



Watch Your Neck

One journalist, a gaggle of 'vampires' and some motorcycles rev up an otherwise dull evening

by Hunter Holcombe

SOMETHING TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO Are these Vampires hell on wheels?

It's Sunday night and I'm standing alone in the Santa Cruz Diner parking lot, when the Vampires begin to appear out of the darkness. There are two directly in front of me; a third is approaching from behind. In the distance I can hear the high-pitched whine of more as they circle closer. I am quickly being surrounded. I look around; there must be at least 15 of them. Fully clothed in black leather, boots clanking and scraping the pavement; my blood has already chilled and suddenly I know what it feels like to be prey.

This is not the set of *Lost Boys II*. These are the Vampires, a local Santa Cruz motorcycle club. They're often seen frequenting Café Pergolesi or cruising around town, wearing their signature Hwy. 1 patches on the backs of their leather jackets.

But who are they? Wild speed demons? Ex-cons? Weekend warriors?

As I stand in the parking lot, I suddenly don't want to find

How much does it cost to maintain this addiction? After a brief lesson in protective motorcycle clothing, I realize that these guys are possibly wearing more money on their bodies than a group of Versace models. This is in addition, of course, to their bikes, which number an average of five per person. One Vampire's recent hospital bills were \$76,000.

How about the girlfriends and the wives? What do they think about the motorcycles? Laughter circles the table.

"Every time I have a new girlfriend I take her out to the garage [and] I say, 'These were here before you, and they will be here after you leave,'" says a Vampire with seven motorcycles.

Another guy reminisces that his bikes outlasted his marriage. For most of the others though, their partners quickly learned that motorcycles would always be a part of the family.

I sit back and let all this sink in. If women, money, and death can't budge these guys from the seats of

out. These guys look bad. One guy resembles that scary guy from Star Wars: Episode I—he has blood-red spikes coming out of his helmet.

Back in the mid-'70s, Hunter S. Thompson was beaten to a bloody pulp for writing about the Hell's Angels. What in God's name am I thinking? Before I have a chance to run away, I'm being herded into the diner.

It's packed with families tonight and as we commandeer a corner of the restaurant, the place falls silent—all eyes locked onto us. We are met with three types of looks: the disapproving/protective glare of a mother, the envious half-grin of a father, and a wide-eyed, kid-in-a-candy store gaze of the child.

Admittedly, I'm intimidated. Why do 15 tough, burly bikers want to sit for several hours and answer questions from a journalist with a pastel button-up shirt, even if I do ride a bike?

Yet, as the helmets come off, and I get a better look at the faces that surround me, I am struck by a single thought: These look like nice guys.

And, in the next few hours, as I talk with them, all of my preconceptions are erased, one by one. By the end of the night, I come to the realization that the Vampires are one of the most friendly, positive-minded, and entertaining groups of guys I have ever met.

There is no hostility, no attitude, no set image and no aggression. In fact, all of them are extremely different from each other. They ride various bikes (no Harleys), work jobs ranging from computer specialist to teacher to welder to professional racer, and have vastly different personalities. So, what is it that these guys share in common? What brought them together? Why are they in this club? Quite simply, they are all ridiculously addicted to riding motorcycles.

Like any addiction that comes to fruition, the reasons to initially not do it were many. I asked how many of them had been in an accident—every hand went up. Had they been in more than one accident? The numbers rang out, “four, two, nine, five.”

their bikes, than what is it that is so enthralling about the ride? As a fairly new bike owner myself, I have just begun to taste the thrill, but I am far from possessing the wide-eyed stare of the Vampires when they talk about riding.

“Riding keeps me sane, it is Zen meditation on two wheels,” says Mike “Moike” Jones, a 30-year-old convergent technologist who has been riding since he was 16.

Everyone at the table nods in agreement. Another Vampire explains that being on the road on a bike is the feeling of freedom.

Freedom. It is the most basic desire of every human. If these guys find it by riding a motorcycle, isn't that reason enough?

But there is something else, too. As I hear endless stories about their annual events, recounts of immediate support every time there is a breakdown or an accident, and the laughter that never quite stops, I recognize the strong bond of friendship between them. This is beyond a club of like-minded enthusiasts. It is more of a church, a tribe, and a family rolled into one.

So, what do the Vampires actually do together? Mostly they ride around—all the time. But they also have about five events a year, in which they participate with other motorcycle clubs. At their annual rally, they regularly attract up to 90 people, and, in the last seven years, have generated money at that event that is then donated to the Santa Cruz AIDS Project.

As we leave the diner and make our way to the bikes, I feel like I've gone from being an outsider to a friend in a few hours. They invite me to go riding and to attend their next event. We shake hands and smile. One by one, they fly off into the night, the signature sounds of bikes marking their trail. As I ride my own bike home, much less expertly, and a little more nervous about things like pavement and lamp posts, I am comforted by the fact that out there on the black roads of Santa Cruz, there are Vampires.

To learn more about the Vampires motorcycle club, visit www.santacruzvampires.com.