



SKIPPING SCHOOL TO WATCH THE TT: ANDY KERSHAW ON BIKES

Andy Kershaw's new autobiography charts the DJ and music journalist's volatile life – and his enduring passion for motorcycles

By Mike Nicks

It's turning into a perfect day for Andy Kershaw. This morning the DJ and global wanderer bought a house in Yorkshire, the paperback edition of his autobiography is just out, it's his dog Buster's sixth birthday – and he's twirling the twistgrip of his dream bike, a 17,000rpm Honda six. Kershaw is blipping the 297cc motor to only 8000rpm in this warm-up session at a workshop in Leicestershire, but even so the bike sounds louder than 10,000 Samurai warriors screaming into battle. It could be the loudest racing motorcycle ever made.

"This would be my number one bike if I could put together a dream garage," Kershaw says. "I didn't get to see Mike Hailwood race the six at the TT in the sixties, but I saw him when he made his comeback in 1978 and he won the Formula One TT on an 860 Ducati." Kershaw's autobiography, *No Off Switch*, relates how the 18-year-old risked failing A-level history by fleeing to the Isle of Man to watch Hailwood's high-stakes return to the TT just two days before the exam. "I walked the four or five miles almost to Kate's Cottage," he writes. "There I settled down for the day with my sandwiches, my race programme and my history exercise books. I boned up on the Causes of the First World War. I could scarcely concentrate. "Those around me were reaching a state of near panic. If we weren't entirely fearful for Mike's life, we were dreading disappointment. He was no youngster any more. His familiarity with the TT course will have faded.

WHAT'S THE STORY?

■ Andy Kershaw became a cherished national institution before a marriage breakup, nervous breakdown and prison spells shattered his life. But now he's back – and he says his lifelong love of motorcycles has helped drive his recovery.

Modern bikes are vastly more powerful animals than those of Mike's heyday. The best we could hope for was that he wasn't humiliated." Kershaw's faith was rewarded by Hailwood claiming his 13th TT victory. The previous year the motorcycle-crazy

lad had played truant to get to the TT. He slept in plastic bags in a small tent, with only £5 to last a week. "I bought lumps of cheese and bags of nuts and raisins and washed them down with cartons of milk," he relates. *No Off Switch* charts Kershaw's rise from humble beginnings in Rochdale to become one of Britain's most treasured DJs, a foreign correspondent for Radio 4 and broadsheet newspapers in places where a mine or a bullet could easily have ended everything, via a divorce, prison spells and poverty. Try packaging that lot into 52 years. But his passion for bikes surges through the book's pages. "The people I feel most confident with are always the bike racing people," Kershaw says, after shutting off the Honda six. "The racing scene feels to me like my natural home. They treat me as one

of the family, because for all that I've done and for all of my life, I have never left them. It's been the one constant." His friends in the racing world include the owner of the Honda that's just shattered the peace of a Leicestershire village, George Beale. Beale specialises in classic 500cc Matchless G50 racers of the sixties, and has also completed, in an act of breathtaking boldness and complexity, several replicas of the six-cylinder Hondas. Kershaw may never get to sample one of those, but this year he fulfilled an ambition by riding a Yamaha TZ350 for the first time. Kershaw saw his first motorcycle race at Oulton Park in 1974, when he was 14, and Barry Sheene was the star on his Suzuki RG500. "I used to enjoy the 350cc races in the seventies at circuits such as Mallory Park and Scarborough more than the

750s," he says. "The racing was guaranteed to be close because everyone was on a similar TZ350, but also because of the nature of that bike. It had a good power-to-weight ratio, and was light and very agile. "They were pioneering, in a way, those larger-than-life characters. They would break open a crate, put a TZ250 and a TZ350 in the back of a Transit van towing a caravan, and do a whole grand prix season." Kershaw got to ride the TZ in a parade at Mallory when its owner, collector, Dean Want loaned him the 1974 bike. The build-up seems to have been more gut-twisting than when Kershaw presented Live Aid at Wembley in 1985 to hundreds of millions of TV viewers worldwide, at the age of 25 and only 18 months after being on the dole, without a plan.

Kershaw's dream garage

1966-67 250-297cc Honda six
At seven years of age, Kershaw was already aware of Honda's technical masterpieces, but couldn't get to the Isle of Man to see them.

1973-74 Yamaha TZ350
Water-cooled twin made 60bhp, and was the journeyman racer's short-circuit and grand prix tool.

1966-68 250cc Yamaha V4
Yamaha's answer to the Honda six – the 70bhp RD05 70" V4 two-stroke.

1969-73 250-350cc Benelli four
Kershaw's heroes Renzo Pasolini

and Jarno Saarinen raced the Italian fours, and Kel Carruthers won the 1969 250cc world title on one.

HIS OWN BIKES
1970 883cc Harley-Davidson Sportster

"What a proper bike should look like."

1974 Harley-Davidson X-90 minibike
"One of these was my first bike when I was 14."

50cc Honda Monkeybike
"I love the downright silliness of small bikes like these!"

"It was the first time I'd ridden a real racing bike," he says, in his Lancashire accent. "There was Alex George, Jim Redman, Phil Read and other famous names all around me, and I thought, 'What the hell am I doing here?' "Everybody warned me that it was a difficult bike to ride, that it would spit me off if I didn't ride it in a particular way, that I would never even get it off the startline. Charlie Williams (an eight-times TT winner) said, 'Use the clutch around the hairpin.' But Stan Woods (a former British champion) said: 'Don't touch that clutch going around the hairpin.' I was terrified, with all those spectators watching. "But it was dead easy to ride – I felt that I could have ridden it all day. My only difficulty was that I couldn't find my way around Gerards Bend. It goes on and on and on, and I couldn't see

any apexes or a line – it was just this growing ocean of Tarmac." Now Kershaw's got the parade bug, and he's open to offers if anyone needs a keen young lad to handle a classic racing bike. "I'm not good enough to go racing," he says. "But in a parade you get to go out on beautiful old bikes with none of the pressure of competing, and the camaraderie is wonderful." Kershaw is also a regular visitor to British Superbike rounds, even though he has reservations about modern racing. "The machinery and the riders have no personality, when you think of the characters that used to be involved with racing," he says. "A modern 600 is enormous compared to a 350 Yamaha – it weighs a ton in comparison. I liked the very elegant riding styles of the TZ era." **Continued over**



“ I didn't get to see Hailwood race the Honda six at the TT but I was there when he made his comeback

Andy Kershaw



BILL SANER



BILL SANER

Kershaw prepares for a TZ350 outing at the Festival of a Thousand Bikes at Mallory Park

'It's dead easy to ride' – Kershaw at Redgate corner, Donington Park, on the TZ
Right: TT winner Charlie Williams offers guidance on the grid before the TZ debut

Kershaw's future looks like becoming even more involved with bikes in 2013. He has been invited to be the curator of a Legends Museum being planned for Scarborough's Olivers Mount, and motorcycles will feature in his broadcasting work. He's training to be a wall of death rider, and he's making a piece on the 98cc military Welbike for BBC1's *The One Show*. "It was made for paratroopers and spies in World War Two," he says. "It's a fold-up bike that was dropped in a crate."

When his marriage broke up in 2006 and Kershaw defied a restraining order barring him from contacting his wife, he ended up on the run, and eventually served three short prison sentences. In 2009 he was so poor that a friend had to loan him some money so that he could travel to his father's funeral.

But now Kershaw has recovered from a breakdown and drink addiction, and

is once again bubbling with the energy and passion that's made him one of Britain's favourite broadcasters. His autobiography is an inspiration in how to take courage and do the things you really want to do.

In 2010 Kershaw was relaxing in Bangkok after making programmes for his Radio 3 *Music Planet* series, when the city's business district was sealed off in a protest. Most reporters believed that it was impossible to get in, but the challenge gave Kershaw the opportunity to hail a motorcycle taxi with the phrase he'd always dreamed of using: "Take me to the revolution."

A girlfriend once said to him: "Do you know what your trouble is, Kershaw? You've got no off switch."

It's a problem that a lot of people would like to have.

■ **No Off Switch: Virgin Books, £8.99**
www.andykershaw.co.uk

HEROES

Mike Hailwood: Nine world titles, 14 TT wins

'I was there in 1978 when he won his comeback TT'

Bill Ivy: 1967 125cc world champion

'I was also very small as a youth, so I identified with him. He was no more than 5ft 4in, but he was a tenacious little terrier on a bike'

Jim Redman: six 250 and 350cc world titles

'A huge talent, with the humility of an earlier age. An almost mythical figure to me as a youth'

Jarno Saarinen: 1972 250cc world champion

'He won the Daytona 200 on a 350 Yamaha against much bigger bikes. Such a tragedy that he died at Monza in 1973'

John Hartle: Norton and MV

'Could have been a world champion, but he was killed at Scarborough in 1968'

Tenacious privateers

'Including Alex George, Chas Mortimer and Charlie Williams – I just admire what they did'

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