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DRIVING; The Biker Question: To Roar or Not to Roar

By ANN FERRAR

SOMEBODY out there is making Wayne Doenges look bad, and he's not happy about it. Mr. Doenges has been riding motorcycles for 30 years, and with his white hair and reflective two-toned riding jacket, he cuts an impressive figure on the roads of Indiana on his chromed-out six-cylinder Honda Valkyrie. "The bike attracts attention," he said, adding a significant phrase, "in a positive way."

Because he likes that positive reaction, he will not allow his bike to assault you with a mighty avalanche of sound.

Bruce Czerwinski and Michele Moshier see things differently. They are a handsome, ruggedly stylish couple, favoring leather jackets. When Mr. Czerwinski cranks up the 1,500-cc V-twin-cylinder motor of his Suzuki Intruder, the exhaust pipes emit a thunderous roar and a deafening staccato blat-blat-blat. He has replaced the exhaust system that came on his motorcycle with straight pipes -- hollow chrome tubes devoid of any noise-dampening system.

"I do rev the engine at stoplights and I do enjoy showing off," Mr. Czerwinski said. "It's big boys with their big loud toys."

Ms. Moshier said she shared the thrill, reveling in the ear-splitting victory laps the couple take around their hometown of Lowville, N.Y. "Everybody knows it's us," she said.

In the motorcycle world, Mr. Czerwinski, a 42-year-old factory worker, is part of an exuberant and growing cult, contemptuous of noise rules and eagerly supplied with noise enhancement by the aftermarket -- the trade in car and motorcycle parts added by owners.

He is also on one side of a mushrooming conflict among motorcycle owners, pitting the noise lovers against riders like Mr. Doenges, who think the fun isn't worth alienating fellow citizens. (Mr. Doenges, a 75-year-old retired engineer from New Haven, Ind., said his opposition crystallized when he was getting ready to start his bike at a rest stop and saw a small boy cover his ears. He assured the boy not all bikes were loud, he said, annoyed that he had to "make up for what somebody else ruined.")

The two groups don't mingle often, but they both show up at events like the Americade Motorcycle Rally, held last month in Lake George, N.Y., where Mr. Czerwinski and some other bikers on both sides of the issue were interviewed.

More and more American bikers, from the faithful on Harley-Davidson Fatboys to riders on Kawasaki Vulcans and Suzukis like Mr. Czerwinski's, are telling dealers to replace the factory exhaust pipes with aftermarket high-performance exhaust systems, plunking down as much as \$1,000 in the process. The snazzy chrome exhaust pipes have macho names like Samson Big Guns, Screaming Eagles and Cobra High Boy Shotguns. The noise

they let out is often in excess of the federal maximum for motorcycles of 80 decibels.

Still, it's not enough for some. Federal regulations say all motorcycle exhaust systems must contain noise dampeners, typically baffles, a series of passages through the muffler that dissipate sound. Straight pipes have no noise dampeners at all, in direct defiance of the law. To demonstrate the effect, Mr. Czerwinski cranked his Intruder's engine. The pipes spat out a Niagara of noise.

Movies like "Biker Boyz" and television programs like "American Chopper," on the Discovery Channel, project an outlaw biker image that celebrates sonic aggression, and many motorcycle magazines not only carry advertisements for performance pipes but print covers showing the kind of behavior that goes with them -- riders leaning fast bikes aggressively into curves or doing burnouts: holding the hand brake while revving the engine and spinning the rear wheel until it smokes.

"If people are sitting at an outdoor cafe and 50 motorcycles drive by quietly, no one notices," said Ed Moreland, a lobbyist in Washington for the 270,000-member American Motorcyclist Association, which is officially opposed to excessively loud pipes. "Then one guy rips off a salvo and they snap their heads around. People think all bikes are loud because that's the one they remember."

He sees one result firsthand -- part of his job is fighting outright bans on motorcycles, which he said are being proposed in many parks and gated communities and for some public roads by people fed up with the noise.

All new on-road motorcycles sold in the United States must meet the 80-decibel noise limit. But nearly half of the five million or so registered motorcycles on the road -- a conservative estimate is at least two million -- have modified exhausts, according to a survey by the Motorcycle Industry Council, a motorcycle trade association representing manufacturers and distributors. Many aftermarket pipes are stamped "for closed-course competition only," but it is widely accepted that they end up on street bikes.

"Right now," said Pamela Amette, vice president of the industry council, "it's illegal to install an exhaust system that does not meet federal requirements, but it's not being enforced."

States that inspect motorcycles check for exhaust leaks but not noise. Police with decibel meters would have to test bikes under controlled conditions that aren't feasible on the street. With little to stop riders from knocking out baffles, straight pipes can emit 110 decibels or more, akin to the sound level of a jet climbing at 1,000 feet.

A large part of the motorcycle's allure is the visceral thrill of horsepower, and many riders consider the bike's sound as vital to this sensory experience as the rushing of the wind. The sound of loud pipes is "like opera," according to a Screaming Eagles fan who stated his opinion in a chat room at motorcyclecity.com.

Some loud-pipe owners may enjoy annoying people. Paul Priolo, 30, a chiropractor from Brightwaters, N.Y., rode to Americade on his Harley Fatboy equipped with performance pipes. "I have to be kind and patient all week," he said. "On the bike I let it all hang out. Plus I like being a little obnoxious, riding down the street and setting off car alarms." As for quieter motorcycles, Dr. Priolo said: "I have a friend with a BMW that sounds like a blender. I tell him, 'Hey, I'll have two smoothies with that.'"

Cris Dunham, a 52-year-old bus operator from Queens, is one of many bikers who contend that loud pipes save lives. Ostensibly, the extra noise makes motorcycles more noticeable to drivers in cars and trucks. Ms. Dunham's Kawasaki Vulcan breathes through nonbaffled Vance & Hines Long Shots. With the motor idling, they put forth a deep, loud drumbeat that reaches an earth-shaking crescendo when she revs the engine. "Having been a professional driver for many years, I think it's better for bikes to be seen and heard," she said. She also admits to the influence of peer pressure. "I mainly ride with Harley guys who teased me when I had a smaller bike," she said. "They told me it went tick-tick-tickety."

No lifesaving value in loud pipes has been proved. Most collisions of motorcycles with larger vehicles occur when cars and trucks turn left in front of oncoming bikes, according to a study by the University of California at Los Angeles. Since exhaust noise is emitted behind the motorcycle, these drivers do not hear loud pipes.

Jack Savage, a motorcycle safety instructor and a publisher of motorcycle books, isn't buying the safety angle. "If a guy is such a poor rider that he needs everybody to hear him coming from a mile away," Mr. Savage said, "maybe he should take up knitting."

RICK GRAY, a 58-year-old lawyer from Lancaster, Pa., owns 13 motorcycles, rides 20,000 to 35,000 miles a year and is chairman of the American Motorcyclist Association. "Too many people tell me, 'I hate motorcycles because they're too loud,'" he said. "This hurts us in other areas, like when we want to lobby for fairer insurance policies."

He fears worse consequences. "If we don't recognize we're a distinct minority in a world growing more environmentally concerned -- and that means noise, too," he said, "we'll become an anachronism."

Personally, Mr. Gray prefers a quieter ride anyway. "To me, riding is like a form of Buddhist meditation," he said. "Just hearing the sound of the wind with nothing intruding on it, not even the engine, is a Zen-like experience." His BMW R1100RT purrs along like a sewing machine. "It's like being in a chair and flying through the air," he said.

Ms. Moshier, who said she loved the attention that a booming motorcycle attracts, may share this attitude to a degree. "At first I hated the straight pipes," she said. "But it's not as loud when you're on the bike."