

# Sparks will fly: Artsy bikes at First Fridays and Mill Ave.

**The Tom Cruisers take their two-wheel works of art on the road, drawing an audience appreciative of the metal madness.**

by Brie Iatarola

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At first glance, the scene borders on absurdity: A man zips down Mill Avenue on a pink lowrider bicycle that boasts a pair of tassels, white tires and the moniker "Pink N' Pretty." He pedals fast, eager to attract attention. When part of the frame nicks the asphalt, sparks spit out and, sure enough, people stop to look.

The stares are exactly what 22-year-old Ryan Murray, Pink N' Pretty's owner, and the Tom Cruisers expect every time they bike the Valley's streets. Chrome rims and shiny frames like those featured in the Sprite commercial aren't what make these bicycles stand out - luxury isn't the goal...yet.

It's the way Murray's junkyard sculptures on wheels evoke a spirit of childhood and transform adults into kids the minute they begin to ride.

"[The bikes] are so much fun," says 19-year-old Megan Thompson, a self-proclaimed Tom Cruiser and student at Mesa Community College. "When we go out, I feel like a kid again. You can't go on a single ride without someone going, 'Whoa.' You know all eyes are on you. You don't care what people think when you ride."

For ASU interdisciplinary studies freshman Andrew Benson, who has known Murray since high school, riding is also a way to stay young at heart. "I feel liberated every time," he says. "Everybody's stoked. Honestly, this takes you back to where your roots are ... in the 'hood."

"Yeah, we get some flack, but you know they're just jealous."

## Golden Junk

Merely four months ago, Murray, a sculpting and film student at Scottsdale Community College, began to salvage abandoned bikes and weld them into riding material. He says he found most of them in alleys and garbage cans, and during half-off sales at Goodwill.

What began as a hobby, however, is progressing into something greater: a collection of some of the funkiest rides on the block and a posse to go along with it.

"When I started building the bikes, I was only thinking of four to five people to ride them for [the Phoenix art walks] First Fridays," Murray says. "But every time we go now, there's at least one new person."

Murray admits he likes to spend hours in his garage building the designs, which usually begin as a rough sketch on a notebook when he's in class. "I'm not good at drawing," he says, dragging his fingers through a scrambled mop of brown hair. "Seeing the sketch reminds me what I had in mind. My adrenaline starts going. I'm not really thinking about the process. I start working fast. Before I know it, I've missed lunch and it's dinner time."

## The Posse

So far, the man behind the pedal power has produced 13 bikes for the Tom Cruisers, who ride through downtown



SCC sculpture and film student Ryan Murray makes a few adjustments to his hand-welded bike before taking it for a ride.



Murray is ready to ride his bike, a creation he's welded together from old scrap parts, in downtown Phoenix for the First Friday art walk.

Phoenix during First Fridays or around Mill Avenue on the weekends. Although several of his latest bicycles [which he built from scratch rather than scrap] are for sale on eBay and at Gordy's Bike Shop in Phoenix, Murray and his posse ride merely for fun. And that's what's in store for the crew this particular Saturday afternoon.

The Tom Cruisers, who have also dubbed themselves everything from the Orville Redenbikers to the Pedalphiles, unite almost every weekend at a house on Farmer Avenue in Tempe that includes a collection of Vespas any fan would envy. After Murray unloads the bikes from his trailer, the front yard becomes an exhibition of metal madness. A few passing drivers brake to observe; others shoot puzzled looks. All this attention, yet, at this moment, no one has even started to ride the suckers.

As stragglers arrive, some people linger inside the house and chat to kill time. "Ryan's bikes are so good," says ASU secondary education sophomore Kelly Rogers, who seldom passes the chance to cruise. "They're like moving art - good to look at, but hard to ride."

### **Bike Antics**

Finally, everyone is ready to give the streets a dose of Tom-Cruiser love. Ben Shill, 26, climbs on a green bike named The Mantis, which slightly resembles the majestic insect. For Shill, the Tom Cruisers have become his surrogate family. "I've been riding for a couple of months," he says. "I wouldn't be riding if it weren't for them. I only relate to them. I don't relate to my family that much."

Uniting friends and open-minded strangers, along with providing an outlet for innocent fun, are what the Tom Cruisers do best. After a guest appearance at a friend's house and several stops for chain repairs, the gang finally makes it to Mill Avenue. "There are all different types of people on Mill, so you get all kinds of reactions," Rogers says from a simple beach cruiser while waiting for a green light.

Seconds later, a burly guy revs his Harley and shouts, "Ride On! Live to ride. Ride to live." When the light changes, Benson whizzes past bystanders on the pink "Li'l Princess," a midget-sized bike that he, not Murray, revamped several months ago. Some chuckle and point. They have every reason to; every time he pedals, his legs nearly whack his chin.

"Throwing up sparks is the best thing about riding her," Benson says. "Li'l Princess is almost a fluke ... she is the remnants of the trouble I had building her."

After awhile, several Tom Cruisers suggest a switch so they can ride the bike they have been secretly eyeing since the day began. Murray settles into one that's like the offspring of a tricycle-breeding wheelchair.

Once he gains enough speed, he throws his hands above his head and leans back to pop a wheelie. A steering device connected to the bottom of the seat scrapes the road before Murray's hand can grab it to control the bike. Some spectators whistle and others clap when sparks shoot out and the front tire slams back into the ground.

### **Riding Reflections**

For the rest of the afternoon, the Tom Cruisers rove the streets, rousing their audience with more wheelies and other spark-spitting stunts.

Eventually, however, the inevitable arrives: It's time to head back.

The posse flips a turn that would make Lance Armstrong proud. On the ride home, a driver flashes thumbs up and toots her horn. When the house comes into view, a fellow Tom Cruiser declares she's having so much fun that she doesn't want the day to end.

But it does - the moment the group rolls up to the yard. Like obedient children who put away their toys, they dismount and walk the bikes through a gate and into a jungle of shrubs. Suddenly, reality hits: It's time for the Tom Cruisers to jet, because this day of cruising is officially over.

Even so, everyone agrees on one thing: "[The day] always seems to work out for the best." Benson says. "Especially when you're hanging out with friends."

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