for not being a programmer, for not inventing the MP3 player, whose vengeance has consisted of success upon i-success.) But Gary Fisher is different.

Take, for example, when I asked him this: Since Fisher clearly knows bikes, why does it bother him when critics claim that he can't weld? "I don't get it," he says. "I don't get it. What is this need to discredit me for everything?"

**Why I Ride**  
Because I don't want to go to jail. —Marla Streb, 45, goddess; Sausalito, California

Then, suddenly, he turns raw: "Don't tell me what I can't do. Don't tell me what I don't know how to fucking do, because I fucking can!"

Fisher takes a deep breath. He tries to steady himself. And what about the ongoing bitter rift with Ritchey, the one that dates back decades now?

"I know that when I said I was the only one," Fisher says, "it was a mistake."

A deep breath. "I don't understand why I can't be cordial with Tom," he says, quieter now. "Why can't we both acknowledge what a wonderful thing we were part of?"

No. The Question has remained huge and raw. During the time we spent together, emotions attached to it bubbled with such intensity that the real question became why the wounds have stayed bare so long. And I began to wonder whether it had become a kind of prison for one of the sport's most gifted minds.

From the beginning, there have been two Gary Fishers. One is isolated, and the other lives—and thrives—in public. The first, as a teenager in the 1960s, felt the burn of his peers' rejection. There was little for him in either traditional sports or academics. Then he discovered bikes, and started racing. A photo of "promising 13-year-old Gary Fisher of California" appeared in a 1964 issue of *Bicycling* magazine. But the young



EARLY MOUNTAIN BIKERS FRED WOLF, BILL GARY AND GARY FISHER (RIGHT) ENJOY AN AUTUMN KLUNKERS RIDE, CIRCA 1975.

Fisher had deep creative energies, and at first they were not devoted to cycling at all.

In 1967, at age 17, Fisher left his family home in Marin County and moved to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury, the legendary counterculture focal point of the era's so-called Summer of Love. There he became known as Spidey, creator of "The Lightest Show on Earth," a psychedelic panorama of images that were integral parts of the music shows typical of the day. Like a modern DJ, Spidey often appeared right along with the bands on the concert bills. And the bands were big. "He was good," says Jon McIntire, longtime manager for the Grateful Dead, one of the groups Fisher worked with (along with the Jefferson Airplane, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin). "It isn't surprising that he went on to greater things."

The early pioneers of mountain biking were, in a sense, refugees from the Summer of Love. From his present-day apartment, Fisher gestures toward Haight Street, just a few blocks away, and describes

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how it all ended badly: "Predators arrived with hard drugs. It fell apart." Marin County, just north, offered an idyll. There were mountains and pasturelands. There were parties in the woods. There were trails.

Fisher, Kelly and Joe Breeze were all ranked road cyclists, but were captivated by a new form of riding, off the pavement, on cobbled-together bikes known as klunkers. Word spread as the 1970s closed, bringing a clamor for pre-built bikes. Breeze was one of the earliest to try to meet that demand with meticulously crafted machines. If you were willing to wait, a Breezer was probably worth it. But there were impatient customers who wanted a bike now.

To that end, Fisher and Kelly opened a store in San Anselmo and approached Ritchey, a 21-year-old frame-building prodigy. The partners spent their days matching the frames Ritchey supplied to an assortment of parts they had chosen.

They called their business Mountainbikes—Fisher and Kelly came up with the name but failed to properly trademark it. The rest of the story can almost be inferred. The sport went global. As bigger companies got involved, the partners struggled to meet demand. Fisher and Ritchey clashed. In 1983, Fisher—the charismatic and public Fisher—took control of the company, leaving Kelly hurt and Ritchey furious. That anger intensified, spreading to other Marin pioneers—which led to a long-term campaign involving carefully scrutinized archival photographs and documents and the testimony of unearthed pioneers whose work predated anyone hailing from Marin. These often were presented as "gotchas" to Fisher and the public as a way of attacking the claims Fisher issued through overreaching marketing departments. Fisher now admits he should have spoken up. "I allowed that to happen," he says. "It was wrong."

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The word "invent" should probably be banned from any account of any mountain bike technology. The sport has always attracted tinkers and thinkers. To profess to be first at anything is to invite trouble. That said, Fisher can legitimately lay claim to being early along the

## FROM THE BEGINNING, THERE HAVE BEEN TWO GARY FISHERS. ONE IS ISOLATED, AND THE OTHER LIVES—AND THRIVES—IN PUBLIC.

curve in aggressive-frame geometry, dual suspension, carbon fiber and ultra-short chainstays, among others. Fisher also has a knack for terminology—he's credited with coining the term "standover height," for example—and for spotting talent. He helped glamorize racing with his sponsorship of Italian Paola Pezzo, known for both her Olympic gold medals in 1996 and 2000 and form-hugging shorts of the same color.

"What Gary does," says Keith Bontrager, another early bike innovator who now works under the Trek umbrella, "is bring in ideas. Lots of them. I used to groan when I heard some of them, but I came to understand that he's intensely curious, and that this is how he sees his job: to see stuff, to think of stuff, to get it in here and then find out if it works. That's something not many people can do."

Fisher has also had failures. Still, when I ask him about them, he hedges. In the early 1990s, his company fell apart and was sold to a Taiwanese distributor. That led to a line of disastrous and often defective bikes. But he defends his designs—which included curved, elevated chainstays—as

### Why I Ride

I ride because it feels good to be immersed in the sights, sounds, smells and textures of wild places. I love the inevitable moments of discovery, even on familiar rides. I love the ease of mobility, that experience of fleetness on the trail, and mostly that deeply felt freedom resonating back to my very first bike rides so many years ago. —Jim Hasenauer, 61, watchman; Woodland Hills, California

spot-on. And

the failure of bailout num-

ber one led to Fisher's 1993 rebirth under the wing (and financing) of Trek. The cash infusion led to a renewal of the Fisher line—and to the launch of the first mainstream 29er mountain bikes.

There's little doubt that Fisher has been responsible for delivering the big-wheel concept from the fringes of the sport. But ironically, this has also led to a smaller-scale repeat of the Marin controversy: Detractors allege that Fisher purposefully overshadows earlier, smaller pioneers. The reality seems to be that Fisher and the other 29er-types began thinking about larger wheels at about the same time, and most of them—including Fisher—have always acknowledged the debt they owe to earlier builders, as well as cyclocross.

So why the controversy? Perhaps Fisher's reputation gave a pat rationalization for those who wanted to believe he hijacked their potential for big-time acceptance. But there may also be a culture clash at work, says Belle Marko, Fisher's ex-wife and a former member of the Larkspur Canyon Gang, one of the earliest Marin riding groups: "Gary's an artist," she says. "Most people in the bike industry aren't. They're focused on the technical, and they can't understand his approach. That upsets them."

Nowhere is that more evident than in the simmering animosity between Fisher and Ritchey. Ritchey told me that the issue was simple: "It is about historic information that has not been received by the public." I asserted that the truth had indeed come out—in stories in multiple bike magazines, in the Smithsonian, in the election of recently "discovered" pioneers to the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame, and especially in the 2007 documentary *Klunkerz*, in which nearly all the presumptive authors of the off-road bike, including Ritchey, Breeze, Kelly and Fisher, are generous in praising each other. Ritchey waved this off. "You need to print facts," he said. (He asserted that *Klunkerz* was reedited to show Fisher in a more favorable light, something director Billy Savage denies, and which doesn't jibe with the recollection of several people who attended the film's premiere.)

Ritchey is a man of deep religious faith. His focus is on engineering. (Not surprising: His parts are marketed under the brand name Logic.) Fisher hardly has to admit he's a heathen. His appetite for pleasure is rich; his craving for stimulation is legend. The real surprise is that the two ever got along at all.

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Fisher is probably more inquisitive and encyclopedic about bikes than anyone I've met in my 20 years writing about the sport. When I tell him that I'm about to become a father, and that a sidecar-equipped commuter would be the greatest thing ever, he opens up the photo gallery on his phone and shows me a series of pictures he's taken of bikes equipped just that way.

He photographs every interesting bike-related thing he sees, he says. Later, we have an extensive discussion concerning prehistoric coaster brakes.

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Given the way he absorbs everything, it's obvious why he can both acknowledge his mistakes in overreaching and feel offended at being so dissed. "I know I talk too much," Fisher says. "I spill my guts. Maybe I should keep things under cover. But I can't."

The first time I met him, more than a decade ago, Fisher offered a stunning critique of the sport. Despite the assertions of bike marketers and advocates, mountain bikes, he said, are no boon for the environment: "They have six wheels—two on the bike, and four on the SUV that brings it to the trailhead." Which was absolutely right—and well before the industry's shift toward urban models, something Fisher has embraced.

Fisher's talkative nature—for better and worse—frequently creates maelstroms of emotions. Over the past two years, he's been extracting himself from a relationship that was, by all accounts, difficult and sad, leaving two small children in the wake of a period of "intense craziness."

"But neither of us," he says, "was on our best behavior," and the aftermath of the relationship sent him into a tailspin. He was drinking too much, he says, and riding too little.

"I've been reckless in my love life," he says. Fisher pulls off his cap. He's bald, and suddenly he looks a lot less like a French Emperor. "Look at me. I've got no hair because I have a lot of testosterone and I love girls. I'm a horny motherfucker and I've been insanely so. And it makes me popular sometimes, because I can be intense and a lot of fun. I know how to dance. It has gotten me into trouble."

A few minutes later, Fisher's current girlfriend, Alex Zaphiris walks into the apartment to pick up a charged battery for her electric-assist bike.

### **Why I Ride**

Sometimes I ride just to hate. If you are next to me at the end of the ride, the next day it will be harder. Why? You are my friend. Who could treat you so bad and you still come back?  
Everyone likes to talk about how riding makes them feel whole. That's bullshit. A good ride leaves me empty, my mind purged of impurity. That's why I fight when I ride my bike. I struggle with myself, my buddies and anyone doing intervals that day. If they look like they have the answer in their eyes, I'll do anything to take it.—Mark Weir, 37, leg breaker, Novato, California

(Earlier, Fisher had sketched out his plans for a sub-30-pound version of such a machine. That would be about 50 percent lighter than anything available today, which would be possibly revolutionary.) Zaphiris, a 38-year-old medical doctor, met Fisher at San Francisco's 2009 bike-to-work day; they ran into each other at a bar a couple of weeks later and have been dating ever since.

After Zaphiris leaves, Fisher beams. "You know, I was just at the lowest point. I was feeling like I don't even have the ability to find a soul mate, and I just don't care. But then, she walked in, and she never left." Fisher continues: "I was scared at first. I felt like I wasn't good enough for her. But she pushes me. Jesus. I drink less. I'm healthier. And she never doubts me. Nobody has ever made me feel that way."

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The truth is, though, that even through his self-described bottoming out, there was something big bubbling up inside Gary Fisher. And it had to do with The Question, with finding a way to put it in a rightful, diminished place. The kind words of *Klunkerz* triggered it. When the house lights came up at the movie's Marin premiere, a rush of goodwill swept

through the audience. Of all the burdens lifted that night, none had been as painful as the one between Fisher and Kelly. They'd been tight as brothers, Fisher says. The laid-back Kelly says that the two never stopped being friends, in the sense that "there was no bad blood. But we weren't close."

Still, the loss, both acknowledge, was real.

One of the symbols of that early friendship had been matching Colnagos the former partners bought in 1971. Fisher's was long gone, but Kelly was still riding his, and soon after the documentary came out, Kelly was stopped at a traffic light when he saw Fisher, holding court—as usual—with a pair of excited fans. Fisher saw Kelly, too, and pointed at him.

Kelly recalls the moment: "[Fisher] said, 'Do you know who that is? Charlie Kelly! He was one of the guys!'"

The next day—Kelly sees this as symbolic—the Colnago finally broke. Soon after, Fisher showed up at his former partner's house with a brand new, carbon-fiber Trek. Time and hurt were bridged.

The day after I visit Fisher, he has a huge garage sale. The Marin house he lived in for decades, the one he left two years ago, is going on the market. Kelly, now a professional piano mover, will meet Fisher to help him move the belongings he's going to keep to a storage locker.

What about Charlie, I ask. What about the friendship today?

The answer comes in typical Fisher stream of consciousness. Marin, and moving. Belle, his ex-wife, and how she's at the old place now, where they lived together in the 1990s, helping to ready it for the realtors. The future.

Things have changed with Trek. The independent Gary Fisher brand has been absorbed by the parent company, becoming the Trek-

labeled Gary Fisher Collection. Industry insiders have differing opinions on what this means. Some say it's a consolidation of resources during recessionary times; others label it a deeply ironic appropriation of Fisher-developed concepts; still others say it's simply a way to expand Fisher's availability to dealers.

As for Fisher? He says he hopes the move will allow him to become more vocal in Trek's overall design strategy, and his relentless embrace of the modern does seem like something that could benefit the sober bike giant. Some of the items heading into storage tomorrow will ultimately go to Wisconsin, where he and Alex are likely to buy a second home. Fisher knows that this new reality will require him to take a place directly at the table.

And that, of course, is where he is meant to be. The tortured artist, the man with the thousand ideas. He might not think of everything first, but he is more confident than ever in his ability to take a concept to the next step, and then the next. Allowing history to finally be history is the source of that confidence. Fisher may even be letting The Question go entirely.

Suddenly, he veers back to Kelly. "Charlie," he says. "I split up our partnership. I fucked him over. And now we're friends again."

Belle: "She's over there, for me. She didn't have to do that."

He's grateful to his kids, Trek CEO John Burke and, especially, Zaphiris. "She picked me up off the street," he says.

"I'm grateful, you know," Fisher says, "and I know I need to be more grateful, and keep being grateful. Not just to one person. To the world."

And then, without another word, Gary Fisher—unburdened—begins to weep. 🙏🙏🙏