

Charlie Cunningham, High-Tech Frame Builder

Meet Mr. Wizard

By Owen Mulholland

We were midway through the "Appetite Seminar," Charlie Kelly's Thanksgiving creation for mountain bikers of Marin, and about to assault the toughest hill on the 20-mile loop. Charlie Cunningham had been rolling along with me for the past mile, but as the road steepened he said, in the most even voice imaginable, "Well, see you later." "Clunk" went his chain onto a smaller cog, and with no discernable effort he disappeared. I already knew Charlie Cunningham the wizard of aluminum bike tech; now I'd been introduced to Charlie Cunningham the rider.

There hadn't been a trace of put-down in his good-bye. His acceleration was entirely for himself. It fit: Charlie Cunningham's course, no matter what the objective, has been set by his own gyro at least since age 10.

That's when he got into go-carts and his natural ease with technical complexities first surfaced. In the next decade he and his self-avowed "techno-fiend" friends investigated a variety of physical phenomena, some of them marginally legal.

Like tree climbing. It sounds innocent enough until you realize the tree to be climbed is 368 feet high, the world's tallest red-

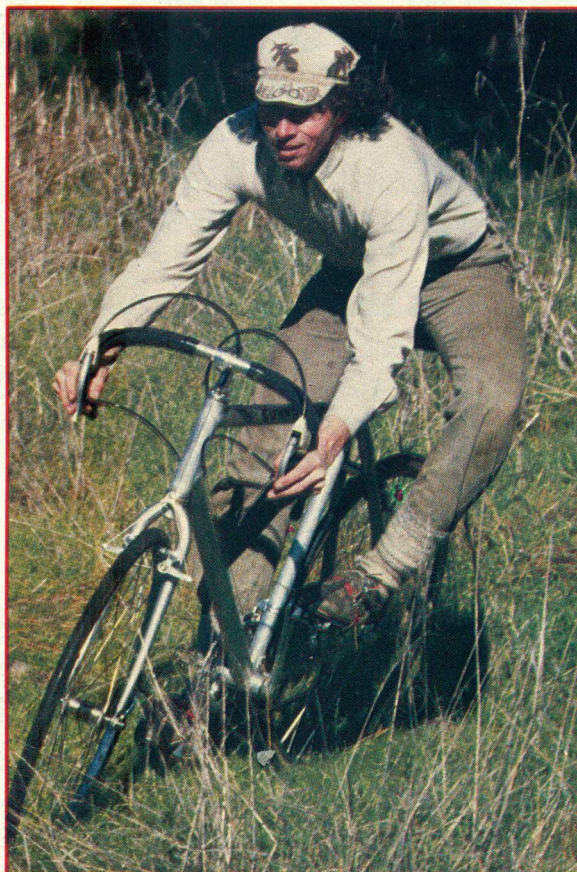
wood, protected in a national park. Avoiding detection, however, wasn't nearly as difficult as reaching the first branch at 200 feet.

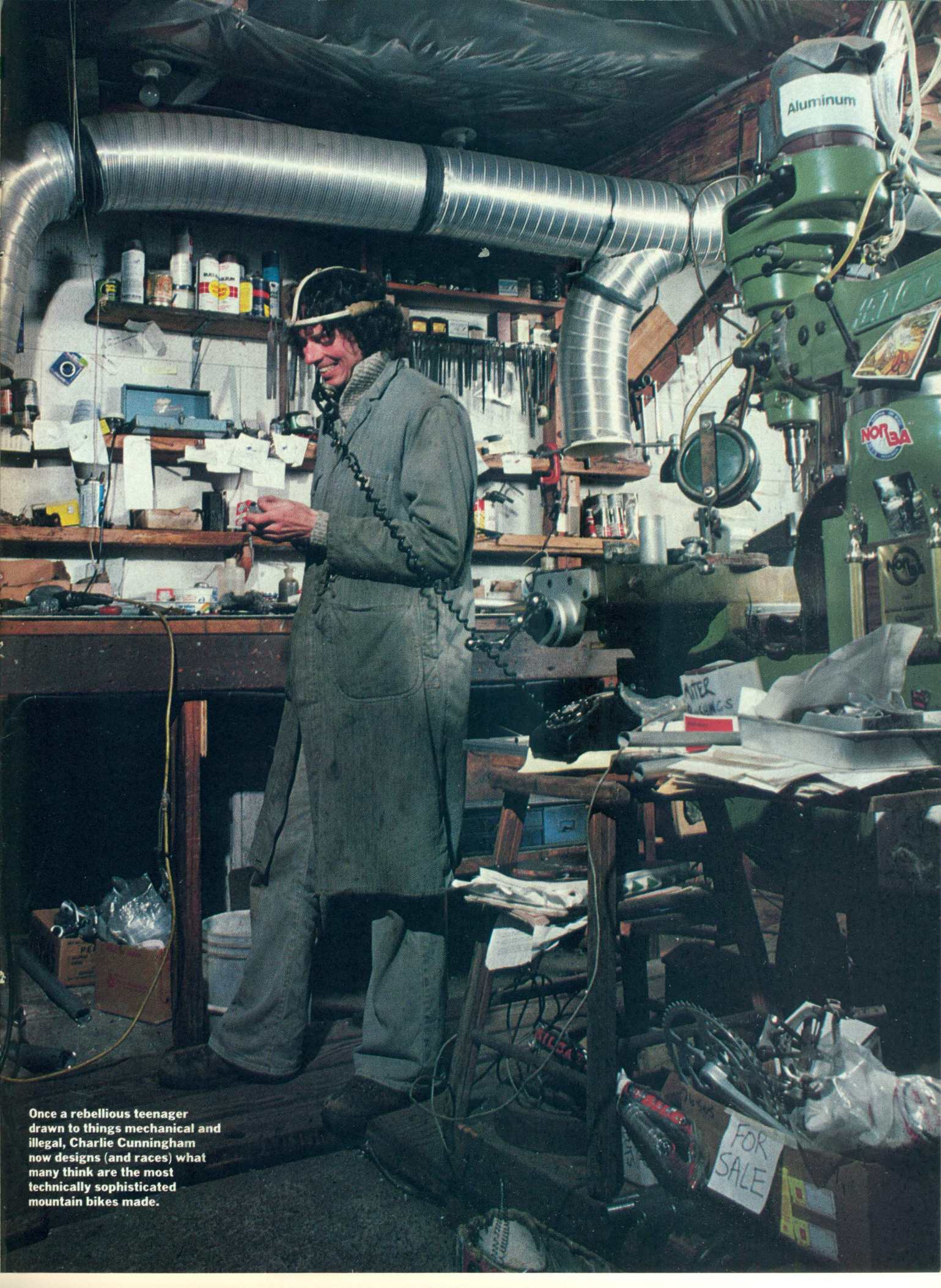
Charlie & Co. had come prepared. For

eight miles they shouldered camping gear, 900 feet of climbing rope, and a homemade propane-oxygen cannon. "Getting the trajectory just right was difficult," Charlie remembers. "We were about out of oxygen when we finally shot the weight with a string over the branch." Expressing another sensitivity, he adds, "It was the only way to climb the tree non-destructively. You could see where someone had tried using pitons."

At 300 feet, things got "kinda hairy." "The tree split into two trunks, each about 12 feet in diameter and swaying in the wind. We had to cross through the notch and you only had a couple of seconds to do it." At the top they embraced the last limbs which were rocking 50 feet back and forth. Descending in darkness, they slept at the base. "It was such a gift to be able to climb that tree," Charlie says on full glow. "Such a feeling of oneness with it."

Not so idyllicly terminated were other extralegal activities that resulted in an explosion and three days in jail. "Nothing we did was maliciously intended," Charlie protests. "We were just fascinated by sheer physical





Once a rebellious teenager drawn to things mechanical and illegal, Charlie Cunningham now designs (and races) what many think are the most technically sophisticated mountain bikes made.



Cunningham is not only a frame builder, but also an inventor of mountain bike parts like the roller cam brake now marketed by SunTour. His goal for both bikes and parts is the best possible performance, with price no discernable object.

knowledge.”

“Jail,” he continues, “was a profound experience. I had no idea how long I was going to be in there. I was surrounded by people smoking cigarettes and pacing away their lives. It was time for a change.”

Partly to pay his lawyers, partly to convince the judge he was a good risk to turn loose and partly because it was on his agenda anyway, Charlie got a construction job and enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley.

During his teens Charlie had moved from carts to motorcycles. This was during the '60s, and nowhere did the flood water of that tumultuous era reach a higher mark than in Marin County, California. “It was an attitudinal thing,” he says. “I went through a period of strong idealism, how sacred and beautiful the earth was, how life-giving it was, and how it got regularly defiled. It bugged me to the point where I got a powerful aversion to motor vehicles and that whole infra-structure of technology. I got into rock climbing and running and going off to various deserts for months at a time.”

It wasn't until he moved into a suburban tract somewhat cut off from the rest

of Marin that Charlie began his love affair with bikes. At first they were just a means to an end—getting places. “Of course that included dirt. . . and some trespassing,” he chuckles. He quickly discovered the bike community and was much impressed by these healthy outdoor types.

His credentials for acceptance in this group were hard to beat. At five feet, 11 inches and 133 pounds his power-to-weight ratio rated with the best. He could hang in on any training ride.

What was missing was the combination of insecurity and desire to dominate that inspires the best racers to squeeze themselves the extra bit. Charlie was never so ensconced in a pace line that he didn't take in the view, and if it was good enough he'd stop to enjoy it.

Charlie is a relative rarity in cycling, sort of a pedalling vacuum in the sense that he creates a void you must enter if you are to meet him. Whether across the table or across the room, his quiet delivery pulls others down to his tonal level.

In his “spare time” he devoured reams of industrial and aerospace technical information, always with an eye to bicycle applicability. Some of the insights he gained he keeps to himself. “The in-

formation is there for the taking if you're willing to do the homework, but some of the processes in fabricating and heat-treating aluminum are pretty complex,” he says with a hint of understatement.

Along the way he almost graduated from the university with a degree in mechanical aeronautical engineering. He was just a casting class away. “I was qualified for it because of all my outside experience,” he recalls, “but they wouldn't let me do it without certain prerequisites. I just got fed up and dropped out. I had a real strong sense of its not mattering. The knowledge was the important thing. My parents couldn't believe it, but today I'm even more certain I made the right decision.”

Degreeless or not, Charlie did get one straight job. He thought it was to be designing food-processing machinery, but it turned out to be basic drafting. One week of boring, eight-to-five toil was all he could take. It was his final flirtation with working for others on their time.

Perhaps to compensate, he's paired up with one of the more flamboyant figures in the current off-road scene, Ms. Alice B. Toeclips herself (a.k.a. Jacquie Phelan). Whether in the latest punk sunglasses or without any upper thorax cover on the victory stand, Alice B. is as easy to miss as a puncture on a smooth road.

Jacquie's public persona means little to Charlie. “She's really the perfect partner for me,” he says with the same subdued matter-of-fact voice he uses when describing the merits of a TIG-welder. “I never believed I would find someone I could share so much with.” Aside from the obvious love of bikes, she has adapted to his fairly unique lifestyle. They sleep outdoors behind their house, eat a simple vegetarian diet, and eschew the cultural and culinary attractions of nearby San Francisco.

And conversely, she's pushed him to race and to overcome his aversion to car travel. He did most of the off-road circuit in 1984, always winning the vets class (he's 36) and usually placing in the top 10 against the very best pro-am riders. Uphill, there's practically nobody who can get away from him, but he's frustrated on the flat. “I can't believe some of these guys,” he says with respect. “On level ground they seem to have motors.”

Aside from the fun of racing, doing well promotes Cunningham bikes. They are like no others. The unappreciative might see them as a mad plumber's glvanized fantasy, but just pick one up and that illusion evaporates.

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Of all the Marin County bike builders, Charlie is probably the most radical. He works exclusively in aluminum. His products are often unpainted, the welds visible, and the tubes oversize. "My bikes' finish has a lot to do with my personality," Charlie maintains. "I believe I offer a highly finished bike. To me they're stunning. Their beauty is in their function. The welds are impeccable, but to some people, to see a weld at all is appalling. I don't cater to those people. I like to create for those who appreciate what I do." There seem to be enough of those people; none of the 30 or 40 bikes he makes each year gathers dust in a showroom for long.

Looking around Charlie's compact little shop, one reason for his uniqueness becomes quickly apparent. This equipment is expensive. The TIG-welder alone cost over \$2000. Acquiring what he needed took nearly a decade of focused toil, most of it in precision carpentry. "At \$20 an hour, the bucks rolled in," he remembers. "I'd ride my bike to work in the dark and come home in the dark. It was torturous but I knew what I wanted to do and I knew I had to suffer to get it."

With demand for his bikes currently exceeding production, Charlie has no plans to up the output. "I want to make a really nice bike, to have control over it, and I want making them to be fun. Producing more would change all that," he says knowingly. "Besides, I need enough time to do more development work."

Charlie has recently entered into a partnership with Steve Potts and Mark Slate, to be known collectively as Wilderness Trail Bikes. They see gearing, tires, rims, brakes, stems, forks, and handlebars crying for improvement. Charlie's patented rollercam brake is already being produced by Sun Tour. It has a unique structure that transmits arithmetic hand motion into geometric brake motion.

This partnership is a good example of the incestuous little off-road bike world in Marin Co. Although they will make parts together, Potts will continue to make his own line of chrome-moly bikes. Potts apprenticed under Tom Ritchey and the original fat tire genius, Joe Breeze. Ritchey, who actually lives out-

side the county, used to market his bikes through Gary Fisher's Mountain Bikes of Marin. Gary's partner was Charlie Kelly who now publishes the *Fat Tire Flyer*.

Such intimacy accelerates the acceptance or rejection of any new innovation. Cunningham for example, was the first rider to use toe clips on mountain bikes. Everyone else had thought them to be impractical. Breeze confesses, "I wouldn't have believed it unless I'd seen Charlie using them. But I had to admit they were more help than I'd have dreamed possible." With few exceptions they are now *de rigueur* among the heavies.

Cunningham feels they're a tight knit family because, "We have a singleness of cause. These bikes have a subtle but pow-

erful effect. They put people in touch with their bodies and the elements, in touch with things that go back millions of years. Just today when riding over Pine Mountain I was thinking that one of the things that's so neat about these bikes is the life styles they foster. There's a sense of self-reliance and yet interdependence too. Certainly all of us around here need and help each other."

Charlie lives in a small house on the edge of a Marin subdivision. Out the front door is the street and all that man has made, for good or ill. Out the back is the mountain and its promise of a simple, ennobling life. To carry both worlds at once, in harmony, is a heavy load for one man and his bicycle. But then, mobile support systems are Charlie's speciality. ■

