

Story & Photos by **Matt Kopec**

Time Machine

Wheelie eternal
on the highways
of Valhalla





Late autumn last year, while preparing to shoot riding shots for this story, Dirk Vanzuuk, stepping into his leathers and suiting up for the ride, seemed a bit annoyed. "This used to be a lot easier," he said.

Dirk's an old friend of mine and the owner of this custom GSX-R. We met and worked together more than 20 years ago at a small sign shop in Port Chester, New York, where I first saw this unique machine.

Dirk grew up in Westchester County, New York, obsessed with cars, motorcycles, and just about anything else that involved horsepower.

Along with this fascination for go-fast machines, he's also an incredibly talented artist; this bike exemplifies that talent. He has designed, sketched, assembled, and painted this bike several times over the years, assembling it anywhere he could find space to work: his brother's apartment, a friend's basement, his girlfriend's kitchen, until eventually landing in his own garage.

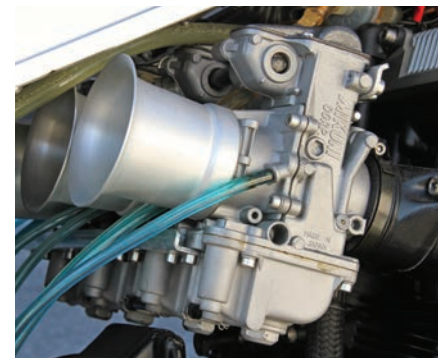
Yeah, it's a home build—several homes to be exact.

Dirk's passion for motorcycles was ignited after he saw *Mad Max* for the first time. The hero drove a modified Ford Falcon XB GT coupe ("The Interceptor"). The bad guys rode custom sport bikes, obviously. Several *Mad Max* movies have been produced over the years, and even with the occasional

dud, one thing's always been consistent in these films: unique custom cars and motorcycles. I'm sure most of you can relate—granted you've seen the movie, or at least the recent *Mad Max: Fury Road*. If not, please close the magazine, roll it up tight, and smack yourself on the head! How do you expect to "ride eternal on the highways of Valhalla" without seeing *Mad Max*?!

When I asked Dirk about the inspiration to customize the Gixxer, the answer surprised me. There wasn't some lightbulb moment. Rather, it sprung from an unexpected trip through a storefront window.

The build started back in 1996, with a basically stock '86 GSX-R1100, a game-changing bike in its day. "This



bike was fast," Dirk says; it was the king of light-to-light road racing until R1s and Hayabusas hit the scene in 1999.

Dirk's build was a result of circumstance. He told me that back in the day he'd basically do burnouts and wheelies until he shut the bike off. A post-work wheelie wasn't out of the norm—not until the bike hit an unexpected pothole causing a violent tank slapper. He did his best to hold on and keep the bike steady to no avail. He eventually relinquished control seconds before hitting a curb, which sent the bike tumbling and barreling through the front window of a local business.

Fortunately, no one was seriously injured in the accident. But damages to both the business and bike were costly. Smoke was everywhere, oil was on the ceiling tiles, desks, and computers were scattered—it wasn't pretty. Dirk ended up having to sell his 1969 Camaro in order to pay for building repairs, plus several tickets and court fees. That morning, before this all happened, he remembers being very upset about a small scratch he saw in the fairing. Bigger problems awaited him.

Most of the bike was destroyed in the accident. The motor had a hole in it, the forks were bent, and the bodywork



was toasted. So, Dirk took the bike apart and separated it into piles: salvage and trash. “I was left with a frame, swingarm, shock, and the back wheel,” he says.

He replaced the Gixxer’s engine with a 1989 Suzuki Katana engine. This, he says, has a little more torque and midrange power, plus the pistons and cam had been upgraded. So, longer burnouts and wheelies? Excellent.

The forks, wheels, and brakes came off his friend Mike’s 1993 GSX-R750 Superbike. Mike raced and crashed the 750 in Daytona. Surprisingly, the only undamaged parts were those that Dirk needed. After a few drinks and some tough negotiating, a deal was struck.

Dirk decided to go with a naked streetfighter look, which, he says, only a few people were doing in the ‘90s, but usually not well. He wanted this bike to look like something Suzuki would have built.

After cutting away everything that



wasn’t needed, ditching those pesky fairings, fabricating a tail section, and drilling holes into anything that needed to shed a few pounds, the bike took form. And after a coat of dark orange absolutely menacing!

Today, the bike remains true to the original build, one of the key differences being the color. That changed several times over the years. That dark orange became gray, which became

flat black, ultimately morphing into the white with orange and black stripes you see today. Each paint job was impressively done with rattle-can spray paint, Dirk saying the most important aspect is the prep work.

He fabricated the tail section using a foam block, sandpaper, and his stylistic eye. Once he had the desired shape, he created the plastic mold using the foam. It looks like it’s straight from the factory.



The current headlight is actually from my 2003 SV650, a parting gift of sorts as the SV was stolen soon after. Dirk’s Gixxer is a combination of long-lost rides from the past.

Despite the mishmash of parts from donor bikes, Dirk’s work is nothing but meticulous. Nothing looks out of place. Perhaps from working in small, unorthodox locations over the years, He developed a very organized way of doing things,



and his handiwork here proves that and exemplifies his creative eye.

The passion for this Gixxer runs deep. A few years ago, Dirk was diagnosed with an advanced stage of throat cancer, which required aggressive treatment and an even harder fight from Dirk. For months Dirk summoned the courage to march on, channeling the strength of his wife, Patti, and friends. Like the bike build, he evaluated the situation, salvaged what he could, and built upon it. He kept his eye on the future, keeping his goals alive. One of those goals? Ride

TECH SHEET

Owner/builder Dirk Vanzuuk, Garrison, NY
 Year/model 1986 Suzuki GSXR1100
 Time to build 1991 to present
 Powdercoater Prodigy Coatings, Fishkill, NY
 Painter Dirk Vanzuuk
 Color ... Pearl White, matte black, Day Glo Orange spray
 with HOK matte clear

POWERPLANT

Engine 1989 Suzuki Katana
 Builder Johnny “Lightning” Tisdale
 Displacement 1216 cc
 Horsepower 160
 Balancing Orient Express
 Connecting rods Orient Express
 Pistons Wise 1 12:1
 Cam Degreed ‘86 GSX-R
 Carb Mikuni flatslide 36mm
 Air cleaner Velocity stacks
 Exhaust Modified Vance & Hines
 Ignition Dyna
 Coils Dyna
 Wires Dyna
 Clutch Barnett Kevlar with blasted plates

CHASSIS

Frame 1986 Suzuki GSX-R1100
 Front forks 1993 GSX-R750 with Progressive springs
 Shocks Rebuilt by Eric Madden
 Front brake 1993 GSX-R1100
 Front fender 1993 GSX-R1100

ACCESSORIES

Headlight 2003 SV650
 Handlebars 1993 GSX-R1100
 Pegs Fabricated by Gravity Research
 Chain guard Dirk Vanzuuk
 Dash Dirk Vanzuuk
 Hand controls Sudco push-pull throttle
 Foot controls Owner modified
 Levers Cycle Gear with Hayabusa master cylinders

the Gixxer on a race track again.

Ultimately, Dirk beat his cancer to a pulp and has been cancer-free for the past five years.

Did he get back on the track? You bet. And I’m happy to report I rode alongside him. OK, maybe I was behind him. The dude’s fast!

Yeah, we’ll all get to that point someday, where our knees ache and zipping up the leathers used to be easier. But if you can suit up, throw a leg over your ride, and wheelie like it’s 1996 – it’s all good. Just watch for potholes, you don’t want to have to sell your ‘69 Camaro. **GB**