

ROCKERBOX 2012 Includes visit by BBC Members

By Darrell Broten

When I bought my Triumph Bonneville two years ago I knew I would be entering a motorcycling world different than the one I was used to. The closest club I found that catered to English motorcycles was the British Biker Cooperative from Milwaukee, so I joined it, just to try them out. I learned about Rockerbox on the internet and in BBC's monthly newsletter. It sounded like a fun time, so I rode to Milwaukee to try *that* out.



It worked out well for me to combine a visit to my relatives in Green Bay with a day ride to Milwaukee. Fifty years ago was the last time I was in Milwaukee, so I accepted Scott and April Hermann's invitation to a BBC breakfast they were hosting and a ride to Rockerbox they would lead. Early on a sultry August 4 Saturday morning I headed south on I-43 to Brewtown.

Scott provided good directions to their home. They were excellent hosts, introducing me to each BBC member as they arrived. April prepared a breakfast of kringle, quiche (delicious!), coffee, water, Bloody Marys, and beer. Scott, who is in the home restoration business, conducted a brief tour of his 1929-era bungalow that they had remodeled and outfitted with classic furniture. He even gave me some extra pin-up art he had laying around.

By 11 it was time to leave for Rockerbox. The Hermanns fired up their vintage Norton Commando and led 13 of us north on Wisconsin 794 and past the beautiful lake front area on North Lincoln Memorial Highway. North Avenue took us to Humboldt and finally Center Street. On the way I could see April clutching Scott, red hair bobbing.

Rockerbox MotoFest and Street Party is held each year in the Riverwest neighborhood of Milwaukee, barely a half mile north of downtown. It boasts itself as being “the premier free Midwestern motorcycle show and street party.” Rockerbox was begun by Scott Johnson, owner of Fuel Café, and Tim Schneider, owner of The Shop. Both businesses are located on Center Street, where Rockerbox is staged. In their own words, “The one day festival features a mix of Euro, Japanese and American vintage café racers, choppers, sport bikes, racers, super motos, scooters and sidecars. Last year, the five block show boasted 2,000-3,000 motorcycles and 7,000-8,000 people along with 50+ dealers and vendors of all things motorcycling.”

According to Shepherd Press Milwaukee, “Rockerbox Motorcycle Show in Riverwest attracts a different, more youthful kind of biker counterculture—in particular, those side-burned, rockabilly throwback types who reside in the bars of Riverwest and Bay View. Between all the throwback sport bikes, street fighters, choppers, supermotos and sidecars, the vintage bike show is novel enough for non-enthusiasts to enjoy,”

The event certainly doesn't take itself seriously. Its billboard shouts, “Thousands of bikes to impress, confuse, reminisce, and motivate! Embracing the freakish and fun in Riverwest! Ride to Rockerbox from every corner in the city!” Rules for the bike judging aim low. “The bikes are judged on criteria known only to them and the level of sun stroke they are suffering from. So if you feel you've been cheated out of a victory, calm down and remember that this show is all about fun and the spirit of motorcycling and not about period-correct spark plug caps,” informs the bike entrant. One bike show category is “Cool as F---.”



Well. I don't know just how cool that is, but there certainly were a lot of people on Center Street when we pulled into Rockerbox. Had to be over 4,000 bikes and close to 10,000 people. When we arrived officials waved us past the barricades and into a sea of sweltering humanity. We coasted two blocks and then most of us parked together on a side street. I found a shady spot just a few feet away. On the way in I received a couple of "nice bike" comments and a thumbs-up for my CMA blessing sticker. This place was rockin'.

My BBC comrades made their way over to the club tent. I, however, was there to explore. My plan was to go to one end of Center Street on the south side and back on the north side, but as happens so often I wound up following no plan at all, what with trips to vendors for water, back to the T100 for the camera, a stop at Fuel Café for a sandwich, at the BBC tent for a T-shirt, and so on. My wanderings did put me near a '77 Triumph Hurricane triple, two Honda CX500s parked out, a biker wearing a Captain American helmet on a chopper with the highest ape hangers I've ever seen (arms straight up), a Stella 150 scooter next to a 1930s something Whizzer next to a vintage Harley, and a 1980s Yamaha 350 Exciter with a sidecar, for crying out loud, with Alaska stickers on it. There were innumerable Triumphs from all years, restored Nortons, and tricked out BSAs. Vendors for clubs, performance shops, and dealers were in the middle of it all. And, of course, signs of an inner urban area: facial studs and tattoos on young bodies; locals lounging on front stoops; a Mandarin hatted musician on his flute; posters advertising jazz clubs and ways to save planet Earth. Yes, I was a north woods hillbilly in downtown inner city Milwaukee.

But it was fun. The vibe and the scene felt good. I left after two and half hours (good thing—rain forced three stops on my way back to Green Bay) because my early get-up and the heat made it a long day for this old man. Next year I'll work it so I can stay for the trials demo riding, the live music, and the bike judging awards. It was fun to see all the Brit bikes parked in front of Hermann's house and refreshing to see another style of motorcycle outnumber the otherwise ubiquitous Harleys and Gold Wings. Who knows how large this event will become? It will be interesting to see.