

REFLECTIONS ON THE YANKEE Z



From
SPANISH FLYERS

By Tom Bailey

Supercycle Magazine received one of the first true production Yankee Z's for a road test in the summer of 1972. The bike had been conceived some years earlier and had suffered numerous delays in production. Had it been brought to market quickly it would have been the largest two stroke bike available, perhaps dominant in its class. Unfortunately in the years intervening between its concept and arrival, the Japanese manufacturers had introduced two strokes which were larger, faster, more technologically advanced and most importantly, far less expensive.

Despite the fact that the Z was not a cutting edge bike we were enthralled by it. Admittedly we were fans of Spanish motorcycles in general and Ossa in particular. But what captivated us more than its engineering or performance was its execution. Everything about it was first class. Welds to wheel rims fit and finish was absolutely perfect.

Impressed by the art of the Z we allowed ourselves to believe it would be a successful and important bike. I decided to photograph the Z for the cover of the magazine. But rather than use the typical action shot, I wanted something really classy - an exquisite girl to compliment the exquisite bike. We used a local model who was the embodiment of cold Scandinavian beauty. And we got exactly the effect I wanted. In fact although I shot two rolls of film of her and the bike we used the very first frame as the cover.

The Yankee was a competent off road bike. At over 350 pounds it was no lightweight,

but it did not feel as heavy as it looked. The frame was extremely stiff and the suspension excellent. The engine produced tons of smooth power at virtually any throttle opening. And it could be ridden fairly quickly over really rough ground. It was also capable of being ridden slowly and in control while travelling up and down steep ledges and over good size obstacles. These characteristics should have added up to a very good off road bike.

There was a problem though. The Yankee was abnormally wide and round through the seating position. Normally when making a turn on a dirt bike you lock your knee against the side of the tank and use your legs to assist in control. On the Z you sat in a sort of bow legged position which prevented such actions. The seating position combined with a low center of gravity and excellent suspension resulted in a strange disconnect from the normal feedback a rider receives. The total sensation when riding the bike on dirt was one of being a passenger rather than a rider, a sensation which did not instill confidence.

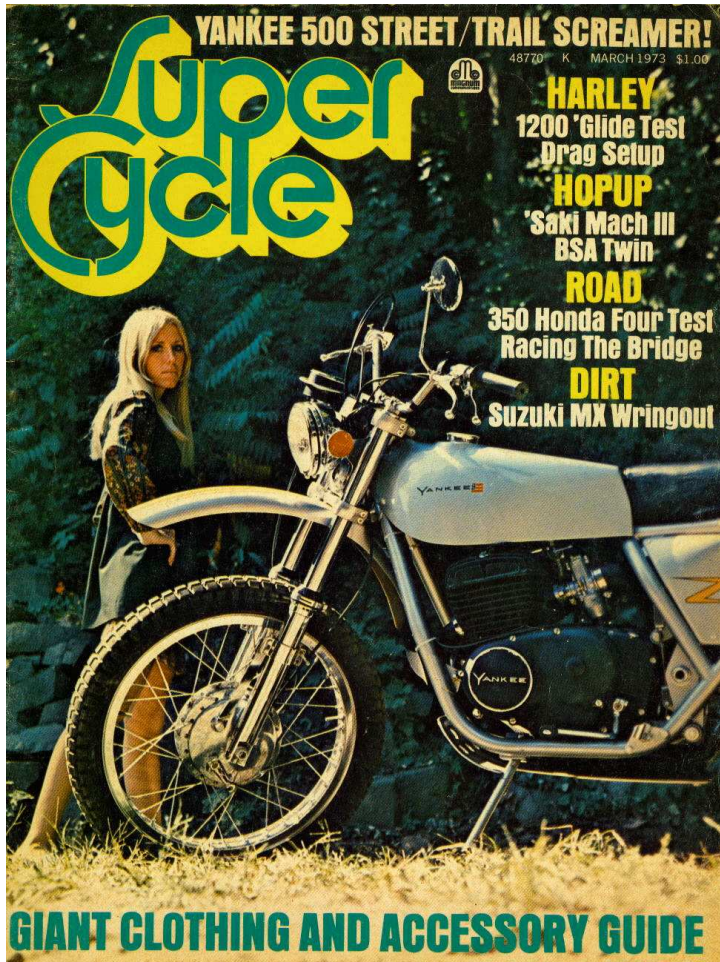
Obviously no matter how artistically it is made, this is a pretty serious shortcoming in an expensive bike designed for and marketed to off road riders. Somehow this went by us at the time. The fact is, after the first week of testing on dirt we almost never rode the bike off road. Instead we used it as a street rocket on the twisting mountain roads of the Hudson Valley. And in this environment even with trials tires it was glorious. Had Yankee offered a cafe version with street tires, a front disc, clip ons and a half fairing, I believe the bike would have been a success.

Tom Bailey
New York 2003

OUT TAKES

We shot a whole lot of film on the Yankee. Not only did we like the bike and admire its beauty we thought some of the other magazines we worked for on an anonymous basis would want to purchase road tests of the Z from us. This did not turn out to be the case.

The Cover



We did the cover photography on 95 degree summer afternoon. It was the first time our model, Sue had ever posed outside of the studio. She was not to thrilled to be drug out into the woods in mini skirt and stockings to begin with. After an hour of shooting basically the same shot with a slightly different pout or head position she was even less amused. The picture on the cover was the first frame we shot, the picture on the right is the twenty fourth frame.

Sue was flawless. When the cover came back from the art department all of us were taken aback. It was so good we could not quite believe it was our work.

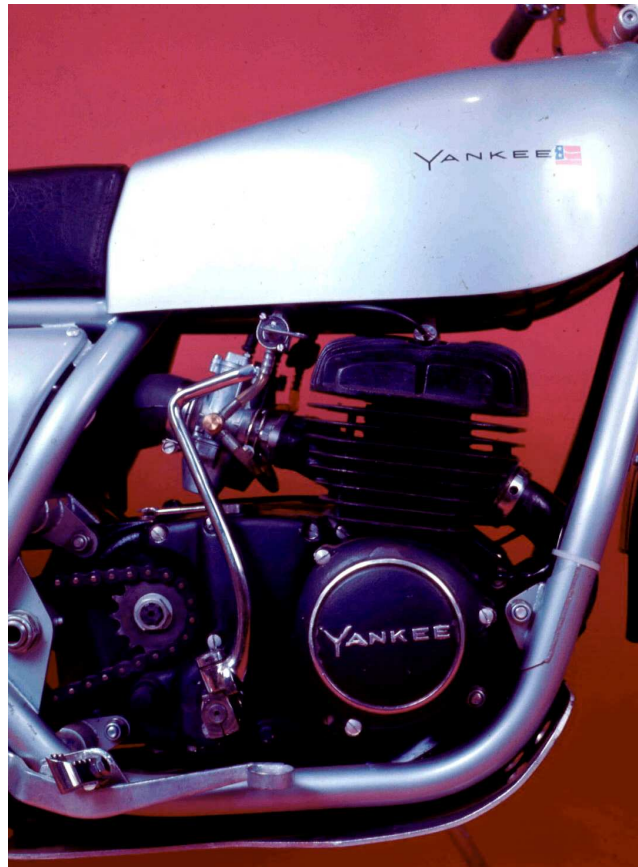
We had another girl named Lil who frequently modeled for us at *Supercycle*. Whenever we had a story that was dull and did not have a great deal of visual interest, we'd use Lil to spice it up. If we were doing a story on sprocket teeth, we'd get Lil to pose holding a sprocket while wearing a mini skirt and pouting at the camera. And boy did her pictures did provoke interest! Every time she appeared in the magazine we'd get letters from readers asking for her address or phone number or making proposals which were sometimes decent but usually entirely indecent.

Lil was cute and a genuinely nice person. But she was not perfect. She was able to move through life without having men she did not know constantly staring at her. Sue was different. She was one of those girls you just couldn't stop looking at. When she walked down the sidewalk men passing her frequently looked so hard and long that they walked into parking meters and parked cars. We all figured that Sue would generate a whole lot of mail. But we were wrong. She did not get even a single letter.



Stills





Action







Black & White



On Instilling Confidence

As I said in *Reflections*, the bike did not instill confidence in the dirt. At one point we were out in the woods and I wanted to get some shots of the Yankee in the air. We went to a steep ledge which was about 15 feet high where we frequently shot pictures. The procedure was simple. Get up to twenty miles per hour or so on the trail, shoot up the ledge and when you got to the top the bike went into the air. Motocross bikes were able to get some serious altitude at this location. Even our 100 cc pit bike could get its wheels a couple feet off the ground as it came over the crest.



I asked our skilled test rider to run the Z up the ledge and get some air. He went down the trail and got some speed up but as he started up the ledge he hit the brakes and bike began to slow dramatically. As the front wheel reached the crest he was going so slow I thought the Z was going stop and endo over backwards hillclimb style. He gave it full throttle just in time and with the wheel spinning and the back end fish tailing made it over the top.



On his second attempt he hit the brakes again but got on the gas sooner and was able to reach the crest with less drama.



On his third attempt he did not hit the brakes but did roll off the throttle just enough to keep the bike from getting airborne.



On attempts 4 through 20 he used exactly the same technique. At no point did the rear wheel leave the ground. Ultimately I gave up. "Man," he said, "this thing just does not want to fly." He was right, especially if you slowed down enough to make sure it didn't.