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THE FLASHBACK EXPRESS

You Can't Go Home Again, But You Can
Enjoy the Ride with a Honda Benly 150 Touring

Can't go home again? As Bob Dylan says, "Of course you can." For those of us who paid attention to them when we were young, the mechanical details of motorcycles can be a sort of visual time machine, powerful touchstones to an earlier era, just like a visit to your home town. I still ride there at least once every summer to consider the passage of time and other deep matters, but mostly for lunch at the Elroy Café.

When the Sunday paper arrived that morning I glanced at the front page, where American statesmen were saying thoughtful things about countries that have a lot of oil, then cast it aside. Digging through the center section I zeroed in on the heart of the paper, the motorcycle classifieds. I was in the market for a good cheap utility bike for running around town and the occasional jaunt into the countryside. My 400F was decked out as a production racer with no sidestand and had to be leaned on a tree wherever I went. Also, I'd grown weary of warming up four quarts of genuine Blackstrap 40-weight Racing Oil every time I had to run to the Seven/Eleven for some nacho bean dip and a throw-away razor. I had a vague longing for an easygoing duffer of a motorcycle; a mechanical respite from the hectic, urgent quality of the 400 Four.

I opened the paper wide, set my coffee cup on it, and started down the column of used bikes. There were two BSAs, one chopped and one partly chopped—but with much chrome—followed by a “loaded” BMW R100 that cost a hundred and nineteen dollars less than I made last year. “A nice bike, and money left over for gas,” I mused. Skimming over a Can-Am that was only raced four seasons, I worked my way down the long list of H-bikes, where I suddenly stumbled over the following item:

For Sale: 1962 Honda 150 Benly Touring. Can be made to run again. \$50.

An alarm went off somewhere deep in the fiasco-defense portion of my brain, but I drowned it out with some quick scoffing. “Of course it can be made to run again,” I mumbled to myself. “The bloody Hindenburg can be made to run again, if you’ve got money to burn. Hell, raise the Titanic!”

I let it pass and continued scanning the column, stopping by force of habit at those missing letters of the alphabet where various British and European Singles and Twins used to appear—and occasionally still do. Nothing there. No hundred-dollar Metrallas; not a single AJS 7-R offered for a fraction of its worth by an unsuspecting widow with her mortgage in arrears; not even a faded Desmo being tossed out of the garage by a confused couple whose son is in the Air Force in Turkey and never writes. A dull day for the classifieds.

I returned to the Honda and frowned. Good grief . . . a 150 Benly. Little brother to the Dream. I hadn’t seen one in years. I thought they’d all been patched up and run into oblivion by beatniks. That or died of exposure chained to the front bumper of some camper with mallard decals all over it. Fifty bucks was not much money, even for a 150, if it could really be made to run. At that price you never knew what to expect; it might be scattered around in six peach crates, or have nothing worse than burned points. Anything could happen to a motorcycle in 17 years. Old bikes survived from one decade to the next on odd twists of fate and the whims of a succession of owners, like the horses and dogs in children’s stories—generally the victims of some casual human vice. You couldn’t always get there in time to save them.

Before calling the number I dragged out my Castrol box of old motorcycle sales literature and sifted through for some hard information on the Benly. I finally found a 1964 folder, gleaned from the sales rack of a Honda-and-fishing-tackle shop where I used to hang around. The folder opened up four ways into a poster that showed every big road bike that Honda made that year, from the 305 Superhawk down to the Super 90. There was a nice picture of the 150, all in scarlet and chrome, with big fat whitewall tires. Beneath the photo the legend read:

Here’s on of the best all-around motorcycles ever built, with an enviable engine performance record. The Advanced Honda engine is a two-cylinder,

four-stroke power plant designed to use a high compression ratio of 7.5:1. The overhead camshaft eliminates unnecessary reciprocating weight for peak efficiency. The Honda CA-95 produces 16.0 hp at 10,000 rpm. Electric starter of course.

Of course.

Thinking back as hard as I might, I honestly couldn't remember anybody who envied the performance of the 150, except maybe those of us who rode 50s—and even we knew they weren't Japan's answer to the Vincent Black Shadow. A friend of mine used to call the Benlys "retro rockets." They were famous, in fact, for being quite slow at a time when other Hondas raised eyebrows by going so fast. Still, they were reliable, and in 1962 reliability was one aspect of performance you could truly envy, especially in an engine that held together at 10,000 rpm, didn't leak oil, and consumed almost no gasoline.

A close check of the Honda spec sheet further revealed that the bike had a 49 x 41mm bore and stroke, weighed 246 pounds, had a four-speed forward constant mesh transmission, and was supposed to deliver "approx." 75 mph and 141 (not a mere 140) mpg. A perfect bike for the age of wind-fall profits.

That night I drove out to look at the 150. It belonged to a man who had taken it to work every day until the right-side cam bearing housing fell off onto the road and was lost. Since the bike had bad mufflers and a slipping clutch, he reasoned it wasn't worth fixing and parked it in the back of the garage, just behind the Weber grill and the cluster of 10-speeds. It sat just so for three years, until a better job beckoned the family to Houston and the Honda was found to be worth less per pound than the cost of its shipping by Mayflower. So the owner, working on the one-born-every-minute principle, ran an ad in the paper. Twenty-four hours later I was standing at his doorstep.

When we pushed the Honda out into the center of the garage it looked a little rough, even under the dangling 40-watt light bulb. The seat was torn; the unsupported end of the camshaft wobbled luridly when the engine was kicked over (yes, Virginia . . .), and the raw, rusted-off ends of the mufflers stuck out like a pair of blown howitzers. The paint was faded from the original factory Light Scarlet to a sort of Allis-Chalmers orange,

and the engine was flocked with that curious mixture of brown oil and kitty-litter that seems drawn to the cooling fins of forgotten bikes.

As I stood back and looked at the Honda, words other than “prime” and “cherry” crossed my mind. The 150 was in pretty sad shape; a quintessential \$50 motorcycle suffering its last chance to be owned. Yet beneath all that disarray—I told myself—there lurked a certain camp, period-piece beauty. And except for the cam cover and a few pounds of truant muffler material all the parts were there.

Normally I would have fled from a cycle in this condition, counting myself rich and prudent for all the money I hadn’t spent. But this one I had to have. I knew even before I drove out to look at the thing that I would probably weaken and buy it. The bike, for me, was more than just an old crock. A 150 Benly Touring, Light Scarlet in color, was the first Japanese motorcycle to penetrate the great barrier of rolling farmland that surrounded my home town. It was the first Honda I ever saw.

I wrote out a check for \$50 and the owner and his sons loaded the bike into their Chevy van and delivered it to my house. When it arrived I rolled the 150 into the middle of my garage, turned on all the lights, opened a beer and pulled up a lawn chair. It was a nice summer night full of crickets, so I left the garage doors open. I was in the mood for a long look, a chance just to sit and study the bike. There are times when a motorcycle is just like an old song or a forgotten photograph. You run across one from the past and it floods you with memories, conjuring up all kinds of forgotten details from another era. You see a certain bike or hear it run and suddenly you can remember exactly what you were doing when it was around. Brain cells you’d given up as long lost to all that Southern Comfort and lime vodka in your formative years somehow regenerate and send clear and perfect messages. For me the Benly was that kind of machine. It brought back things I hadn’t thought of for a long time. I sipped on my beer, looked at the bike, and let myself drift.

It was 1962 when I first saw one. I was 14 years old and living in a primitive civilization without shopping malls. We had stores then, and Muzak hadn’t yet been perfected. My parents drove a 1956 Buick Special three-tone (blue, white, and blue) with a plush rope across the back seat in case you wanted to hang on to something, since there were no seat belts.

When we drove into the city the parking meters accepted pennies and you could buy hamburgers as big as quarters for 19 cents. Words like Emission Control were used, discreetly, only by doctors and nurses. Elvis was out of the Army, and Saigon was a place called the Paris of the Orient. My nine-transistor radio, permanently tuned to a distant WLS in Chicago, was blasting Duke of Earl and Telstar from its pathetic tin speaker. There were no sound systems then, so I made do with a record player. Henry Gregor Felsen novels were checked out of a library rather than an Instructional Materials Center. Von Trips was dead. Phil Hill was reigning World Champion, and on the screen Peter O'Toole had just put a thrilling end to the Cinemascope life of T. E. Lawrence by crashing a JAP-engined Brough Superior on an English country lane. In 1962 Ernie Kovacs died, and my shop teacher bought a new Corvair Monza. It was the year a 21-lb. chunk of Sputnik Four landed on a street corner in Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

Just 100 miles inland from that little-known non-disaster I was spending the weekend on the farm of a friend of mine from school. We'd both just graduated from eighth grade and we were playing badminton with his three brothers on the lawn of the farmhouse. Suddenly we heard a high-revving motor, accompanied by the country sound of gravel plinking off the insides of metal fenders. We turned to see a young woman in helmet, goggles, and a jacket with a map of Korea on the back riding up the driveway on a bright red motorcycle. It was my friend's older sister. She was 19 years old, with dark eyes and long brown hair, and I thought she was beautiful. A Bohemian at heart and one of the original free spirits of the decade, she had the previous summer motored all over the West on a beat-up Indian V-Twin.

She removed her helmet, shook out her hair, and told us the bike was a brand-new Honda 150 and she'd sold her Indian to buy it. She said you could rev the Honda to 10,000 rpm and it didn't leak oil, so you could keep it right in your house if you wanted to. We all let out a low whistle of approval. The mother of the family brought out some iced tea and we all sat on the lawn to admire the bike. Even then I thought it was sort of funny looking—and a poor trade for an Indian V-Twin—but I didn't say anything.

The Honda didn't have that bare-bones hard mechanical look that motorcycles were supposed to have. It was all sculptured and full of sheet metal, like

a Vespa or a Talbot-Lago with fender skirts. Everything was enclosed: battery, chain, air filter, electrics, and cables were all hidden beneath covers, tunnels, and overlapping shrouds. The fenders looked like Roman gladiators' helmets, and the rear shocks were square. (Were there square springs and shock seals beneath those covers?) The styling was pure cream puff, full of flowing, swoopy lines that managed to appear squared-off at their edges. There was a new message of cleanliness and civility in the machine, and I wasn't so sure I liked the message. Honda was trying to tell you that you didn't have to know how a motorcycle worked in order to own one, any more than Sophia Loren had to be a Lambretta mechanic to ride around Rome.

Back then I judged every motorcycle by how much it looked like a Triumph (a habit not entirely lost) and I immediately dismissed the Benly as cushy and decadent. Always a callow youth, I failed to appreciate many of the good points buried in the design. How, at 14, could I know that the pressed-steel frame, swing arm, and front forks with their swinging-link suspension were not merely a compromise with cheap mass-production, but an effort to incorporate the best features of the light and modern NSU racing bikes, so much admired by Honda. Or that the odd-looking, very tall cylinder head enclosed a chain-driven overhead cam, and that all those little clacking and whirring bits and pieces turned over at speeds normally seen only on racing bikes that had to be rebuilt every half hour. Or that the electrical system, hidden deep in the frame, might still be working, untouched, after 17 years—electric starter and all.

And looking at the bike as it sat in my garage that night I was struck by something else; a view from the era of one-liter-plus superbikes. Honda had taken 150cc's of displacement and stuck it into a real motorcycle; not a downsized mini-chopper or a pit bike for kids, but a cycle with the aura and proportions of a full-sized road machine. A remarkable, lost concept lived in the Benly; that of a 246-lb. luxury touring bike, a plush cruiser with the displacement of two Dixie-cups. I wondered if you could really tour with the Benly Touring. The word was right in the official title, but would a 150 really carry two people and some luggage in any kind of comfort? Or was the designation a misnomer, like the word scrambler applied to certain high-pipe road bikes of the 1960s? I vowed that if the Benly could be got running I'd take it for a short but proper tour. Maybe my wife,

Barbara, could be persuaded to come along. We could go north into the country; journey back to the farm where I saw that first Honda. We could take our tent and camp. A bike was no touring machine, after all, if you couldn't go two-up and camp.

It took a little time and money to get the 150 right. Fifty-dollar motorcycles are like blackmail or a drug habit—they keep costing more and more, but you're in too deep to quit. Before I was done I'd lavished many hours and \$150 on the Honda, right up to the magic buck-a-cc limit. I cleaned the bike thoroughly, polished the chrome, and rubbed out the faded paint. Then it got new mufflers, battery, clutch, air cleaner, side-cover knobs, plugs, points, oil (0.8 qt.), and a right-side cam bearing. All the parts were available on order from Honda and took about two weeks to arrive. Only the baffle inserts for the mufflers were out of stock. No problem. Back in high school removing baffles was the ultimate demon tweak of the backyard tuner. The **Benly** would have to go on the street sounding a little louder than stock. I just hoped I was up to handling all that extra power.

With all the part in place I cranked the engine over. The electric starter worked fine and the engine fired almost immediately. Great clouds of smoke, smelling like old lawnmower gas and flaming cobwebs, billowed from the mufflers, but it soon settled down to a clean, steady idle. It had a throaty, mellow note that sounded much more like a large British Twin than like the cammy little whizzer I'd expected. I clunked it into first, extinguishing the red neutral light (still working after all these years, in the square headlight nacelle just behind the built-in speedometer), and motored down the driveway.

Out on the street the Honda performed just the way it sounded—all low-end torque and thunder. You could ride and shift it just like a big British Twin, and with the baffles gone the effect was fairly convincing. The only difference was that when you were done shifting and flat-out in fourth the Honda was going about 55 instead of 110. It rode and sounded like an honest-to-God big bike, except that everything happened at a 50 percent increment of the normal range.

Top end of the **Benly** was just a wild guess, of course, based on the progress of the other traffic. The speedometer needle wagged and vacillated

crazily, like an admonishing finger telling you to slow down. It reminded me of a floating cork-and-needle compass I once made in Scouts. Curious about the true speed of the bike, I had Barb follow me out onto the highway and clock it against our Nash station wagon, that world standard of precision. The Nash speedo had me flat out at 57 mph, once it caught up. Then, with the help of neighbor Lee Heggelund (a track coach and no slouch with a stopwatch), we marked off a quarter mile at the famous K-Mart Parking Lot Drag Strip and I took a few runs at it. On my third and best try I got down to a scintillating 24.66 sec., trap speed unknown. "Maybe some bleach on the rear tire . . ." Lee suggested. A new 150 may have gone "75 approx. mph" back in 1962 with a bantam-weight jockey strapped to the tank and a friendly wind sweeping off the slopes of Mt. Fuji, but there was no way in 1979—not with a 165-lb. pizza-eating American in the saddle and 13,000 on the odometer.

Unenviable track performance aside, the 150 worked just fine on the street and was perfect for riding around town. Its tires were the only remaining problem. The rear was an ancient K-70 Dunlop, and the front carried no identification at all except the single word, "Riken," which I took to be either a brand name or a misspelled assessment of the tire's road-holding qualities. Both tires were worn perfectly square across the bottom, leaving a heeled-over footprint about the thickness of a dime. The mildest lean caused the bike to handle very oddly, cornering in swoops and dips, like a playful otter chasing trout. Also, the rear tire tried to slide a quick 180 into every turn, which was no fun at all. So I went down to the cycle shop and bought a pair of Universal tires, legendary for their low price and for cutting down on sparks and noise by keeping your rims off the pavement. They were a vast improvement.

Universal shod, I rode off into town to show people my new bike. The **Benly** drew mixed reviews that first day. Everyone had an opinion; no one was neutral. A friend of mine said it was "a bike only a pimp could love," and a man at a stoplight told me it was the "best damned bike I ever had." The child across the street, who just recently learned to talk, described it as "a funny motorcycle." People who knew absolutely nothing about motorcycles thought it was "very pretty," or even "beautiful." Those more acquainted with the breed rolled their eyes back in their heads and snorted,

or merely chuckled quietly. Then, when they settled down to examine the old bike, their eyes took on a vague, faraway look and I knew that they too were being transported back to something or someplace.

In the end the 150 brought out the best in people. Two friends contributed accessories to the Benly. One was a handlebar-mounted windshield with a green panel at the bottom. I normally don't care much for windshields, but this one fit the essence of the bike perfectly and gave it that hard-core touring look. The other donation, from a retired Honda mechanic, was the crowning touch—a genuine Benly fender ornament with a flying wing. Vibration, he explained, used to cause a fatigue crack in the leading edge of the front fender, so Honda came up with a factory fix to hold it all together—a fender emblem. He also informed me that when the Benly first came out a certain Italian fashion designer was so taken with the lines of the bike that he created an entire wardrobe to be worn while riding. (When I looked at the Benly the only wardrobe that came to mind was some sort of Dobie Gillis outfit—chinos, bleeding madras shirt, and penny loafers.)

With the windscreen and flying wing in place the Honda was ready to head into the country. We loaded it down with a tank bag, two sleeping bags, and Big Pink—a faded pup tent from my youth, originally designed to hold a pile of comic books and two nine-year-olds with a flashlight. It was waterproofed on the assumption they could run into the house if it rained. I filled a backpacker's plastic fuel container with gasoline and stuffed it into my tank bag, just in case the gas stations were closed for the weekend. I noted with effortless irony the unfairness of having to haul extra gas on a motorcycle simply because so many people drove grotesquely overweight automobiles.

We got under way early on a Saturday morning, heading north out of Madison toward a town called Sauk City. The first 15 miles of highway were crowded and busy. The 150 felt smooth and crisp in the cool morning air, but just couldn't push two people and a windscreen through the air at anything over 50 mph. We got passed by everything on the road; funeral processions, farm implements, three nuns in a station wagon—everything but a homecoming float and the Tijuana Marching Guitar Band. Most people seemed to sense we were working with some kind of power deficit and gave us waves of encouragement.

We relaxed over a big breakfast at the Jailhouse Café in Sauk City, then rode off into the welcome quiet and emptiness of the county roads that would take us all the way to Elroy, Wisconsin, my erstwhile home town. Out of faster traffic the 150 was in its element, cruising along serenely and easily at about 45 mph. Climbing hills the big twin ran out of clout very quickly, but a downshift to third handled all but the steepest grades. I kept looking down at the engine, trying to figure out where all the torque was coming from. On long, flat stretches it reminded me of a 36-horse Volkswagen I once had. You'd shift into fourth and then reach for another gear that wasn't there, not so much to go faster as to muffle that Spad-climbing-into-the-dawn engine roar. The machine was telling you it was time to back off and be content. Only when you had to use the brakes or swerve to avoid a rabid farm dog did the bike's built-in moderation make sense. The suspension and brakes simply weren't built to handle any more speed. If Mr. Honda had intended for Man to fly on a Benly he'd have changed the design slightly, raised the price, and called it a 305 Dream.

Fifty miles from home we stopped at a roadside cheese factory and picked up some two-year-old cheddar and a bottle of much younger Mountain Red for lunch. The stop was a welcome one. After a few hours on the Benly we both had that numb, end-of-the-cattle-drive feeling. The handlebars, footpegs, and seat were laid out in roomy, comfortable fashion for a relatively small bike (even the American Longhorn handlebars weren't too bad, since there was no stiff wind to lean on), but the seat began to feel hard and narrow as the miles wore on. We soon found ourselves taking turns standing on the footpegs; the bike handled strangely with both of us standing at once, so Barb had to wait in line.

We took our wine and cheese up the road to the farm of David and Lucy Rhodes, a pair of reformed cosmopolitans who for reasons of their own prefer to live without alternate-side-street parking. David, who once owned a BSA Gold Star, among other fine machines, had nothing but praise for the Honda.

"That's certainly an interesting bike," he said.

We had lunch and then headed for my home town. I was anxious to see the old place. My parents had long since moved away and I hadn't been back for years. Elroy is a nice farm community that was once a booming railroad

center. It was the C&NW's halfway point between Chicago and the Twin Cities. When I was a kid there were two giant roundhouses working around the clock and you could hardly cross town for all the trains. The railroad is all but gone now; the ticket office is being renovated as an historical landmark and the main rail line has become a state bicycle trail. The town is built against a large hill with streets that are steep beyond belief—a sort of San Francisco of the Midwest with 1,500 people and no harbor. Strictly first gear stuff for the 150. We spent an hour chugging up and down hills while I bored Barbara to tears by pointing out meaningless landmarks and recounting stories from my childhood—all shouted over my shoulder.

With that out of my system, we rode out to the city fairgrounds and set up Big Pink next to the empty 4-H cattle barns. Then we went into town for dinner at the Elroy Café, took in *The China Syndrome* at the Elroy Theater, and later stopped at Mr. Ed's Bar, where we ran into some old high school friends and polished off a few Heinekens before returning to camp. It didn't rain that night and we escaped sleeping in the cattle barns. We packed up early, had breakfast at the Elroy Café, and headed for home.

Ten miles from town I had one last stop to make. I wanted to visit the farmhouse where I saw my first Honda, that harbinger of the Japanese Invasion. We turned off County WW into a deep valley where the winding gravel road followed a creek. I missed the driveway at first and had to go back and look for it.

My visions of reunion with old friends faded as soon as we pulled up to the mailbox. The big white farmhouse where I'd stayed was empty and unpainted. Most of the windows were broken, or dark and curtainless. A back wing of the house had black streaks on the wall, as though damaged by fire. In the front yard, where we once sat drinking iced tea and admiring a shiny new motorcycle, was a mobile home surrounded by a clump of flowers. A 1966 Mustang with oversized tires and a raised rear end sat in the driveway, and a limping collie dog came out from beneath the car and barked at us from a safe distance. A young woman came to the door of the mobile home. She shouted something at the dog and then waved to us, tentatively. We waved back. She was no one I'd ever seen before. Different people lived here now; everything was gone, changed. We turned around and rode up the valley toward the county highway.

We took the long way home, winding down the Kickapoo River Valley, then joining up with the Wisconsin and heading east along the sandy floodplane. The sun was at our backs, setting a deep gold in both my mirrors, and the early evening air had a nice warmth left over from the afternoon. We crossed a bridge to the less-traveled southern bank of the river and motored along the water's edge, nearly alone on the highway. The Benly was running strong and clear, its exhaust note a steady, faultless drone muffled by the wind. It couldn't have run any better, even in 1962. Cars were turning their lights on as we entered the city. It was almost dark when we got home.

As always after a long ride, it felt good to be back in a cool, quiet house. I called to have a pizza delivered, then opened a beer and sat down on the front porch. The wind noise was still in my ears, like the sound of two seashells, slowly fading away. I sipped on my beer and looked at the Benly out in the driveway.

Touring on a 150 was good fun, I decided, providing you chose your highways carefully. A bike like the Benly wasn't cut out to mingle with traffic on Interstates or major highways, but those roads were not much fun on any motorcycle. The 150 encouraged you to pick pleasant, low-pressure routes across the countryside and then to ride at speeds that allowed you to enjoy the scenery. It was a good device for watching the country slip by. It got excellent gas mileage (90 mpg with two people, luggage, and a windshield), ran well, and all its pieces continued to do what they were supposed to, mile after mile. While there were other bikes for other moods and purposes, this one was just right for a tenth-and-a-half liter tour.

But in 1979 the Benly did more than carry you efficiently down the road. It brought back, if you were lucky, visions of a big farmhouse where a nice family lived, of someone's pretty older sister who one summer rode all over the West, of gas for 24.9, and a small town with a busy train station. As a private indulgence the 150 was a nice thing to have around. For \$150 you could afford to keep it as part of a small collection, taking it out for a ride or looking at it every so often, like an old photograph. Well maintained, a motorcycle was a thing that stayed fixed in time. It didn't change or move away, but always stood by, waiting at any time to become animated and to continue from where it left off. All you had to do was

park it in your garage and keep it ready. Which was exactly what I intended to do with the Benly. If you couldn't go home again, you could at least enjoy the ride.

I picked up the Sunday paper, still wedged in the screen door, and carried it back to my chair. I slid the want ads out of the middle and tossed the other 40 lbs. of newsprint on the floor. I read over the list of motorcycles a few times and then went back to the one that caught my eye. It was a 1968 Triumph T100C, a Tiger Competition 500. The very bike I was about to buy when I got drafted. Good Lord . . . a 1968 Tiger. I could almost see the sculptured aquamarine tank and the high double pipes and stainless steel fenders, smell the hot oil around the valve caps and hear the chuffing exhaust note at tickover. It would look nice in the garage, sitting right next to the Benly. The price in the paper was ridiculously low; the Triumph probably needed a lot of work. I circled the ad with a pen and went to the phone.

"Who are you calling?" Barb asked as she walked into the room.

"Oh, no one," I said whistling to myself and listening to the phone ring on the other end. I checked my watch and wondered if it would be too late after the pizza came to take an evening ride on the Benly and look at an old bike.