

gear

Special
**SEX, THUGS
& ROCK 'N' ROLL**
Double Issue

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WY-MEN
Save the World!

**THE MAN
SHOW**
Ruins the World!

HOLLYWOOD
Rules the World!

**TRIP WITH
THE DEVIL**
Hell's Angels Founder
Donny Barger Waxes Poetic



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Summer Fashion
Elodie Bouchez
Carjacking in
Johannesburg
Busta Rhymes
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DeLoreans

JULY/AUGUST 2000



Road rage: Barger
(far right) and his crew
on dirt bikes in the
Mojave desert, filming
Hell's Angels '69





BORN TO BE WILD

He's the founder of the Hell's Angels. And Sonny Barger's the kind of guy who finishes what he starts.

The Carefree Highway runs through the blistering desert due north of Phoenix. The heat rising from the asphalt gives the distance an undulating blur. After an expanse of seemingly uninhabitable sand, sagebrush and cactus is an enclave of single-story haciendas. A winding dirt road cuts through the cluster and near the end of the road sits a white stucco house. A green pickup is in the driveway, three motorcycles are in the garage, an American flag is flapping from a pole in the front yard, and three horses and a small barn encompass the back yard. The house is owned by Sonny Barger, the Godfather of the Hell's Angels.

As I knock on the front door of the house, Hank Williams resonates from the living room. A beautiful "thirtysomething" brunette – Noel, Barger's third wife – welcomes me at the front door. After she ushers me

Article **Nick Bryant**

into the house, I am greeted by the 61-year-old Ralph "Sonny" Barger, who thrusts out his thick right paw. Sonny Barger alive and well and not incarcerated at 61 is one of the greatest long shots in recent history, rivaled only by Buster Douglas knocking out Mike Tyson in 1990 and the Mets winning the World Series in 1969.

Sonny wears a blue tank top, blue jeans and cowboy boots. Years of weightlifting have given his 5 ft. 10 in. frame the sinewy and taut definition of Iggy Pop on anabolic steroids. Tattoos from the era preceding the hip art deco tattoos of today are collaged on his arms, chest and upper back. A large cross commemorating the death of his first wife, Elsie, in 1967, is tattooed on his right forearm (she died after trying to give herself an abortion by pumping air into her vagina). Barger's left forearm carries a quote from Kahil Gibran's novel *A Tear and a Smile*: "I would rather die yearning and longing than live weary and despairing."

Cancer consumed Barger's larynx 17 years ago, and he has to press against a pros-

Barger grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Oakland. When he was six months old, his mother left and never returned. His father was a functioning alcoholic. Barger joined the army at age 16, but when the army found out his actual age after 14 months of service, he was given an honorable discharge. "After the discharge, I had problems deciding whether I wanted to be a biker or a beatnik," Barger says. What ended the ambivalence? "I bought a bike," he says simply.

It's almost incomprehensible that a fickle decision made by a wayward Oakland teen would ultimately spawn the infamous club and all that debauchery. If Barger had ended his existential crisis by buying a set of bongos, the Hell's Angels never would have emerged as a phenomenon in the U.S. and 18 other countries.

Barger forged his first motorcycle club, the Oakland Panthers, in 1956. He wanted the Panthers to be an extended family, but they lacked the loyalty he sought. When he formed the Oakland division of the Angels

sold me the stuff. I was standing in front of the toilet, and a shelf over the toilet had a box of Yogi Bear Bubble Bath on it. Suddenly, Yogi Bear jumped off the box and started chasing our cat around. I told my wife to hold on — we didn't get burned."

Still, cocaine was his favorite. "I once went on a nine-day coke run without any sleep. We heard that lack of sleep was the first step to insanity, and we wanted to see just how insane we could get." As Barger was sating himself on coke, he custom built a Harley chopper that he christened Sweet Cocaine. A motorcycle club named the Unknowns had the misfortune of stealing it. "The Unknowns started to take Sweet Cocaine apart, but when they realized the bike belonged to me, they panicked and dumped it. After we rounded up the culprits, we used hammers on their fingers and spiked dog collars on their backs."

At one point, he was approached by a young, unknown writer named Hunter S. Thompson, who wanted to write a book on them. Barger consented on the condi-

"I'VE STOOD UP IN THE MIDDLE OF A GUNFIGHT, AND I KNEW THE BULLETS WOULDN'T HIT ME."

thesis in his throat every time he talks. The rasp is remarkably similar to that of the archetypal godfather, Vito Corleone.

"When I was first diagnosed with the cancer, they told me I had only two weeks to live," says Barger. "I was really upset, because I didn't have the time to take out everybody I didn't like. And then, when I lived, I was really happy I didn't take anybody out. Shit, I was 45 years old at the time of my cancer and nobody thought I was going to live to 20, so it's amazing I've survived this long.

"I think when you die," he says, "you're dead. The lights go out — end of story. I don't believe in God or the hereafter. But, on the other hand, I think you have a time to die, and it doesn't matter what you do to yourself — you won't die until it's your time. People put guns in their mouths, pull the trigger, and they live, and other people slip on the curb and die. In *Apocalypse Now*, there's a character who stood up in the middle of a firefight — he just knew it wasn't his time. I've felt that before. I've stood right up in the middle of a gunfight — bullets whizzing by my head — and I knew the bullets wouldn't hit me."

a year later, he found that cohesiveness.

The Angels were relatively innocuous in the late '50s, but their presence was soon to be burned into the national consciousness. In 1965, Barger and a group of Angels reaped national headlines for disrupting a Vietnam demonstration in Oakland. "Vietnam was a bad time for the country," says Barger. "The politicians were willing to let our troops fight in Vietnam, but they weren't willing to let them win the war. I didn't like the way protesters were treating veterans."

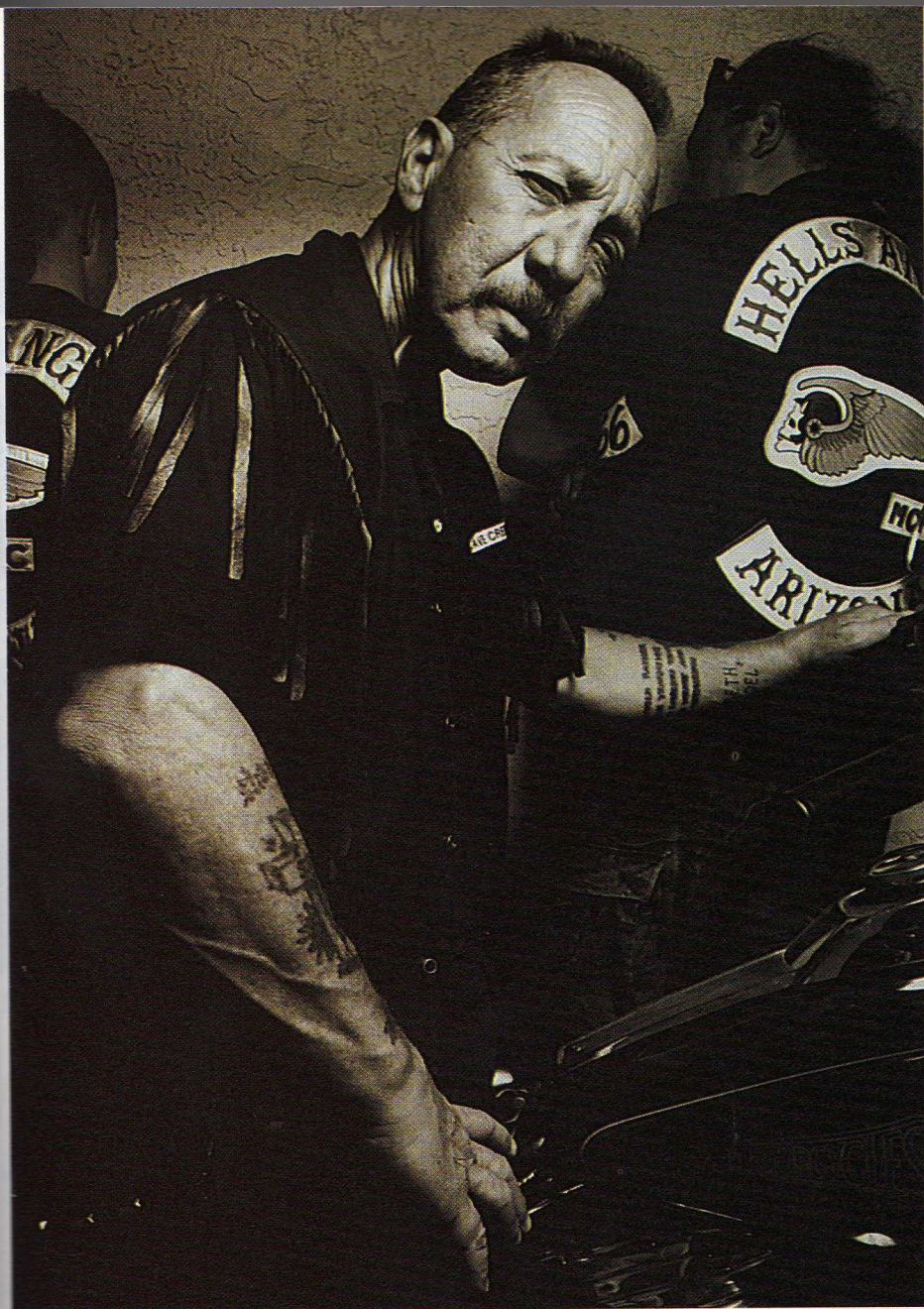
After the Angels wreaked havoc at the Vietnam demonstration, Barger sent a letter to President Lyndon Johnson volunteering the Angels for active duty in Vietnam. "If they really wanted to win the war, they would've sent the Hell's Angels," says Barger. "We would have killed everybody and ended the war." The government declined.

Barger soon discovered better living through chemistry. "The drug I had the most fun on was LSD," he says. "The first time, I was married to Elsie. LSD came in sugar cubes back then, and I bought a couple. After we took it, nothing happened and I thought we got burned. I was taking a piss before I started looking for the guys who

tion that Thompson buy the Angels two kegs of beer. Thompson's book, *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*, was a bestseller, but Thompson reneged on the two kegs of beer — Thompson's first mistake with the Angels, but not his last.

"Hunter S. Thompson is probably one of the best writers I'll ever meet, but he's an asshole and a coward," says Barger. "He asked if he could make a gunrun to Squaw Rock with us, and we said 'Yes, of course.' At Squaw Rock, Junkie George got into a fight with his old lady and slapped her. When he slapped her, his dog bit him, and he kicked his dog. So Hunter jumped up and says, 'Only punks slap their old lady and kick their dog.' Hunter had been around us for a year, and he knew he was going to get beat up for mouthing off. We sent him down the road, bleeding and crying."

Mavens of pop culture often cite December 1969 as the definitive demise of the peace-and-love '60s — the date of a Rolling Stones concert 30 miles southwest of San Francisco at the Altamont Speedway. The Stones hired the Hell's Angels to act as security for



\$500 worth of beer. A Hell's Angel named Animal knocked out the Jefferson Airplane's lead singer, Marty Balin, and it was announced to the crowd what had happened. The masses quickly became nitro and the drunken Hell's Angels glycerin. By the time the Stones strutted onto the stage, there had been a stabbing death. Keith Richards proclaimed that the Stones wouldn't play until the violence stopped. But Barger thought that the Stones' refusal to play would only make the scene worse, and he claims to have introduced Richards to the Sonny Barger School of Motivation.

"Keith Richards denies the fact that I stuck a 9 mm into his ribcage and said 'Play or you're dead.' The Stones are very good musicians, but they're assholes."

As I interview Barger, his 10-year-old

daughter, Sarrah, walks into the living room. "What do you think of your dad starting Oakland's Hell's Angels?" I ask.

"Pretty weird," she replies.

"What do your classmates think of your dad founding the Hell's Angels?"

"They didn't believe me at first, but then I brought his book to school," she says. "When they realized I wasn't lying, I got a little more respect."

Family life hasn't overly mellowed Barger: he was in a fight a few months ago, brought on by a membership discrepancy. "I think I'm getting too old to fight," he says. "I had a blocked artery and a heart attack and I take medication, so I run out of breath pretty fast. I was knocking the guy backwards, but I started to run out of breath. He was over a couple hundred pounds, and



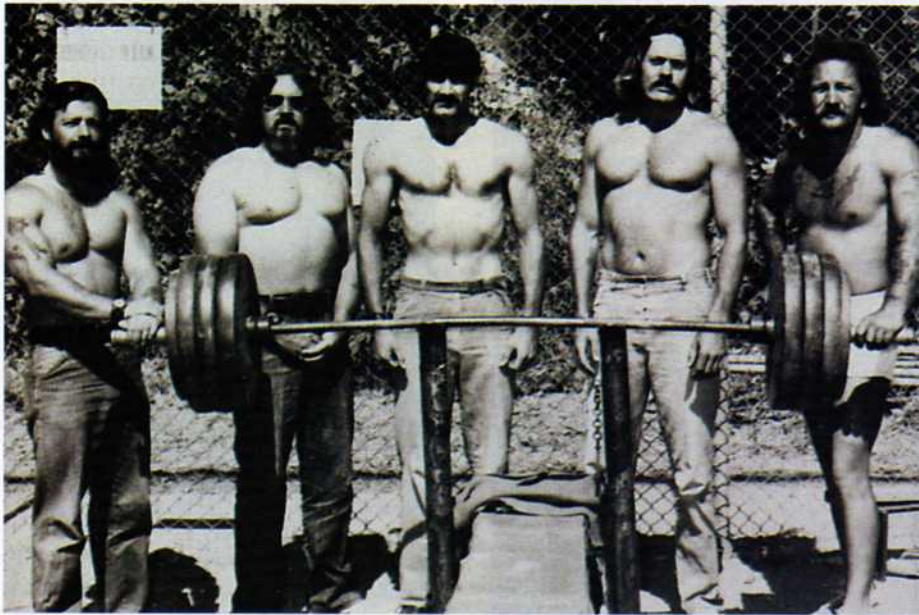
Satan's helper: above, Barger, 16, in his fighting days and, left, Barger, 61, in his fighting days

it took me about eight punches to drop him. When I finally dropped him, I was so happy, because I was really tired."

Barger was arrested repeatedly throughout the '50s and '60s, but he and the Oakland Police Department initially had an unorthodox give-and-take coexistence. Barger was giving and the cops were taking. Machine guns. "The cops really wanted to get automatic weapons off the street," says Barger. "If someone from the Angels was busted, we would put a couple of automatic weapons somewhere for cops to find." But soon enough, Barger's relationship with Johnny Law shifted. On May 21, 1972, three men were found shot to death in a Bay Area house that was owned by a drug dealer named Mike Rounder, who knew Barger. A few hours later, a few miles away, a Cuban coke dealer named Severo Agero was found shot to death in a bathtub. The four murders were the byproduct of the same pistol.

Rounder said Barger had done it. "Rounder told three different stories before finally fingering me, and I was found not guilty of the Agero murder." Shortly after the acquittal, the state indicted him for heroin, cocaine and marijuana possession, gun charges, and kidnapping, and the feds indicted him on gun charges and income tax evasion. Barger had been busted for pot in 1964 — a felony under state law then — so he was sentenced in 1973 to 15 to life

"I'M GETTING TOO OLD TO FIGHT. I RAN OUT OF BREATH AND IT TOOK EIGHT PUNCHES TO DROP HIM."



Hard time: Barger, on far left, and the big boys inside Folsom prison, which was dubbed "The Last Stop"

for the heroin and five to 15 for the cocaine. The feds believed he wouldn't be released from Folsom prison until he was eligible for Medicare, so the federal penance was to be carried out at the same time as the state's.

Following six years in prison, Barger pulled a legal Houdini and liberated himself. He had the 1964 marijuana conviction overturned because the court didn't properly advise him that he was pleading guilty to a felony. And since his 1973 conviction, California had passed Senate Bill 42, which radically reduced certain sentences. The new law affected his sentence. He was released.

Once Barger beat his sentence, he says the feds were determined to get him. A Solano County deputy sheriff named William Zerbe started working with the feds to nail Barger. But, as he investigated the Angels, Zerbe grew very, very cautious. He even installed a remote starter in his car and every morning before leaving for work, he'd stand in his front yard and start his car. The morning Zerbe was to testify against a Hell's Angel, he stood in his customary spot and started his car. Unfortunately for Zerbe, the bomb wasn't in his car, it was planted at the spot where he stood to start his car.

Although severely maimed, Zerbe survived. The feds came after Barger and the

Angels with the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act. Dawn raids on June 13, 1979, netted Barger and 26 others. Barger's bail was \$2 million.

"It took me a while to understand RICO, but once I did, I knew we could beat it. I was the first person in the history of RICO to be found not guilty." In 1988, the feds did put Barger away after an infiltrator taped him in an incriminating conversation about blowing up a rival motorcycle club's clubhouse in Chicago. He was found guilty of conspiracy to transport explosives across state lines with intent to kill, maim or injure. He served almost five years.

Barger feels the feds won't rest until they put him away forever. "I've been told that my name is on a list possessed by all federal prosecutors. If they can convict a person on that list, it's a feather in their cap. So I figure there's always somebody out there trying to get a conviction on me and move up the ladder."

Theoretically, I ask, if the feds offered him the chance, would he quietly bow out of the Angels — if they offered to let him alone with his wife, daughter, motorcycles and horses? "Being a Hell's Angel isn't the most important thing in my life," he replies. "It's the only thing." □

The World According to Sonny Barger

Fatherhood Having a kid is a gas. She's a handful, though. At school my daughter's taught to like cops and she had a problem with me talking bad about them.

Man's inhumanity As long as there's two people on earth, they're going to have a problem, and one will always try to take the other one out.

Favorite TV shows *Futurama*, *Family Guy*, *The Simpsons* and *Ally McBeal*.

America It's a nice place, but I'd like to see a whole lot less government intervention in our lives. I don't believe in love-it-or-leave-it; if you don't like it, change it.

Politics Every politician belongs in jail.

Jesse Ventura We need real people like him in office. I've been told that he belonged to the Mongols Motorcycle Club when he lived in southern California. He's mentioned that he ran into me somewhere along the line, but I don't remember him.

On equal rights The Hell's Angels are a male chauvinist club, and we will always be a male chauvinist club.

Second Amendment I'd like to see people pack guns all over the country like they can in Arizona. In California, guys will step on your toes, spill a drink on you, or call you a motherfucker. People are much more polite when everyone has a gun.

Legalizing drugs 400,000 Americans die a year from smoking. If we're going to let people smoke and die, why can't we let them take drugs and die?

Being a Hell's Angel It means that I belong to the most elite motorcycle club in the world. I'm one of the prima donnas.

Becoming one He has to prove he's loyal and that his beliefs are along the lines of our beliefs, and that he isn't a cop.

Closest brush with death A pickup truck broadsided me on my motorcycle. My bike flipped up in the air, but I rolled away so it didn't come down on me. I picked my bike up, duct-taped the saddlebag back together, and rode it home. The truck had to be towed.

Fighting I don't really feel rage or fear before a fight. Rage doesn't get you into nothing but trouble. I try to keep calm. When I see a punch coming, I try to figure out how I can block it and hit them back.