

**gary fisher**





# King of the hills

In the 1970s, an ex-hippy and sometime stage technician for the Grateful Dead revolutionised cycling by taking it off-road. *MF* meets Gary Fisher, the man who invented the mountain bike

Words **Tym Manley** Photography **Robert Rebholz**

**I**n the evening light on the Marin hills outside San Francisco, the inventor of the mountain bike, Gary Fisher, sits on a rock being photographed after test-riding his beautiful, brand-new 2010 machine. Now almost 60 years old, Fisher has been designing mountain bikes for 35 years. Before that, he was a road rider with visions of helping his friend Greg LeMond win the Tour de France. Before that, in the 1960s, he was a 16-year-old hippy light show operator hanging out with the Grateful Dead and Ken Kesey at the original Kool-Aid Acid Tests. And before that, he was a skinny kid from Beverly Hills who rode with a grown-ups' bike club and gloried in completing 100km rides.

Many people on the Californian bike scene treat Fisher as a minor deity. Others dismiss him as an egotistical irritant – but with big personalities, these things aren't mutually exclusive. Witty, full of entertaining anecdotes and extraordinarily bright, this is the man who combined the vision of promoting a popular, ecologically friendly mode of transport, practical innovation and a genius for

publicity in exactly the proportions needed to take the crazy idea of riding bicycles down mountains and sell it to the Americans before passing it on to the rest of the world.

These days he's an odd mix of seething energy and mellow good humour, content to talk about the past

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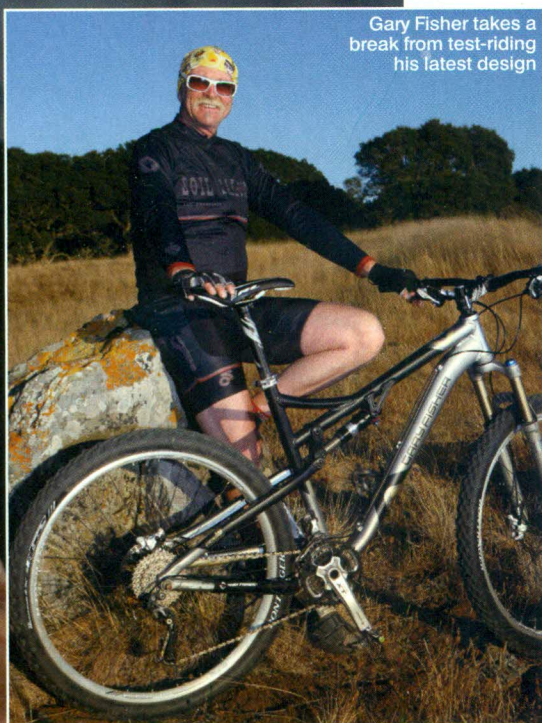
**'I just wish I'd taken the names of the know-it-alls who told me Americans would never ride bikes'**

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but keen to get on with the future. 'I feel I've done really well,' Fisher says, 'because my original goal was to cover the earth with bicycles, and we're getting there. I just wish I had taken the names of the know-it-alls who told me Americans would never ride bikes.'

## IN FROM THE COLD

For the first time since 1969, Fisher is living again in the former hippy district of Haight-Ashbury (known locally as 'the Haight') and he's enjoying the energy of the city after many laid-back years in Marin County across the Bay. He is evidently right to ridicule the cycling non-believers – there were 20 or 30 at every set of lights on Market Street this morning and it's generally accepted that the >



Gary Fisher takes a break from test-riding his latest design



large numbers of bikes on the San Francisco streets have helped calm the traffic.

We meet in Fisher's bright apartment, which is full of mementos of bands, art, light shows and cycling, including pictures of the most recent Tweed Ride, where riders swamp the city streets dressed in full Edwardian bicycling rig. There are so many at the event that the police hold cars at green lights to allow the tweed-clad peloton to pass. Not the sort of treatment cyclists got back in the day...

'No way! We were outcasts. Absolutely!' says Fisher. 'Riding was a secret. I didn't want to tell anybody. When I was in seventh grade a girl saw me in my cycling kit and I was ridiculed for six months in my school.'

At the beginning of the 20th century, bicycles had brought ordinary people the joys of freedom and mobility, but by the 1960s the car had occupied all the road space and sucked away cycling's prestige. 'If you saw

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anyone riding a bike between towns who was not a kid or an obvious drunk who'd lost his licence, you'd greet each other like brothers,' Fisher says. 'It was that unusual.'

### SIGNIFICANT OTHER

Fisher met his longtime business partner Charlie Kelly in the late 1970s through the Haight's music scene. 'I was living with this band called the New Riders Of The Purple Sage, who were into bikes, when I met Charlie out riding and took him to the Grateful Dead office, where we helped put together an album cover,' he says. 'Charlie was the roadie for a band called the Sons Of Champlin and lived above their rehearsal studio in Marin County. I moved in with him and we made our first mountain bike there.'

Kelly was a tough ex-road rider who since 1976 had organised the downhill time trial races on nearby Pine Mountain that were the central story of early mountain biking. The race was called the Repack, because you had to 'repack' your back brake with grease since constant braking would boil it all away. Cheap brakes would simply explode, and stopping dead was never really an option. Fisher still holds the Repack record.

'Charlie putting on the Repack made all the difference, because he did it again and again and it won legendary status,' says Fisher. 'The only thing people on the street had heard of in cycling back then was the Repack.'

### LUXURY GEAR

Fisher says it was frame builder Joe Breeze who discovered that 1940s cruiser bikes,

Fisher's strength is his lifelong obsession with riding



although they hadn't been thought good for racing before with their laid-back frames and balloon tyres, were perfect for tackling the steep trails where races like the Repack were run. In the early days, riders would walk their single-speed bikes uphill and bomb back down, but Fisher added gears to his cruiser so he could ride in both directions. However, his athletic aspirations were coming to an end, which made it the perfect time to throw himself into a new business. 'I was going to the Olympic Training Centre till the coach told me, "Forget it, you're too old,"' he says. 'The next day Charlie and I started MountainBikes.'

The machines Fisher and Kelly started making were based on old cruiser frames, augmented with bits from motorbikes and



## Life On Two Wheels

The big events in Fisher's 47-year cycling career

1963

### Fast starter

Aged 12, Fisher starts racing bikes on the road and track. Suspended from racing at 16 because his hair is too long, he starts a light show called 'The Lightest Show on Earth' which plays San Francisco's major rock venues.

1973

### Category 1

Fisher finishes second in the Tour of Nevada City and becomes a Category 1 US Cycling Federation road racer. He starts to build his Schwinn Excelsior X, the first off-road bike rideable up mountains as well as down.

1979

### In business

A sport is named: Gary Fisher and Charlie Kelly call their new company 'MountainBikes'. Fisher finishes the Coors Classic and collects the points to rank third in Western Division road racing.

1983

### No more Charlie

Charlie leaves MountainBikes just before the mountain bike takes off, leaving Fisher to run the fast-developing company. He introduces the CR7 and in 1989 the Evolution headset, tubing and seatpost, the first oversize system for mountain bikes.

1993

### Grand design

Trek buys Gary Fisher Mountain Bikes. Fisher stays on as chief designer, a few years later changing the shape of mountain bikes again with his Genesis Geometry.

2000

### Big wheels

Fisher introduces the Sugar line, a full-suspension platform that's light enough to be raced professionally, then turns the mountain bike world upside down again with the introduction of the Fisher 29in (74cm) mountain bike wheels.

2004

### Having his cake

Fisher launches the Cake, the lightest 5in (13cm) travel mountain bike on the trail. This is hailed as the holy grail of mountain bikes: a machine that can climb the steepest mountain competently and descend the roughest trail confidently.

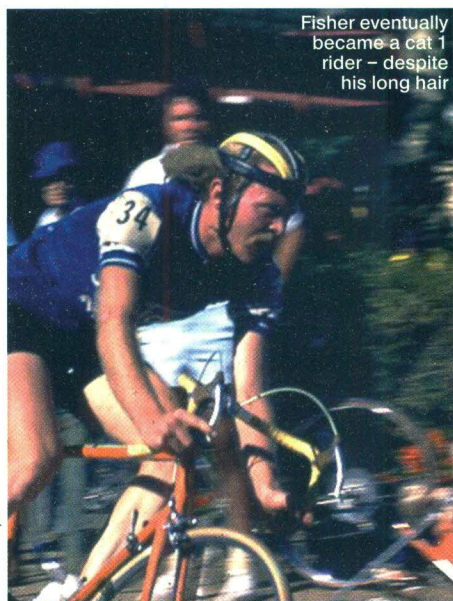
2009

### Riding on

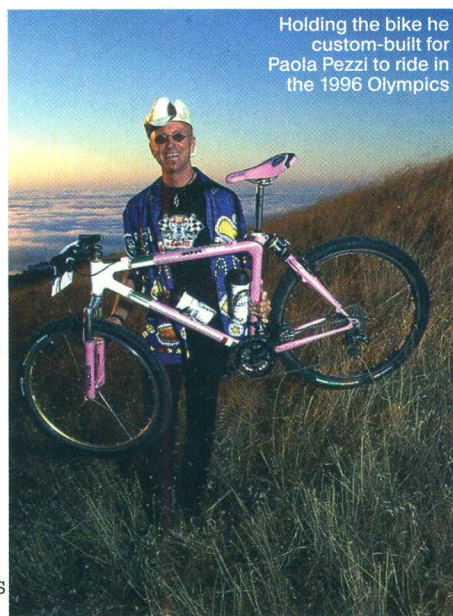
A series of light big-travel bikes follows until Fisher finds the sweet spot between a trail bike and an all-mountain bike in the Roscoe. Finally, he reconnects with his roots and introduces Gary Fisher road bikes.



Under five minutes is an elite time for the Repack. Fisher's record is 4min 22sec



Fisher eventually became a cat 1 rider – despite his long hair



Holding the bike he custom-built for Paola Pezzi to ride in the 1996 Olympics

tandems then pimped up with exotic European parts. It may all sound a bit *Scrapheap Challenge*, but Fisher insists that they weren't junk in any sense.

'We put bikes together from old frames and parts we'd sourced, but they were beautiful-looking bikes. We anodised and powder-coated parts. We made an all-black bike and a Tiger bike. They were great off-road bikes – they still ride OK.'

They weren't cheap either. 'In the first year Charlie and I were selling basic nice bikes for \$1,300 but the owners would ask us to do things to them and they'd end up around \$2,000,' he says. 'This was at a time when you could get any Colnago [a high-end road-racing bike] you wanted for \$400.'

### HITTING THE HEIGHTS

The invention of the mountain bike took cycling off the road, raising its status and its price, which meant it paid manufacturers handsomely to develop the hugely advanced machines we ride today. Anyone who uses a bike to keep in shape has a lot to thank Fisher for. Few people seriously deny that his company MountainBikes gave the bike its name, shaped it, honed its image and generated much of the publicity which took it from Californian cult to Olympic sport.

But Fisher didn't always expect his machines to become so universally loved. 'When we made the first mountain bikes I thought they were just for athletes,' he says. 'My mind was changed in 1975 by an out-of-shape fireman named Bob Burrows who rode with us. We'd wait forever for Bob on the climbs. He struggled, but he loved it so much he kept coming back.'

'That's when I saw how powerful this thing was for everybody. Mountain bikes got you away from the cops, the concrete and the crowds, and a lot of people will always want that.'

### CHILD OF THE 60S

Fisher's younger self might not appreciate his fashion sense now, but he would approve of his continued ecological fervour. The mountain bike was a child of the hippy movement, which was the last time young people were as serious about saving the planet as they are now.

'I met the Grateful Dead at a bike race in 1966,' says Fisher. 'All the rising SF bands were into bikes because they were "a good thing" – we were all gung-ho to behave properly ecologically. It was the same message as now and the bands were the messengers.'

That might have continued to be the message if the Haight scene had not come to an unfortunate end. 'The 60s scene in the Haight was good for a couple of years. Then it attracted kids from all around the world, living on the street, taking bad drugs... And we didn't help by organising a free rock festival in Altamont in 1969.'

The violence at Altamont, ending in the murder by a member of the Hell's Angels of Meredith Hunter during the Rolling Stones set, came in the last month of the 1960s, just four months after Charles Manson's 'family' >

BIKE SPECIAL 2010



had murdered actress Sharon Tate and her friends at her Los Angeles home. 'After that all the original people left town,' says Fisher. 'We all wanted to get away into the hills.' The San Francisco hippies took their bikes with them.

**BACK TO NATURE**

It's easy to see how charging down mountains on bicycles might become a cult on the sunny, sage-scented fire roads of Marin County. But making the magic work worldwide – in sludge and sleet, deserts, jungle and dreary flat places – would take a lot of Californian magic dust. Fisher had plenty.

'I was brought up in Beverly Hills. My grandfather made films with Errol Flynn,' he says. 'My mother was a nightclub singer who had worked as a Hollywood publicist. I learned how to deal with the press and get publicity from her. It wasn't hard. Charlie and I had a story that people wanted to read. Riding bicycles off road and down mountains – it was a story about crazy people.'

Once an aspiring *domestique*, one of the workhorse team riders who allow star road racers to slipstream behind them, Fisher had

**'We had a story that people wanted to read. Riding bikes down mountains – it was a story about crazy people'**

the capacity for hard work. He went for it, getting stories in magazines, putting stars on his bicycles and running Fisher race teams worldwide – all at the same time as designing bikes, doing the deals and fronting the company. There were ups and downs – Fisher wasn't the world's greatest businessman.

'MountainBikes stands as an example of how not to do it in trademark terms,' says Fisher. 'We had the name "mountain bike" but we didn't know what we had. We did well and we did badly. In 1983 we were in a big hole, problems with suppliers and so on. That was when Charlie walked away. I bought the business and it became Gary Fisher Mountain Bikes. That year everything came together and I made a heap of money.'

**ONWARDS AND UPWARDS**

Magic dust is useful, but Gary Fisher's real strength was his lifelong obsession with riding bicycles. He grew the company and kept his bikes in the public eye by technical innovation, making the first production bike with suspension forks and constantly aiming to make light bikes that could be ridden fast uphill and even faster down. His company also supported race teams with great riders, culminating in Paola Pezzo winning mountain biking Olympic gold in Atlanta

and Sydney. However, the business side had changed completely by the time of Pezzo's Olympic success.

'In 1991 supply caught up with demand,' Fisher says. 'We made good money that year but we were a leveraged-out, poorly financed mid-sized company that needed to get bigger and get the economies of scale up, so we sold. It was the right thing to do, but I made a big mistake by selling to guys who turned out not to be high flyers [Taiwanese company Anlen]. That was a big mess until Trek picked us up in 1993, and that was my dream come true.'

Fisher has done some of his best work since then, working with the biggest bike

corporation in the world, making a series of important changes in the form and function of bicycles. He used to say that he wanted to meddle with everything and be responsible for nothing. But he has taken that back, and now he gets more involved in the products as part of his role as chief designer.

'At the end of the day you have to be responsible for your name. I do a lot of promotion, but I work with the products too. I'm also busy with the team riders and the consumer side. And I'm working more with politicians, trying to change our cycling environment. I'm still trying to cover the earth with bikes.'

**FISHER'S GREATEST HITS**

The ex-hippy is behind some of the biggest leaps in bicycle design history



● **1987 Procaliber**

The first mountain bike that it was comfortable to ride absolutely flat out. The secret was Fisher's frame geometry – the tube lengths and angles dictate how a frame will ride. In 2009 he released an updated model.

● **1989 CR7**

Outrageously, this combined a stiff aluminium front with springy steel rear triangle. More importantly, it debuted Fisher's oversized Evolution steering bearing, which added stiffness and changed bike standards worldwide.



● **1998 Big Sur**

A good example of Fisher's Genesis geometry which sits the rider slap bang in the middle of the bike, making it harder to fall off and easier to steer.

● **2003 Paragon 29er**

His first 29in (74cm) wheel bike. Fisher had the faith to promote the big wheel to the whole market, because the trail-smoothing ride simply makes riding rough terrain easier.



● **2010 Superfly 100**

Where Fisher is now: a full-suspension 29er made super-light by carbon fibre and nimble through advanced geometry.



Fisher poses with his younger self on one of the early converted cruisers

