

Steve Thompson

Straight Pipes and Street Civility

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Noise pollution is not a fabrication of the anti-automobility activists. It should be self-evident higher ambient noise levels lead to higher stress levels among many if not most people. Thus restrictions on exhaust noise make sense for helping to maintain a semblance of a civil society.

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Nevertheless, self-described car enthusiasts are too often among those least interested in creating or preserving a civil society. This is evidenced by so many enthusiasts being among those most susceptible to the allure of loud pipes. Whether they tune for the duck-call drone of a four-banger or the rumble of a big-inch V8, enthusiasts all too easily combine their open exhausts with a slew of assumptions about the capabilities of both man and machine.

Hence the appeal of straight pipes on Harleys to the white-collar riders as well as to the biker-gang crowd. They seem largely to accept the idea that such a display of the "thunder" of Harley engines signifies individuality and virility. And of course they also believe the big vee-twin's syncopated potato-potato drumbeat is music.

I well understand the appeal of motor music, though my own predilections run more to the Cosworth DFV end of the spectrum than the Hog motor end. Different strokes, and so forth. Nevertheless, in an increasingly vehicle-jammed environment, in which stress is heightened by so many rude, ignorant, incapacitated, distracted and just plain stupid drivers, adding to the volatile mix with what many people interpret as simply noise does not make the situation better. Even on rural roads with less traffic, whatever bucolic peace might exist is instantly shattered by self-centered vehicle operators with unmuffled engines.

Engine noise as a public display that amounts to nothing more significant than a hoarse shout of "Hey! Look at me!" ought to have passed long ago into our history. As for the reasons it has not, they have more to do with the perceived value of the display than with the failure of the police to enforce noise laws, though why so many Hog riders seem to get a pass on straight pipes baffles me, as it does many other motorcyclists. But whatever the causes of the straight-pipes syndrome, the effects are straightforward: more noise, more stress and less civility on the street. Too bad so many never get the message of motor maturity: A real man doesn't need loud pipes to prove his manhood.



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