



THIS GUY WANTS TO GIVE YOU A STYLISH PLACE TO REST YOUR ASS

WORDS AND PHOTOS: COURTNEY HALOWELL

You might recognize the name Duane Ballard from the custom seats he has done for the likes of Greg Westbury, Sucker Punch Sally's, Dave Perewitz, Paul Yaffe, and Kendall Johnson just to name a few. Recently he moved his entire family from the freezing East Coast to the warm climate of Southern California and that means we have pretty good access to the elusive Mr. Ballard.

So on a Saturday not long ago, we got the chance to hang out for a couple hours at Duane Ballard's custom leather shop to watch him tool some leather for a seat he was working on for Sucker Punch Sally's. When he got to a good stopping point, we hopped on some bikes and took a trip 110 miles south to the San Diego Aerospace Museum in Balboa Park. The museum was having a special *Star Trek* exhibit and had the actual bridge set from the original TV series. Duane was too big of a chicken to get his picture taken in Captain Kirk's chair, but he thought about it.

After walking around the Aerospace Museum, we stopped at a café for lunch. Between bites of enchilada, we managed to ask Duane a series of questions about the amazing leather work he does, his recent move, and even his period-perfect Honda chopper. Here's what we learned... **SC**

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DUANE BALLARD

Street Chopper: So what got you started working with leather?

It's all my mother's fault. She was taught by her mother when she was a child. My grandfather owned a gas station and they made wallets, etc. to sell. There were nine kids in my mother's family so they must have had a pretty decent sweatshop going.

SC: When it comes to seats, do you prefer working with fiberglass or steel pans?

Both work well. I get fiberglass dust on me though and I'm a walking blister. Because of that, I prefer steel or aluminum but will gladly work with anything.

SC: How long does it take from the time you get a customer's seatpan to the time he can expect to see it on his doorstep?

That all depends on how far back I am when the order comes in and how long the process takes coming up with a drawing they like for the seat, wallet, etc. It's usually at least a month.

SC: That is if you're not swamped with orders for Sucker Punch Sally's? Heck, if they keep sending you work in the volume they are currently sending you, you're going to have to hire a helper.

I have my wife, Lisa, helping me with shows, promotion, billing, and all the other stuff that doesn't involve making a seat. My daughter, Ashlee, has been interested in doing some of the lacing so I'm teaching her that. I have some new things coming to the shop that my son would like to do. All the tooling, dyeing, pattern making, drawing, and other crap is still done by me. If it wasn't for the family backing me up, I'd be screwed. They are a big help.

SC: We know that you recently packed up and moved from New Hampshire to Southern California. Was it a move that helped you generate more business, or was it just the change of scenery that brought you west?

I grew up in Phoenix. We ended up in New Hampshire to be closer to my wife's family. It was great being around them. The only thing I didn't like was the HORRIBLE weather. You are stuck inside more than half of the year. After nine years I just couldn't do it anymore. I was miser-

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able as soon as the leaves started changing, knowing I was about to freeze my ass off for six months. I didn't do it for business reasons. I stayed very busy the entire time I was out East. Business has increased since the move, but that wasn't the reason.

SC: We have seen your seats and custom frame bags, but recently you have started doing custom belts and wallets as well. Is this sort of an attempt to let people know that you are a lot more than just a seat guy?

When I first started doing leatherwork, I was making wallets and belts. The last few years I kept having customers

ask for them but would send them somewhere else. I finally was talked into doing a few and forgot how much I enjoyed making them. It gives me a break from making seat after seat. After the first few I did they really took off. I always have a few going now for customers.

SC: Could you do a custom piece that goes between a pair of Fat Bob tanks to replace a dash, for example?

I can make just about anything out of leather. Even if I've never done it or have never seen it done before



I'm usually up for giving it a shot. A few months back I had a customer that wanted a huge H-D fender covered with tooled leather. I did it and he was extremely happy with the outcome. It was a pain in the ass but I enjoy a challenge. His reaction make it worth all the time and effort.

SC: Could you make it so it was tooled to match a custom seat?

I get asked to do that all the time. I'm in the middle of doing a large group of seats and dash panels for Sucker Punch Sally's in Phoenix. If someone is planning on doing both it's best to order them from me at the same time. All hides dye slightly different and I prefer to make a matching seat from the same cowhide.

SC: Lets talk about your bike for a second. You have one of the baddest Honda choppers we have seen built in the past 10 years. Why a Honda?

Thanks! Why a Honda? Mainly because they rule! I love the SOHC CB750's. I've wanted one ever since I saw the ones my father's buddies chopped. To me there is nothing like them. The look and sound is like nothing else. It's also fun to watch Kutty Noteboom (from the cover of the May 2007 issue) kick, and kick, and kick his Shovel then start my Honda with one good push with my hand. He says I can only do it because I have an "Ac-cord" motor in my bike.

SC: Did you do most of the fab work yourself, or did you have a lot of help?

Most of the bike was done by me and my good friend Joe back in Massachusetts. When I got stuck, I wasn't afraid to ask for help. I know a lot of people in the industry that do this for a living, so why not use all that knowledge. I would have never finished if they hadn't

answered all my questions and come up with parts that needed to be made. Cole Foster made the stainless bars. An amazing machinist, Ted Wingate, helped get that front wheel and brake to fit in that narrow girder. There is a long list of help.

SC: Do you ever get hassled for it being too loud? That thing is loud for those who have never experienced an un-corked Honda 4-banger. It might be louder than a Big Twin with drag pipes.

It's not bad unless you really get on it. You can stay out of it and people won't even notice unless they see you. You just happened to show up a day where I hadn't been able to ride in a week. I wanted to go fast and make lots of noise. It makes me happy.

SC: We know you're a busy guy with a lot of seats piled up in your garage that need your attention, but is there anything you'd like to add or anyone you would like to thank?

My mother for showing me how to do this in the first place. My father for being addicted to motorcycles. Most of all my family for putting up with me always working and running all over the place constantly. It's hectic as hell at times but I wouldn't trade it for anything. How many people get paid doing what they love? I would also like to thank the customers that keep coming back. I really enjoy living indoors and my kids have this thing for food. Thanks!!!

SOURCE

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