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MASTER OF MOOTS



“We’ve got a viewing platform out back, it’s 10 feet. You know, 10 feet is all you need!”

There’s a touch of a thousand-yard-stare to this statement of incredulity at my ignorance toward the accepted height of UFO observation towers. Ending the conversation pretty much where it began, the owner of this place jumps back into her oversized truck and rumbles off down the dusty track to the arrow-straight road a few hundred yards ahead, leaving me and a slightly confused but unrelated geocacher in an awkward moment of “should we discuss what just happened or merely pretend it didn’t?”

I am left alone to wander around this museum of the extraterrestrial—a garden of homemade tin-can aliens and oddments—until Corey pulls up, swinging the van door open. We’re on our way north again, Americana-road-trip radio at its best accompanying our race into the Rockies, as we run parallel to a blizzard to our left. In contrast to the endless, warm Arizona desert that hosted our riding earlier in the week, we will take in three varying states, starting with sand and ending in snow, and all with accompanying steel guitars and potato chips.

Steamboat Springs is a warm orange glow far down in a valley from our ice-capped road high in the mountains. We squeeze by as one of the last vehicles allowed through before this final pass is closed for the night and the weight of the snowstorm begins to take hold. Our long-journey feeling is so much larger than the slight crease on the road atlas it represents. This country is huge and varied, and our trek ends in Steamboat—not quite Colorado’s top floor but still nearly 7,000 feet above sea level and whited out.

Stomping the snow off our boots in the foyer of a somewhat famous industrial building with a red sign and yellow window frames, I bump into my second employee. Unlike Corey, Frida weighs me up, winks and licks my left knee before wandering off around a corner. As I am later to realize, the profound connection with free-ranging, four-legged friends will partially unlock for me the *raison d’être* of this house of titanium high up in the Rocky Mountains.

Moots is 35 this year. Middle-aged and seemingly doing pretty well, something affirmed by my guide and coffee maker, marketing man Jon Cariveau, who has been here 18 of those years—a long time, but not long enough to remember some of the creations in the prototype graveyard above. Full Ti acro TT designs and bizarre electronic wiring looms on wheels hover above, out of the line-of-sight, but not hidden from the world in these halls of not so heavy metal. On the face of it, Moots appears much like any other old-school bike company: metal shops crammed with machines so solid and permanent that once installed life tends to revolve around them. Handmade and metal is so different to high-volume production and carbon. It’s hard to imagine the contrast given the end result being so similar in general shape; but it seems akin to editing a music track second by split second on a computer screen compared with lifting and replacing a needle on a turntable and pressing “record” on the tape deck. Titanium is hard to work, but it is also very, very analogue.

I stand and watch the mitering guy Willy Keane from across the room. He stands, looks, blows and holds a seat



WORDS/IMAGES: AUGUSTUS FARMER



stay up to the light streaming in through the south-facing window, then squints, looks down the line, returns to the vise, files briefly and repeats the cycle. Cycling cap and glasses, wiry beard, lean-faced with aerodynamic features, he just looks like a roadie as he takes this role seriously. This isn't put on for the camera, but I spot a wry smile through long glass as he lets on he knew I was there all along.

People come and go as they run ideas or problems past him, looking for solutions from the old school. They seem to leave happy too, content he knows his shit. Behind him, a wall of titanium with 3-meter-long tubes bracing the entire length of one edge of the room. Like a kitsch 1970s wallpaper print, dimly lit in tungsten orange hue, dusty and two dimensional, they backdrop the modern ideas being born in front of them, and all around there is good music—proper reggae in here. Early stuff, raw, warm, produced in a shoebox—sounds that share the air with the thumping and drilling of machinery, a happy marriage of dust crackle and laser cut.

Out of the territory of the superbly named husky, Sawyer Tom Krieger, and into the chocolate lab Baxter's pad, four guys with masks and Carhartt jackets sit in open booths carefully handling bike frames, welding for a few seconds, inspecting, brushing and wiping clean, and then repeating. Slowly sewing together someone's pride and joy with the real care and attention you'd hope was there if you'd laid down enough dollars on two wheels that would have comfortably bought you four. Within minutes it's clear what this isn't—it isn't a slick marketing operation supporting okay fabrication, all logos and perception and tribe. What this really is about is quality, plain and simple. These guys love making these bikes. They're not welders that came looking for a job and found chainstays; they're riders, cyclists with care and attention to detail and skill in their hearts and welding torches for arms. All that...and bringing your dog to work.

For me this taps into where the company may be facing one of its toughest challenges yet. Moots has been here in these mountains a long time now. Started in 1981, Moots was a reasonably early adopter of titanium (in 1991) and has seen an industry based on metal, ruled over by the wearers of titanium crowns, get pretty quickly revolutionized. The thing about the ingress of aluminum over steel 20 years back was that it replaced the mass-market material but still left Ti pretty exclusively at the top of the range—but carbon seemingly wiped out the appeal for metal across the board. Understandably, given the choice, a lot of cyclists want the latest material and technology as it can now supply bikes from entry-level through to WorldTour. Carbon spelled the end of Ti for a while, but thanks to the inevitable desire of some cyclists for expression of individuality, and in no small part helped by the focus on the handmade side of the industry, it survives—indeed somewhat flourishes—once more.

The handmade lifeline is a double-edged sword though. With that re-igniting of the want for a different exclusive and custom comes a new battlefield. It has kick-started others to join the party. The knights of niche is a growing band of brothers. More and more small, independent titanium-frame makers and designers seem to be popping up all the time; and with new school comes new rules. It would be easy too for Moots to stay within its comfort zone of pretty subtle, quasi-conservative appearance backed up by a quality underneath and allow other smaller, newer operations to run with trends, and then clean up through perception in deficit of heritage; but I can't help thinking that while making high-end titanium bicycles is perhaps a safer longterm strategy than it has been in years, not budging in what they look like or how they are perceived could be a long game too far.

This is something it seems that folks are quite aware of in Steamboat Springs. Flashier outfits have sprung up





fast to meet the new generation of money at just the right time and catch the contemporary expressionism feeding into Instagram, Twitter or Facebook. Personal etching, anodizing, painting, custom bespoke spec—the paradigm of the modern empowered consumer—all adds to the question of the future. And now seems a good time as any to address that. Moots is a company that's conservative in appearance but liberal in experience. Small and independent enough to still be considered cool, old and wise enough to read the writing on the wall. So it will be interesting to see how new owner Brent Whittington takes this "cool dad" of a company into a refreshed high-end consumer marketplace, finding its feet once more in somewhat of a subculture backlash of the mainstreaming of carbon fiber.

In a far corner of the factory floor a man in an apron stained with years of metal and grease stands over a jig holding a 6-foot steel bar with duct tape wrapped around one end. "This is frame alignment," I'm told. That sounds painful. To watch it, it is rather painful. The force this solid bloke with a metal bar wields under this trussed-up frame would make the most hardened bike geek wince. To witness this post-welded titanium frame flex as much as it does and not snap in the torture jig is nothing short of incredible. Knowing it's needed to counteract the deformation the heat from the welding left in its wake doesn't make it any easier a thing to see. As a customer I'm unsure if I'd want to know they do

this or not, but the fact that this guy has done thousands of these hi-torque yoga moves over the years and knows exactly how much force to apply with a huge metal bar reassures a little. The dog under his workbench doesn't seem that bothered; she's seen it all before and looks quite happy.

Expensive computer-controlled technology sits on benches alongside piles of tubes laid out on the factory floor with handwritten notes and blueprints representing someone's bike-by-proxy thousands of miles from its new home. Dogs sniff welding masks hanging about as they wander freely through the place. Access for these four-legged employees in all areas is a refreshing sight in an age of sense and fear in the presence of all things industrial. "Dogs are far more intuitive and logical than us; they'll be fine," explains Lacey LeBaron, flipping down her facemask and goggles for a stint in the bead-blasting booth (dogs not allowed). Through a small window, I witness part of the reason for the cost of one of these Open Road stems—bead-blasting all this titanium, one bit at a time, must take ages. Done through those remote-gloved arms you imagine handling fuel rods in nuclear power plants, bike parts are rotated and blasted repeatedly until they are that smooth-gray associated for years with this place.

Another corner...another workbench...another dog bed. Here as everywhere music is key. The soundtrack to the finishing area is new-school country, kind-of clever-and-



relevant lyrics with a nod to the classic. Would be ironic, but it's actually just nice sounding; it backdrops the smiles and banter, steady finisher Dusty's careful hands that can put decals on in seconds where most of us would deliberate about whether something is straight or not for an hour. Everywhere you look, titanium frames dangle from the sky, little yellow ID tags hanging from their machined dropouts. Each process is hand-signed-off on before moving to the next yellow-ticket recipient. Like an office-leaving card, numerous scrawls in differing inks confirm the team effort on the keepsake receipt for someone's investment. It's a pretty manual process unchanged in a while, but it works and it fits.

Those early days were a long time ago now—245-odd in dog years. Moots ownership has changed twice but remained in Steamboat. Famously founded by Kent Eriksen and his pencil-top 'gator in 1981, it was purchased by Chris Miller in 1995 and then sold to Brent Whittington in October 2015. When the press release went out explaining the company had a new owner, talk was of the possibility of that now familiar chess move of a big umbrella investment company deciding it wants a niche brand to add to its portfolio and moving in for the inevitable return-on-investment soul kill. I'm no purist, but it does somewhat sadden me to see big bucks gobble up interesting companies and rinse the life out of them as they go.

But on talking with Brent, it's clear this new owner is not playing that game. In fact he sees this as his opportunity

to leave that other world behind. He's from a big-business background, clearly knows his onions and I imagine doesn't suffer a bad work ethic, but in the brief time we share I get the distinct impression that for him this is above all a nice thing to do. Work with nice people and their dogs, go riding and have a proud hand in an American handmade industry. Perhaps not a business epiphany, but definitely a plan to come to the mountains and help a relatively small operation remain a relatively small operation. I imagine some employees feared similar outcomes when the news was announced, but in spending time among them I get the impression of an ongoing freedom to create and perfect rather than an uptake in spreadsheet speak.

Packing up to leave Colorado, I realize the paradox of a warm human spirit embodied by a pack of dogs roaming freely between workbenches. People, friends, music, metal bikes, riding, snoring dogs...it's about community here. Not quite what I had imagined, but this is the *raison d'être* that resonates from visiting Moots. Sitting on the plane pointed west on a snow-covered runway, I gaze out of my window at the blue dawn light over the Rockies and reflect on what it feels like to leave the place, these people, their bikes, this pack of dogs. As is the postmodern way, it feels appropriate I invent a hashtag for the occasion. Plane taxiing, I gaze out at a narrowing perspective orange glow that already feels familiar somehow: #mootsfamily ... #matesofmoots ... #muttsofmoots ... #mastersofmoots. **58**