

STEED 300-VM APPALOOSA

**Brains and brawn,
together at last**

BY CALVIN KIM



CHOPPERS, CHOPPERS EVERYWHERE, YET NOT A SINGLE one that can be ridden. Not hard, not fast and not far, at least. Make 'em hot and flashy, never mind the physics of actually *riding* one of these things. Thankfully, this One Big Flaw of the niche is changing, and changing rapidly. Of course, we're not saying you could take one on, say, the Ironbutt Rally, but riding one every day isn't the impossible task it once was.

At least that's the idea that Steed Musclebikes owner John Covington has. Originally a successful full-house custom motorcycle fabricator, he wanted to produce exotic, semi-production choppers that normal people could buy and ride. Thankfully for him, it turns out there's a pretty good market for such things, each of them a far cry from the build-a-frame-around-a-motor-and-throw-a-parts-catalogue-at-it theory that so many "builders" adhere to these days. Covington's off-the-shelf models feature federally approved VINs, tags and stickers, are registered and certified with the EPA, DOT and CARB, and come with two-year warranties. Such government-sanctioned legitimacy—as well as a planned dealer network expansion—should help the Scottsdale, Arizona-based firm reach its goal of more than doubling its sales to 100 units for the 2005 model year.

Take the 300-VM (Vintage Monoglide) Appaloosa, for example. At first glance, it may look like your typical chopper, albeit one with a curiously curvaceous swingarm holding the widest (a whopping 300mm) production tire produced. In order to make the rear-suspension setup work, Steed had to produce a whole new chassis. Tire manufacturer Avon assisted in the pro-



CYCLE WORLD TEST

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cess by giving Steed plenty of pre-release data so that it could properly design its frame around the new Super Venom. Still, even armed with this knowledge, it's hard to believe that such a machine could actually be rideable in the everyday sense of the word.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. The chassis is nice and all, with its gracefully arching, 2-inch-diameter front downtube, but there are tons of visual touches that you won't find on other showroom choppers. When you step back to look at that prodigiously spoked rear wheel, for example, you'd be excused if you didn't notice the floating rear fender; the entire rear end—both fender and wheel—move together to simulate the look of a rigid-tailed machine. In fact, the manual even warns against using the back of the tubular seat mount as a handhold due to this movement, which doesn't really matter because the Appaloosa is strictly a solo bike.

As opposed to decision by committee, there is original (well, okay, unique) thought given to many aspects of this motorcycle. For example the twistgrip palm rest, perfect for those long stretches of lonesome highway. The space underneath the seat is normally where an oil tank would go, but because the lubricant lives within the confines of a Dyna-style transmission, the Progressive shock is placed in the empty space, where it can easily be accessed by lifting off the velcro'ed-in-place seat. Adjustments to the shock include preload (easy thanks to an included spanner) and rebound damping (hex wrench not included). The

frame also features eyelets to vary the ride height between two positions. Nice. Move your gaze a little lower and just underneath the pipes. That little dangle you see is a power plug-in. All Steed motorcycles come with a Battery Tender-type charger; if you're not going to ride the bike for a while (North Dakotans take note), plug the charger in and leave it. Smart.

The gas tank features a neat recessed cap. Only problem being it's either too close to the headstock or the VM's curved triplet of handlebar risers comes back too far. Gassing up for the first time proved to be a messy experience. The trick is to put the front wheel at full left lock and then gas up from the front left quarter of the bike. The handlebar and left riser make an effective accordion-style vapor-return-barrier holder, though it does look a bit silly to have a gas pump nozzle sprouting out of your bars. Once mastered, there's still a need to be careful: Overfilling is easy, gas gushing down the tank and all over the top of the motor.

Notice the lack of clutter around the handlebars? In-bar wire routing makes for a super-clean look. But wait, where are the gauges? Jettisoned for vanity's sake? Nope. The speedometer, numerical tach (revs represented in 100s), odometer and tripmeter, as well as a full complement of warning and indicator lights, are all located within the two billet mirrors and shine through the glass. More clever thinking—this time truly original and functional, too. On the bottom edge of the left mirror there are three buttons. The middle button resets the tripmeter, while the right button cycles between trip and odometer modes. The left button would appear to activate a self-destruct system of some

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sort, as the manual specifically warns not to press it. Rider beware.

Steed prides itself on making rideable machines, and the Appaloosa handles just as well, if not better, than some less raked-out choppers with more conventional 250-section rear tires. Credit here the right-side Primo/Rivera belt drive, which keeps the 111-inch S&S motor centered within the chassis. This gives a neutral feel in left-right transitions. It's still a bear to really lean the bike over, but thankfully the Appaloosa can be heeled over pretty far before anything touches asphalt. You won't be leading the Twins class at the local roadrace track, but for a mile-long choppy, not too shabby.

So far so good, but there's more. Take the inverted 53mm GCB Behemoth Steed fork, for a conversation starter. Not only does it look really good, it's also tremendously stiff. In fact, the Appaloosa has the stiffest chopper chassis/fork combo we've yet sampled. The front end still suffers from stiction—the force vector presented to the fork from a bump doesn't jive with the direction the lower legs want to compress—but at a claimed 40 degrees of rake, what would you expect? Our only real complaint from the front end comes from the lack of a dual-disc setup. The single rotor may make for a cleaner, more open-looking front end, but even mildly aggressive stops took more lever effort than we'd like. A sec-

ond disc would only add to the 'Paloosa's roadcraft.

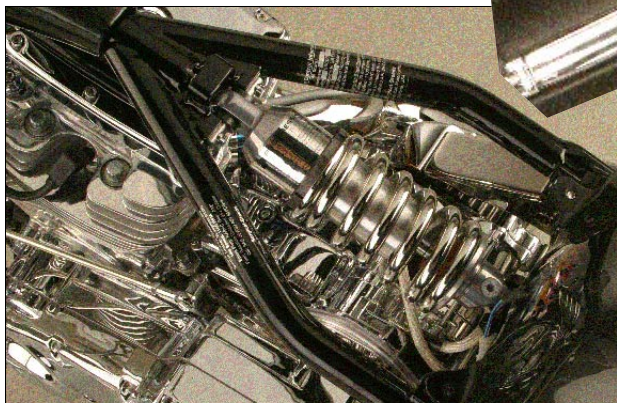
For all the turning prowess afforded by the great front end and ground clearance, the rear suspension didn't contribute much to a smooth ride. In fact, on highway super-slab, the jarring effect was downright painful. The shock blew right through its travel, halting abruptly on the not-so-soft bump stop. The ride mellowed out over non-expansion-jointed two-lanes and backroads—setting the shock on the third out of five possible rebound-damping settings gave the big rear wheel a controlled feel on the mostly smooth stuff—but nothing we did alleviated choppiness over sharp bumps.

When you finally do get to a decent road, with that rumbling mass of V-Twin energy between your legs, you can't help but feel just a little badass. Thanks to Sandy Bullock's squeeze Jesse and those posterboys of family dysfunction from Orange Country, neo-choppers are all the rage nowadays, and anybody with a lifted truck or SUV within a two-mile radius of the Steed will trip all over themselves to let you know how they're gonna get one just like that someday. You start feeling pretty good about things until you find yourself stopped at an intersection and realize that the only thing louder than your ride is a 747 on take-off. Guess the DOT's noise meter is feeling pretty generous these days...

Of course, these things are all about attention-getting, but you can't help but feel just a little bad for the poor schlub

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you just blasted past in a wave of sound a few decibels over the pain threshold. Ruckus aside, the power, staccato beat and feel of the S&S mill is addictive. Shifts from the Baker six-speed transmission are quick and—dare we say—positive, even vaguely sporty. The clutch pull is also quite livable and not obscenely heavy by big American V-Twin standards. Our only driveline issue stemmed from what could only be maladjustment, the tranny sometimes hanging up on the second-to-first downshift. As the carburetor has no provision for a choke, cold starts were a bit difficult (good



An as-tested price of \$37,699, and the 300-VM doesn't even come with a seat?! Just kidding, it does, and the mount is compatible with any H-D Softail solo seat should you want to accessorize. Easy access to damping and preload adjustments is provided by the exposed Progressive shock.

luck again, North Dakota), though setting the idle speed up a turn or two before starting usually solved that problem. Once the motor warmed up, it responded quickly to throttle inputs, pulling hard until just shy of redline, with only a slight dip in power in the 3000-3200-rpm range. It was fun to see the little exposed air-scoop butterfly reacting to carburetor vacuum. Are choppers like the Steed Appaloosa for everyone? No, not anymore than a Kawasaki ZX-10R or a Honda Metropolitan scooter are. But for the discerning custom fan who seeks a radical ride with at least some of the good handling traits and characteristics found in more ordinary iron, Mr. Covington has come up with a unique bike with a split personality: one part bad-to-the-bone custom, the other a dependable and useable motorcycle. Oxymoronic no more, consider it a real rider's chopper. And a step in the right direction.

No official presence at Daytona Beach Bike Week, but look for the Steed Musclebikes booth at the Heritage Rally, April 8-17 in Charleston, South Carolina.



(Top) Stealth "heads-up" gauges and warning lights are easy to read, even in direct sunlight. Why hasn't someone done this before? (Above) Unique swingarm "porthole" complements the frame's curved lines. Bravo for the use of spokes in this increasingly billet world.

If you've ridden any recent Harley-Davidsons, the ignition switch will look familiar. It operates the same way, too; turn the key to unlock, pull the key out and then set the switch to whatever mode you want: ignition on/electronics off, everything off or everything on. The 111-cubic-inch S&S motor produces 110.5 rear-wheel horsepower and 122 foot-pounds of torque. Very stout stuff!



EDITORS' NOTES



THE FACT THAT NO OTHER PIECE OF TWO-wheeled hardware attracts as much attention as a chopper is usually considered a good thing. Not to me, though. I hate attention. One of the main reasons I like motorcycles is because, inside that helmet, it's just you and the bike floating along. Yet on a chopper, there are all these fan boys just begging to get an up-close-and-personal look at your rig. Kind of odd, considering the evil outlaw image that choppers once had.

So what's this have to do with the VM-300? Not much, other than the fact that the Appaloosa is pretty much the most attention-grabbing bike I've ever ridden. The subdued gray/black paint job, in this case, is a good thing. Lord knows the kind of crowd it might draw in metalflake red with yellow flames. Anyway, add the spoked wheels, 300mm-wide rear tire and super-loud pipes, and you get a recipe for industrial-strength chopper fan-boy attractant. In other words, for the target demographic, you got yourself the perfect bike!

—Calvin Kim, Online Editor



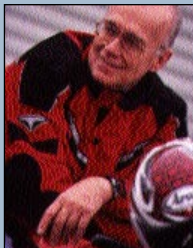
"MA'AM, YOU MAY WANT TO PUT EARMUFFS on your poodle..." I was about to light the fuse on our Steed Appaloosa, and I'd already heard the thing run when Calvin returned from one of his Citizen Stomping road trips during testing. The elderly lady with the K9 was horrified that I'd even spoken, no doubt unfamiliar with the fact that You Meet The Nicest People On Choppers these days.

So, yeah, it's real effin' loud, and even with the downplayed paint job and tasteful shiny bits, the VM still manages to be crass and in-your-face.

On the road, it works too well for its style-conscious chassis and giant rear tire. The engine ably hammers you off the line and up to...as fast as you dare go, which does have its appeal. Repeat at the next light.

Ultimately, the Steed is at once a whole lotta motorcycle, and not much of one. But within the confines of its inherent limitations, it behaves remarkably like a motorbike. Which is cool, as long as your dog has earmuffs.

Mark Hoyer, Feature Editor



I'M NOT MUCH OF A CHOPPER FAN, SINCE I've always preferred function over form, but the Appaloosa ain't such a bad example of the genre. The S&S engine performs flawlessly, the bike looks way lighter than it actually is, it handles acceptably if not nimbly, and its build-quality rivals that of many production bikes from larger manufacturers. I shouldn't be surprised; John Covington has been at this for quite some time. In

fact, Steed is the country's oldest federally licensed "alternative American" (i.e., clone) builder. Steed makes five other models based on the same "Monoglide" chassis and 300mm rear tire as the Appaloosa, and personally, I find some of them more appealing. The Quarterhorse and Clydesdale are more conventional customs without the radically raked-out front end, and the Bronco is a springer-forked bobber that's every bit as spartan as bikes of that type are supposed to be. If it were my thirty-some-odd-grand going into Covington's cashbox, I'd want one of those in return.

—Paul Dean, Editorial Director

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SPECIFICATIONS

GENERAL

List price \$37,699 (as tested)
Manufacturer Steed Motorcycle Co.
9550 N. 90th St.
Scottsdale, AZ 85258

Customer service

phone 480/661-1990

Warranty Two-year limited

ENGINE

Engine air-cooled, four-stroke

V-Twin

Bore x Stroke 104.1 x 104.1mm

Displacement 1810cc

Compression ratio 10.8:1

Valve train two valves per cylinder, hydraulic adjusters

Valve adjustment intervals not required

Carburetion 45mm Mikuni

Oil capacity 3.0 qt.

Electrical power 384w

Battery 12v, 14ah

CHASSIS

Weight:

Tank empty 647 lb.

Tank full 674 lb.

Fuel capacity 4.5 gal.

Wheelbase 79.0 in.

Rake/trail 40°/na

Seat height 25.8 in.

Ground clearance 4.0 in.

GVWR 1050 lb.

Load capacity (tank full) 376 lb.

HORSEPOWER/TORQUE

121.5 @ 4250 RPM

110.5 @ 5300 RPM

110.5 @ 5300 RPM

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SUSPENSION/TIRES

Front suspension:

Manufacturer GCB

Tube diameter 53mm

Claimed wheel travel na

Adjustments none

Rear suspension:

Manufacturer Progressive

Type single shock

Claimed wheel travel na

Adjustments rebound damping, spring preload

Tires:

Front Avon Super Venom

130/70-21

Rear Avon Super Venom

300/35-18

PERFORMANCE

1/4 mi. 11.93 sec.

@ 112.26 mph

0-30 mph 1.5 sec.

0-60 mph 3.4 sec.

0-90 mph 7.2 sec.

0-100 mph 8.9 sec.

Top gear time to speed:

40-60 mph 5.2 sec.

60-80 mph 6.1 sec.

Measured top speed 127 mph

Engine speed at

60 mph 2250 rpm

FUEL MILEAGE

High/low/avg. 49/39/42 mpg

Avg. range inc. reserve 130 mi.

BRAKING DISTANCE

from 30 mph 38 ft.

from 60 mph 158 ft.

SPEEDOMETER ERROR

30 mph indicated 30 mph

60 mph indicated 61 mph

