



Six for the Road

Honda CBX: An enduring colossus

Michael Schulte » The mid-1970s was a cruel era for Honda streetbike enthusiasts. A lack of captivating suspects in the showroom lineup had admirers of the engineering giant wistfully twisting the throttles of past glories. The powerhouse Honda CB750 Four had broken ground on a number of design fronts, but the original superbike was an aging child of the sixties. By late 1976, the once mighty roar of Honda's innovative motorcycle engineering department had been reduced to a muffled gust—at least that was the view

from the street. While Honda buffs had good reason to wax elegiac over the absence of thunder, there was a nascent rumble in the lab. Shoichiro Irimajiri, the man behind Honda's world championship-winning six-cylinder engines (made famous by the legendary Mike Hailwood) was at work applying the technological imprint of his six-cylinder racers to a street-legal, mass-production watershed—the imposing Honda CBX. Irimajiri's audacious feat would shock the industry and effectively signal the end of Honda's '70s stagnation.

Then, as now, the hulking CBX makes a potent first impression, unique among beasts of the road. From the steroidal powerplant bulging out of the frame like a cleanup hitter's biceps, to the zaftig tank and foreboding six-pipe exhaust system that literally spills out over the road, the CBX inspired visions of tattered pavement when it was first introduced in 1978. The heart of the allure of the CBX is the theatrical 1047cc transverse in-line six engine. Resembling a burly Wurlitzer pipe organ mounted upside down and

backwards, it seems impossibly wide, although, in reality, it's only two inches broader than the aforementioned four-piston Honda CB750. The six dishes out 105 horsepower at 9,000 rpm, more than delivering on the motor's visual power pledge. Raw muscle isn't the only remarkable feature of the big six; riders marvel at the glassy ride produced by the high-revving machine at 100-plus mph. The smooth, precise glide, combined with euphoric acceleration and a rumbling baritone exhaust generate an experience that has kept CBX addicts in the saddle for over 25 years.

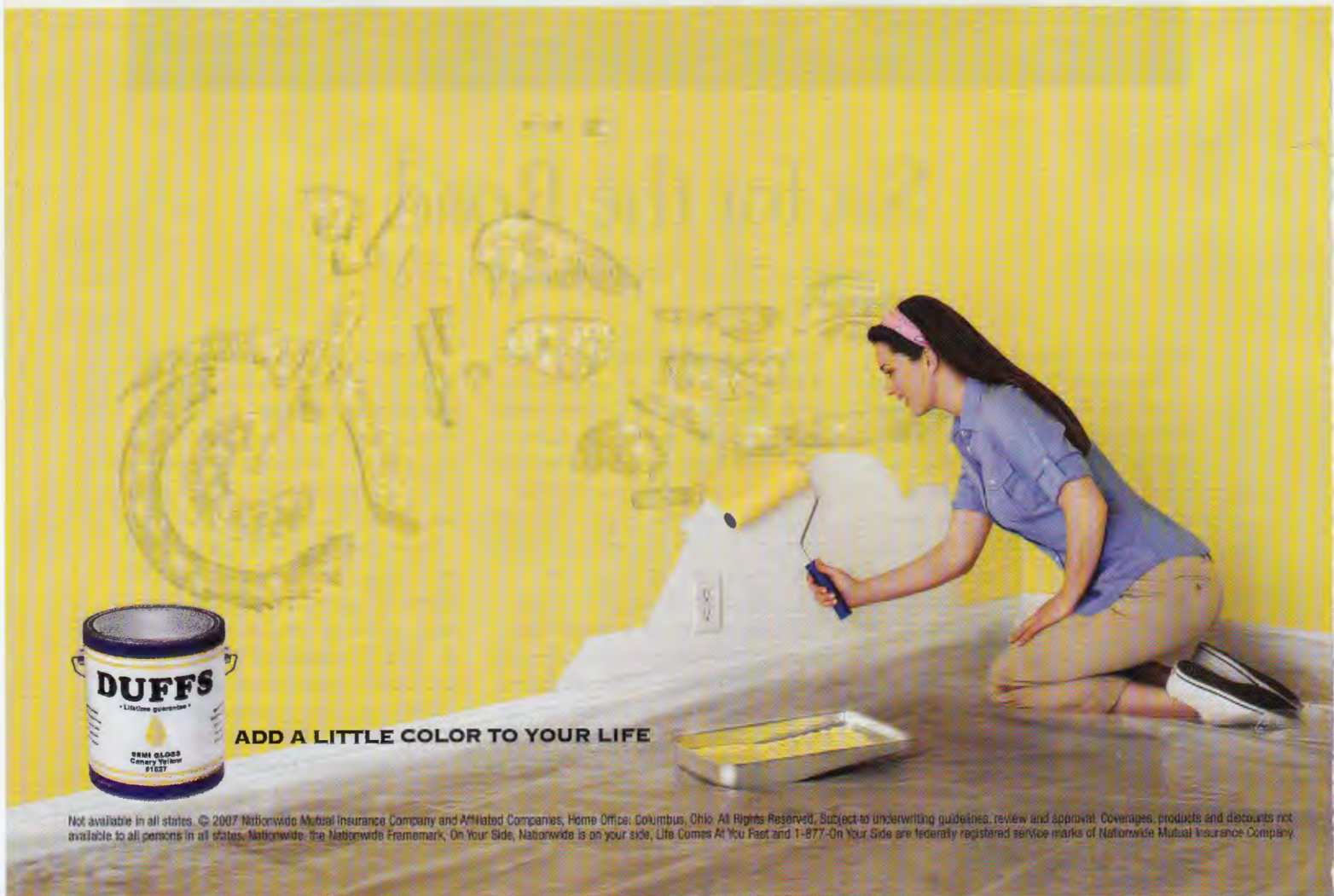
The road to innovation is often littered with hurdles and curses, and so it was with the development of the CBX. Initially, the short stroke

engine revved so fast that alternator shafts were snapping like uncooked spaghetti. To resolve the issue, Honda clutched the alternator, resulting in the emblematic "electric cricket" sound a CBX makes on warm up. Also, early CBX exhaust prototypes produced an unnerving howl eerily similar to that of an F-15 tactical fighter jet. Honda redesigned the exhaust baffling to produce a less threatening (and perhaps less tempting) tone. An oil cooler nullified initial overheating problems.

Despite these obstacles, development on the CBX was completed swiftly, requiring only a year-and-a-half. When the paint dried and the first CBXs hit the streets in late 1978, consumers had access to a road-ripper that topped out at 140

mph and clocked at 11.55 seconds in the quarter-mile, making the new superbike the world's fastest production motorcycle to date. Despite the CBX's uniqueness and its share of glowing press, very few of the bikes got more than a quarter-mile from the dealerships. Sales were flat. Why?

While the motor was a nearly flawless execution of inspired design, the chassis was not as fortunate, to say the least. Flimsy 35mm front forks were scarcely adequate for a bike that weighed in at nearly 600 lbs, wet; ditto for the rear shocks. The scrawny front end was notoriously prone to a nasty high speed wobble. Sloppy riding would be generously rewarded with shoulder-dislocating tankslappers. Handling issues would later be dispatched



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with aftermarket upgrades, but back in the '80s they required more creative means, such as the infamous watermelon remedy, discovered by Mike Brown Barone, National Director of the 1,100-strong International CBX Owners Association (ICOA) and publisher of the organization's magazine, *The CBX Press*.

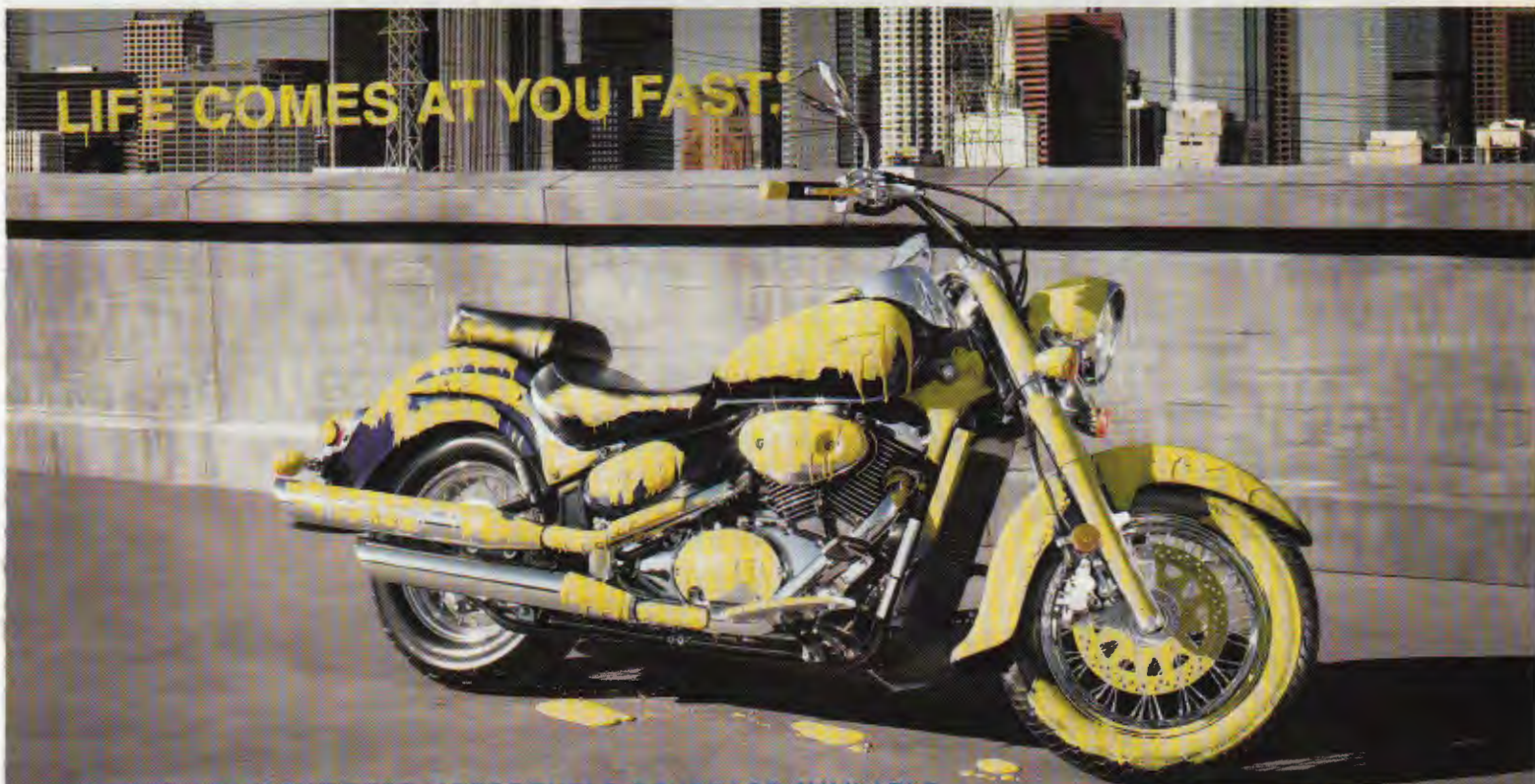
Barone had first experienced the unpredictable wobble while running his new 1980 CBX wide open. One day, at a roadside stand, while securing a just-purchased watermelon to the tank for the trip home, a Kawasaki Z1R shot by, scattering leaves. Barone hopped his melon-laden CBX and gave chase. As he closed to within ten feet of the Z1R, the Kawasaki opened up on a long straight. Barone dove in

behind. When both bikes hit an undulation in the road, Barone was shocked to see that the Z1R was fully engaged in a high-speed rattle, while the X glided through the wave like a torpedo. Barone watched the Z1R exit in his rear view and realized that a 25-pound watermelon strapped to his tank had offset the flex in the 35mm's and provided a lo-tech handling solution. No doubt, the vanquished Kawasaki rider had other creative ideas regarding melon placement.

Considerations other than fruit-assisted suspension curbed interest in the CBX as well. At over \$4,000 retail (over \$11k in today's dollars), it was not exactly a Sunday afternoon impulse purchase. The engine was seen by many as formidably

complex. Six carbs to sync and 24 valves to shim scared off the less mechanically adventurous. Others avoided the bike because it was just too big, too heavy, and too wide. Mike Barone initially fell into the latter category. "I thought it was a despicable motorcycle from the get go," Barone said of his first impression of the bike. In 1979, Barone was riding a Yamaha SR500 that he had tricked to roam the tight Pennsylvania backroads near his home.

One afternoon, his dog chewed the lining out of his helmet, necessitating a trip to the Honda dealership for a replacement. It would prove to be a fortuitous snack. An over-enthusiastic salesman cajoled Barone to take a black 1980 CBX out for a test ride. He was reluctant. "I'm not



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going to sit on that thing, it's ridiculous," Barone remembers saying. Nevertheless, he consented. Pulling away from the dealership, he was immediately spellbound.

"The first 10 feet I rode, I realized it was the most perfect machine I'd ever been on," Barone recalled fondly. Contempt became rapture as he wound the CBX up onto the highway and fell in love with the big six engine, marveling at the smooth acceleration and almost total lack of vibration. "This is the bike I've waited for my entire life," Barone



thought to himself while passing four-wheeled blurs on the highway. Circling back, he would eventually pass a trio of arm-waving riders heading in the opposite direction. "Maybe somebody does like this bike," he thought as he tossed a friendly wave back.

When he returned to the shop, he learned that he had, in fact, passed a search party assembled by the nervous salesman to track him down. The CBX epiphany had kicked the cord out of Barone's internal clock and he had no idea how long he'd been out. Today, Barone speaks with equal passion about the black 1980 CBX on which he has logged over 100,000 mostly watermelon-free miles.

Barone's enthusiasm for the bike certainly isn't isolated. Numerous CBX owners associations exist around the globe, with the ICOA laying claim to being the oldest and largest.

The big machines enjoyed a fleeting heyday in the early '80s with a small breed of riders who discovered the magic before the CBX faded out of style, but the bike's appeal was far from universal. The CBX provoked derisive snickers in some quarters when it roared past, but it is a good bet that the roadside detractors had never both-

ered to fire one up themselves. Because the bike was eschewed by the mainstream, used CBXs were plentiful. In 1982, excellent condition CBXs could be had for around \$1,800 (\$3,650 in today's dollars). It was a niche bike from the beginning, ignored by the many, prized by disciples. Perhaps that is why today's CBX owners have a propensity to be a zealous breed, with unrestrained personalities well-matched to their machines.

The ICOA presides over 15-plus boisterous rallies a year that serve as a gathering place for riders to swap old stories and create new ones, and as a forum for deconstructing popular lore that the machines are too

difficult or expensive to maintain. Because CBXs were produced in quantity and there are now at least three major CBX parts distributors online, the myth that original and aftermarket parts are difficult to find is easily exploded.

The CBX has also found an enduring afterlife as a project bike. CBX engines are still used today in more world-class non-cruiser "specials" than any other motor, resulting in some truly spectacular show bikes, including a Gigeresque V-12 CBX currently being finished by Andreas Georgeades.

The CBX had a brief, incandescent lifespan, lasting only four years before succumbing in 1982. Midway through the bike's existence, Honda transformed the CBX into a sport-touring bike, replete with a sleek fairing and saddlebags. That incarnation also failed to rouse sales, despite boasting a detuned engine, improved brakes, and suspension upgrades. Ultimately, the technical innovation and burnished brawn of the magnificent six was unable to lift public perception of the CBX as a bulky, overweight curiosity. It did, however, serve as an authoritative statement that Honda engineering was as robust as it wanted to be, and that the company possessed the technological vision to bring to the street a creation as singular and imaginative as the CBX.

It is a testament to the 28-year-old creation of Imajiri's project team that there is a worldwide tribe of dedicated CBX adherents for whom the chrome mammoth is no archeological artifact of some earlier cycling epoch, but a living, thundering herd that is still leaving unambiguous six-cylinder footprints far and wide. **M**

International CBX Owners Association:
www.cbxclub.com