

PROVIDENCE MONTHLY

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BIKE PATHS AND TRAILS • THE RETURN OF SOUND SESSION

Circle A Cycles

Chris Bull at his shop.

Anarchy in the West End

Circle A Cycles is helping to pave
the way for a two-wheel uprising
on the streets of Providence

BY GUINEVERE HARRISON
PHOTOGRAPH BY KARIN KELLS

In a light-filled workshop in the Carpenter Mills complex on the West Side of Providence, disassembled bicycles cover nearly every inch of the long, narrow room. Angular frames hang from the ceiling, stacked boxes of steel tubes and spare parts climb the walls. Heavy machinery lines the perimeter of the room; silver shavings glint off the black grease-covered industrial lathe and a welding mask hangs from a burly canister of flammable gas.

Half-hidden behind a wall of repurposed air-filters enclosing a paint room, a two-headed giraffe peers out from a field of polka dots on the back of the sand-blaster. The atmosphere is convivial; the people who visit linger and leave happy. These are bikes we're talking about, after all — they are supposed to be fun.

For the past three years, Circle A Cycles has been outfitting hard-core cyclists and weekend enthusiasts alike with custom hand-built steel bicycle frames. Founder Chris Bull and his apprentice Emily Klass produce about forty bikes a year. Circle A Cycles is one of a handful of independent frame builders whose products are unsurpassed and whose clients are fiercely loyal. But small bike companies that cater to people who love to ride are increasingly rare.

The Washington Post recently reported that in the early seventies, the number of bicycles manufactured in America topped 10 million a year. In 2004 only 200,000 bikes were built domestically, while 18.3 million — or 99 percent — were produced abroad. The majority of these are made in China and sold by mass merchants such as Wal-Mart, the largest retailer of bikes in America. Old household brands like Schwinn and Huff that once employed thousands of people in factories across America now operate exclusively as importers of Chinese goods.

"I calculated that Circle A has a .02 percent share of the domestic market," Chris says, shaking his head at the numbers. "Next year we're shooting for .03!" he jokes affably, before turning serious. "The influx of cheap bikes is hurting everyone. If you get a \$100 bike at Wal-Mart, you're getting a poorly made product that was badly assembled — you're lucky if it works at all. So then you have to take it to a real bike shop for a tune up, and they essentially have to reassemble the whole thing. Either you're paying for that or the bike company's taking a bath on it."

Indeed, most of these low-cost, high-volume bikes end up in landfills. According to Neal Walsh of Recycle-a-Bike in Providence, piles of bikes are thrown away every year. "We get hundreds of bikes donated by people who either find them in the trash or don't have the resources or desire to rebuild them. We probably have over 400 bikes waiting to be refurbished or in progress right now." Recycle-a-Bike, which has just relocated to the

Steel Yard in Providence, teaches people how to fix their bikes during workshops and open studios, and donates bikes to communities in need.

Ninety percent of Circle A's work is custom frame building, and all of their bikes are made of steel. They also occasionally modify existing bikes, repainting or repairing old or damaged frames. Says Chris, "The beauty of working with steel is that it's the cheapest to buy, the easiest to repair, and the most durable. People can ride these bikes for a long time and fix them if they break, which helps to reduce waste."

The first Circle A bike that Chris built nearly four years ago is leaning against his desk. It's still his favorite and he rides it to work every day. Unless, of course, it's raining. Then he'll ride the one with fenders. Or his mountain bike. He's got a different bike for every change in weather and mood, and he rides them all.

Chris began building bikes six years ago as an apprentice at Hot Tubes in Worcester, MA. He had worked for several years as a mechanic at a bike shop, but the instability of the retail sector drove him out in search of something new. After three years of painting, welding, and learning the ropes with renowned framebuilder Toby Stanton, Chris set out on his own and relocated to Providence. In September 2001, Circle A Cycles was born.

Ironically, Chris' roots as a builder began not with bikes but with buildings. He attended architecture school as an undergraduate, but decided not to pursue the profession. "To become an architect you have to put in so many years before you will ever build anything," he explains. "I wanted something more immediate, more tangible, and I'd rather build bikes for my friends than build headquarters for corporations."

The years in school did not go to waste. "Architecture school made me really think about the connection between art and utilitarianism. With bikes, I believe that if you make them pretty, people will want to ride them more."

His philosophy appears to be working. With no advertising, no storefront, and no retail outlets, Circle A is nearing its 100th order and has held a steady, six-month waiting list for the past two years. Each bike requires about a week to build, and prices range from \$800 to \$1300 for the frame and fork. The price varies depending on many factors, including the weight and thickness of the steel tubes and the style of riding the bike is built for.

While it would seem that those most drawn to custom frames are experienced cyclists, and in fact, many customers already know exactly what they want when they come in the door, surprisingly many Circle A clients are Providence residents, and Chris loves catering to this audience. "A lot of people want to buy locally simply because they live nearby," he says. "Not everyone is lucky enough to have such a sexy local frame-builder in their 'hood.'"

Circle A's bicycles come in many forms: road bikes, commuter bikes, mountain bikes,

or a mix of styles depending on the preference of the rider. Generally speaking, touring bikes cost more to build because they are tricked out for longer hauls, while single-speed commuter bikes are the cyclists' equivalent to Danish modern furniture: no frills, super durable. Yet what makes Circle A Cycles so appealing is that you don't have to know the difference between a fixie and cross bike to appreciate that a bicycle from Circle A is a beautiful piece of machinery.

Propped against a work table in the shop is a gleaming black touring bike that has just been finished. Unlike the standard frames that Chris normally delivers to his clients, this is a fully built-up bike with shiny new parts. The customer is planning to ride it across several states: it has been designed with rack mounts and flared fenders, and a sloping top tube for an upright position — a more comfortable geometry for long trips.

Truth be told, I'm not much of a bike person. I'm actually quite terrified of riding them, but my husband-to-be is a cyclist, so our house is filled with them. There's the everyday fixed-gear in our dining room, the aluminum/carbon fiber road bike from two racing seasons past, the mountain bike that rains dirt whenever it is moved, the dismantled custom frame that currently lives on a shelf, the steel road bike frame, the expensive cross bike that rusted through, and extra wheels and parts and tools and inner tubes and helmets and shoes and gloves and team jerseys and leg warmers and Clif bar wrappers and mud-encrusted water bottles, and the list goes on and on. It's not that I don't like the idea of bikes, I just don't like them all over my house.

But damn, that bike in Chris's shop was nice. It sparkled. It was pretty. I found myself coveting it. *It made me want to ride.* Which is precisely why it was built.

What motivates Chris Bull to build bicycles is not only a love for riding, but a belief that what he does is changing the world for the better. On his web site there is a treatise on anarchism and the philosophy behind Circle A Cycles. "For us, bikes aren't toys or simple transportation or art. They represent a human scaled and powered future. They are the revolution."

As a worker-owned collective, Circle A aims to eschew the hierarchy of a corporate-structured environment. To them, the appeal of anarchism lies not in the badass politics co-opted by punks for over 30 years, but in the idea that a better model for society is one based on mutual aid and cooperation rather than greed and power.

Activism and cycling have been married for over a century. In 1896, Susan B. Anthony said, "The bicycle has done more for the emancipation of women than anything else in the world." Bikes not Bombs in Boston (which served as the model for Recycle-a-Bike) has been advocating environmental education, alternative transportation, and safe, sustainable communities for over 20 years. And groups of cyclists have been gathering to take back the city streets on one Friday evening a month in Critical Mass, a movement that started in San Francisco in 1992 and has spread to over 300 cities worldwide.

Frame by frame, Circle A Cycles is building an army of activists right here in Providence. As the local Critical Mass web site proclaims, "the revolution will not be motorized."

Consider yourself warned.

“Bikes aren't toys or simple transportation or art. They represent a human scaled and powered future.”

BICYCLE ACTIVISM

RECYCLE-A-BIKE

Newly relocated to the Steel Yard, Recycle-a-Bike offers free workshops on bike repair/rebuilding. Volunteer and build yourself a free bike!
www.recycleabike.org.

GROUNDWORK PROVIDENCE: BIKE DOWNTOWN

Making biking to work a safer and more pleasant experience for all.
www.bikedowntown.org.

CRITICAL MASS

The Providence ride starts at 5pm on the first Friday of every month at the pineapple on Atwells Avenue.
www.dutchmoney.com/criticalmass.

Circle A Cycles

www.circleacycles.com.