

THEN CAME



BRONSON

BY SALLY WIMER

Act I: The Final Rites of James Dean

From the public relations department of MGM-TV comes the word and the word dwells among us: the people at MGM-TV are telling us that this man, a very good actor named Michael Parks, who just happens to be starring in this television series called *Then Came Bronson*; that Michael Parks is Bronson, the very essence of that man we see mumbling and weaving through some

mildly interesting episodes on TV every Wednesday night.

If you watch the show, you know who Jim Bronson is: he's the bus from the old *Bus Stop*. He's not a dropout, not a bad guy; but not particularly a good guy, either. He's unobtrusive enough to fit into any of the four or five situations one comes upon in TV land. Like the bus, he's simply the

catalyst for a situation in which, of necessity (he's leaving in an hour), he gets only superficially involved.

MGM wants you to think of Parks as the independent loner, the restless young man who has made his own fortune in this rough world since age 14; the guy who eked out a living at hard-core manual labor; who didn't have time to get involved.

To compare the two is good business. It makes you believe in the reality of television; it helps you identify closely with the hero; it's even a way of saying that Michael Parks can't act. (Who admires effete Hollywood snobs anymore?) But none of it is valid. Michael Parks can act, television is patently unreal, and Michael Parks is none other than Michael Parks.

He's not even James Dean risen from the great Porsche wreck or Marlon Brando revitalized as they would also have you believe. He's his own man:

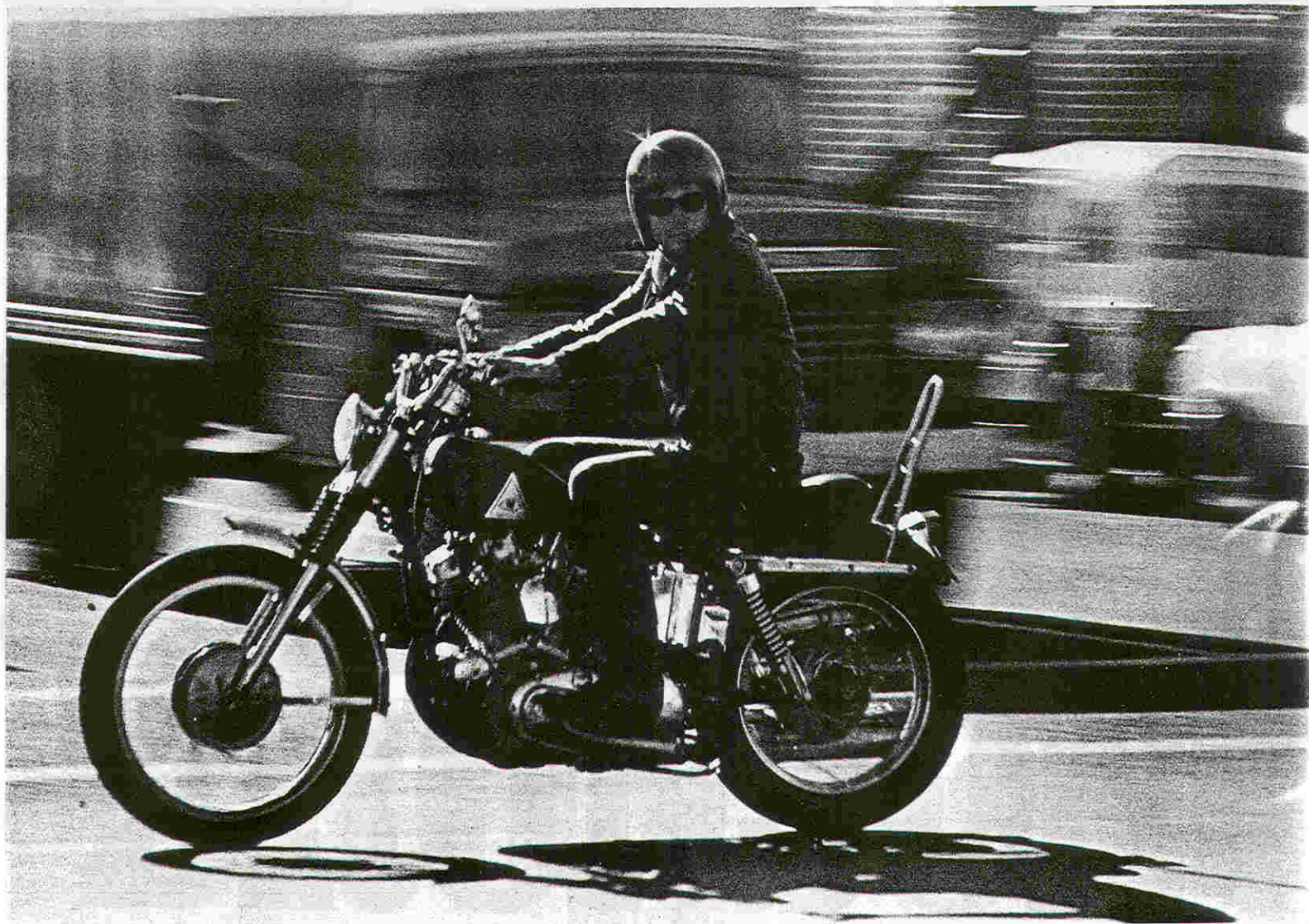
panned: "You know, somebody told me he was alive. And I said, what's he doin'? And they said, nuthin'. Nuthin' because he's a basket case and lives with a cult in the middle of the desert not far from where the Porsche cracked up. And I said, oh, yeah, well do you think he'd like to do some stand-in work?"

Maybe MGM and the rest hang Parks with the gamut of popular identities because they don't know exactly who he is. We don't presume to know, either, but we venture to guess that, despite a fair amount of shuffling on the screen,

he's a mind to. But he's not the kind of man about whom you want to draw too many conclusions: he's much too honest for that and much too bright. He'll shatter conclusions quicker than you can make them. He might even go so far as to prevent you from making the mistake of drawing conclusions:

*Digby Diehl
IBID*

"From his expression, you can tell that he's going off on another verbal rollercoaster, another stream-of-consciousness indulgence in unrelated



bright, introspective and iconoclastic—angry at compromise and the compromising. The fact that he's playing this James Dean kind of loner who happens to ride a motorcycle is not only incidental but, according to Parks, somewhat regretful, at least within the limitations of this series.

*Digby Diehl
"Does James Dean Ride Again?"
The New York Times
October 26, 1969*

"As the conversation drew to a close, it became obvious that the James Dean parallel could not be ignored. Upon mention of the late actor, Parks dead-

Parks is interested in being more than this generation's James Dean. Not that we don't think Dean did a herculean job. For one thing, he managed to take the shouting out of theatrics (which was good) and he did almost more than Stanislavsky himself to further The Method. But just as he did that, he added a whole lot of other (unnecessary?) theatrics.

Dean characters were somewhat difficult and they shunned all but the safest of involvements. Bronson goes a bit beyond that. And Parks: he rides straight into town and communicates—if

statements, off-color jokes, anecdotal fragments, vague allusions, bits of poetry, philosophical ramblings—the undisciplined display of a crazy mixed-up man-child. Maybe it's his idea of Jimmy Dean, but the interview turns into an hour-long jag that would have done Dostoevski proud. . . his publicists insistently reiterating in parental tones. . . Michael, you're not answering the question. After watching him give a day of consistent, rational work on the show, one finds it difficult to believe that Parks is pulling anything other than an intentionally offensive put-on."

II: The Show Goes On

Reno. A girl—just like most of the girls you went to school with, in a skirt that shows nothing much, except that her thighs are a little heavy—has been dealing for hours and you know her feet are hurting; she wouldn't mind having a whisky sour or going home to watch TV or something, if there were anything on TV at three a.m. in Reno.

But she keeps up a happy banter and you're winning pretty good because you're taking it easy. A new lady comes

but you're supposed to be here doing a story on him and from what you've heard, he'll slug you—or worse. He responds with an audible "excuse me"; you'd have done the same if it weren't for the momentary seizure.

The MGM crew has taken over the motel, shooting yet another inane script, this one called "Lucky Day."

The casino is lit up like Electric City, which must cause some mean discomfort to those poor souls still hoping to find a fortune in the machines.

house of plastic on plastic bliss. Cor-sages. Free Limousine. They were doing exterior shots here; for the interior they'd rented a house. (Chapel people can make more money in a day by servicing the throngs who gather there, two by two, than by renting out their place for TV.)

All around are TV folks and their own kind of paraphernalia: the \$250,000 cinemobile, the sound truck, the bike truck, the dressing room truck, ad infinitum. Actors in one group; directors, cameramen and hangers-on in



to the table. She's tight-lipped and business-like and she comes up with more black jacks than a New York cop in June. You remember that you have an appointment in the morning; it's definitely time to go to bed.

Next morning comes earlier than morning should ever come and you stumble into the motel casino on your way to breakfast and stumble right into some cat with brown cords, a brown leather jacket and a blue watchcap. Ohmagod! You've not only stumbled into the arms of a very handsome blue-eyed movie star for heaven's sake,

We met with public relations man-for-the-day Ken Hicks (6 feet, 4 inches, black and beautiful); his was no easy job. (Someone from *Pageant* had just been put back on the plane with a gentle but real "no" to doing a story.) Hicks was more than a little concerned that we wanted to photograph Parks; to talk to him. It's just not done.

But word came through to follow the troops over to the wedding chapel where the next take was being set up.

The Chapel of the Bells. The steeple (no cross, much less bells), the stained glass windows, Woolworth style. The

another. Assistants all over the place, throwing lights and aluminum highlights on the scene. A guy rides by on a "Bronson Red" Electra Glide and waves; nobody waves back. A couple of kids come lurking about. They're asked politely (and then not so politely) to move out of the camera's eye. An aluminum light thrower talks: "Who, me? I'm an assistant. Beats working. I do this six months; collect unemployment six months. Never watch TV." Nobody admits to watching TV. "Don't much care about bikes." Most of the other crew members do.

The bikes are parked out in front of the chapel: Bronson's candy red Sportster and a matching Hodaka. The actors go over some lines and droop around the bikes some. A double gets on co-star Barry Brown's Hodaka; Bronson rides away on his own machine. The work has been done and the scene is over in a matter of minutes.

III: Mike Parks Raps

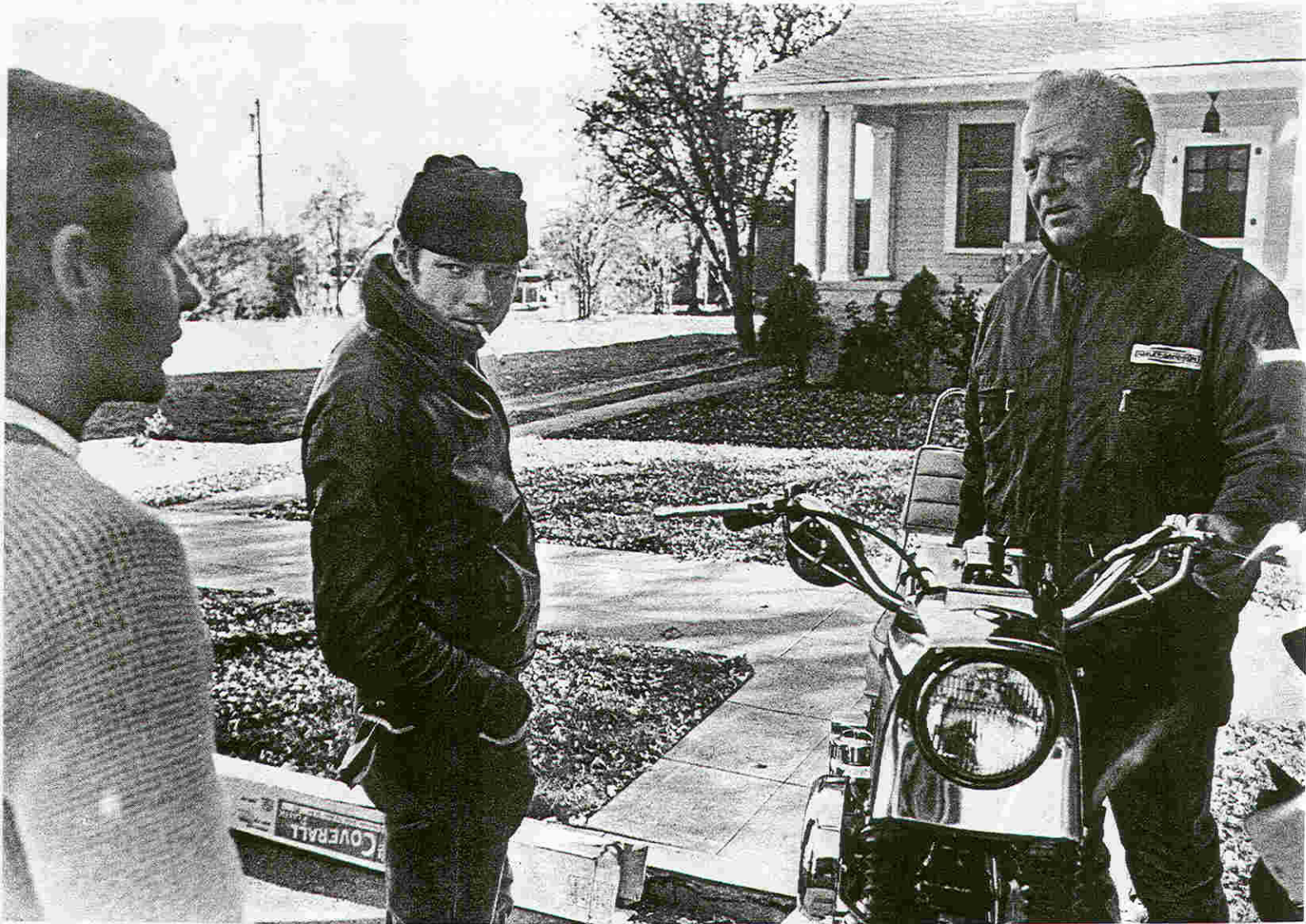
*Opening Scene,
Then Came Bronson*

"Taking a trip?"

Teton mountains one week, the desert the next, Reno the next, you'd be running into a lot of money. As it is, the labor expenses for a crew working 10-12 hours a day are enormous. But the Bronson crew has solved the major problem of shooting on location—the time it takes to set up—with a monster-truck called the Cinemobile Mark IV. It houses six cameras; 30 lenses; 200 pieces of grip equipment; three dollies; two complete channels for sound recording (10 microphones); 60 lights; generators; a mobile telephone; a 270

Bronson evolved pretty much the way TV series do nowadays. There was a two-hour pilot that had two showings and got ratings good enough to interest the sponsors and thus NBC. A story board was made and the writers were assigned their tasks. Denne Bart Petitclerc was the author of the *Bronson* pilot. Robert H. Justman and Robert Sabaroff are the producers.

Michael Parks had some very definite things to say about the scripts. "Actors? There are enough actors. I would encourage writers. These idiot scripts



*"What's that?"
"Taking a trip?"
"Yeah."
"Where you going?"
"Wherever I end up, I guess."
"I wish I was you."
"Yeah? Well, hang in there."*

There are a lot of reasons why *Then Came Bronson* is shot on location. One reason must be the motorcycles; it's easier to do all that hairy stuff outdoors. Another is the change in scenery. Think of how few sets you need for a show as immobile as, say, Johnny Carson. But if you had to build the

watt transmitting station; eight walkie-talkies; and a dark room. Most of this equipment is housed in the easy-open exterior panels for quick access.

The locations have all been in the Western part of the United States (most of our wandering heroes are Western) but the reason, explains associate producer Johnny Wilson, has to do with the labor unions. It would be too expensive to take the show East. Parks says he'd like to take the show to Europe next year but on the other hand, he's made his bread and there are other things he'd like to do, too.

...I ad lib 95% of the lines myself.

"Theater today... it's common. Common, that's the word for it. You go to China and you see nothing but Chinese theater... You say, can't they do anything but Chinese? Here. Here we have only Borsch Belt humor."

His watchcap is pulled down over his eyes. He stops for a minute, then looks up, alive. "When you think of Shakespeare and O'Casey... when you think of them! You'd think that if they were going to plagiarize, they could plagiarize someone good. These scripts, the same plots, week after week?" (Cont. on page 68)

BRONSON *Continued from page 60*

"Doing this show," says Parks, "is the difference between racing a Honda 350 and a Norton. It's all in what you have to work with. What can you do with scripts like these? A destruction derby!" (A show aired in late November). Parks starts laughing. "That's ridiculous! A destruction derby. Does that do anything for you?"

Despite Parks' strong attitudes (justified by the script we saw), he works consistently and hard—six days a week, generally 10 hours a day. He's in most of the scenes and is the only continuing character. He wants to do some directing and told us that they were giving him the final script in the series to direct. Tune in.

Parks was very active. For one thing, he was on screen most of the time. When he wasn't, he was checking on things theatrical, talking to us, setting up a Salvation Army poster, taking care of his young nephew (given a week's vacation from school to be on the set). People let him get on with his work and worked hard to see that he could do it. The ladies made sure that he had the best of the lunch, served from yet another truck (Ralph Green—Think Green Catering Service) in the motel parking lot. There was a feeling of respect for the man in everyone from the director down to the last assistant.

On the Bronson character, Parks feels that he's helped the part to grow. "It's believable, isn't it?" he asked. It's the most believable thing about the whole show. "They had me — every girl in sight on this show. I told them any idiot could —. That's not all life is about."

The Bronson costume—light brown corduroy pants, black tee shirt, brown leather jacket, blue watchcap (and sometimes red helmet) were taken, says Parks, from a book he read—Jack London's *Sailor on Horseback*. He knows he'd like to change the jacket—to one made of down—because it was cold in Reno and Parks reckoned as how he was tired of freezing. His only make-up was a very real two-day stubble.

"Doing your own thing in your own time, is that freedom?" says Parks. "That's what they're always saying—do your own thing in your own time." He was talking about acting. He was talking about methods and indirectly about The Method. "They have you running. . . now I used to be a pretty fair runner" (he quoted some impressive times) "but I am supposed to run against a great runner and win. This guy is the best in the world maybe, and I'm supposed to tell myself that I can run against him. . . and win. I can't do that. You expect me to believe that? You have a rock and you tell someone it's a car. It's not a

car, it's a rock. That's what it's all about. You have a guy who's supposed to be a great photographer and he doesn't know anything about cameras. How can he play the part? Learning, you see, is environment."

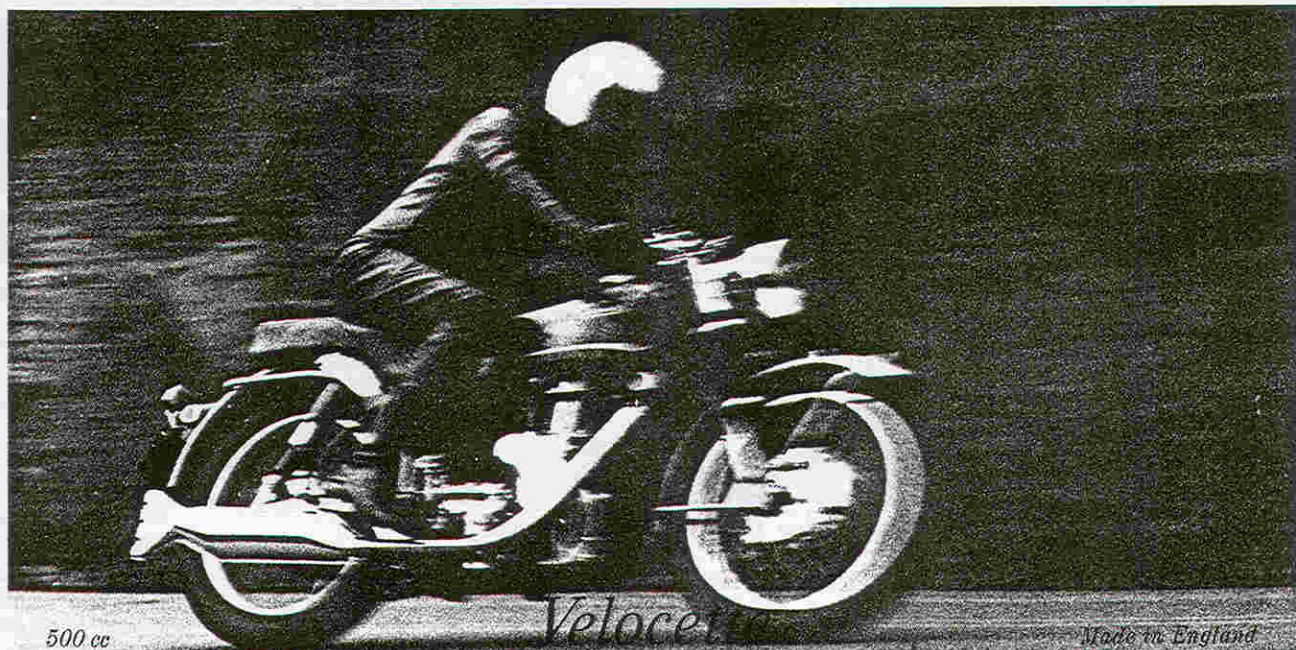
He was talking to Paul Ryan, who's been making a kind of home movie on the Hell's Angels, San Francisco chapter. And Parks was saying how he wouldn't mind making a film on the Angels, how he'd really like that. And Ryan was saying that the problem is in getting to the Angels, how they're a little paranoid with all the hokey movies and such. Parks looked straight at Ryan and said: "You tell them that I said that even paranoiacs have enemies, okay? You tell them I said that and that I'd like to do a film. I might learn something and they might learn something. It might even change some of their lives. That's what making a film is all about," he emphasized. And later. . . "Remember what I said? Tell them that even paranoiacs have enemies."

IV: Up Harley-Davidson

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We'll coast down the hill just you and
me...*

About the bikes. There are five of them, all together. Two Bronson street semi-chopped Sportsters, a hillclimb bike and the stunt bike. There's a unique rig for non-riders which attaches to a pickup truck. The front wheel goes into a runner and it's pulled along while a cameraman hangs over the back of the truck to take pictures. Into the Bronson bike truck goes all this plus a mobile workshop, including dozens on dozens of mufflers ("They wreck one a show, scrape them all up," says MGM mechanic Chet Haffey). The bikes are rigged up on runners inside the truck, bolted down and tied to the wall. On the right-hand side is a double layer, the hill-climb bike sitting on top.

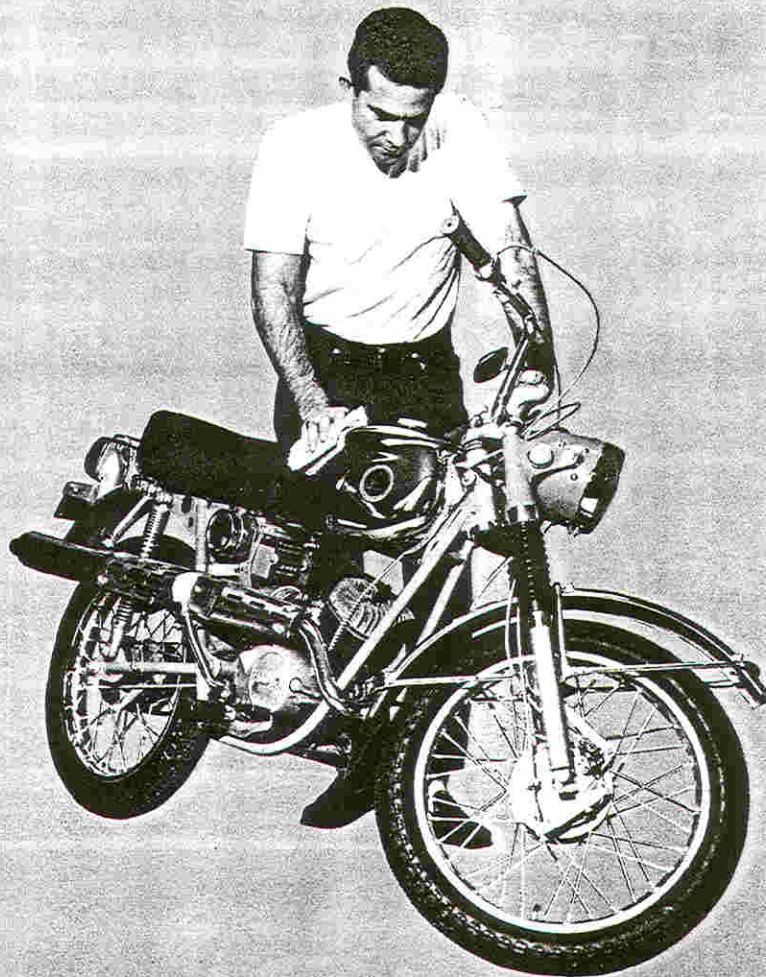
"The Bronson Bike"
MGM Press Release

"For aficionados, the changes are as follows. The front wheel was replaced with a 21" aluminum rim carrying a 300 x 21 ribbed tire. The front fender was changed to a chrome plated, bobbed piece and the headlight nacelle, or housing, was removed and a chrome sports light replaced it. A Harley-Davidson CH gas tank replaced the standard tank, and the oil tank and rear shock springs were chrome plated. A kickstarter was added although the Sportster carries an electric starter. (What the kickstarter does, is to enable the actor to look like he's turning over the big engine while the starter button is being pushed—Ed.)

The seat was replaced with a custom leather unit and a short chrome hand-hold was mounted behind the passenger seat. The chain guard cover and the voltage regulator cover were chrome plated. The rear fender was bobbed 5 inches and the tail light replaced with an old style English light. The motorcycle was repainted with a specially mixed formula which is called, from this point on, Bronson Red. The final touch was the addition of the Bronson "Eye" insignia to the gas tank." (You can find the "Eye" on a dollar bill—Ed.)

The hill-climb bike is exactly like the street Sportster, with a TT saddle, a knobby on the front wheel and off-the-road gearing. For really hairy action, they're likely to use a 350 Harley rigged to look like the Sportster. But the most interesting bike by far is the stunt bike, which has a Bud Ekins sidecar attached and a sprung solo saddle over the front fender, facing the rider. "I've seen Bud Ekins take off through the boonies with a cameraman on the sidecar and another one on that seat and him going 70 mph," exclaims Haffey, a tall, sandy-haired, easy-going gent. *Continued*

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BRONSON *Continued*

As action coordinator, Ekins does the stunt work, the boonie riding, jumps and speed scenes. Parks does the rest. "It's not that he's a bad rider," explain the folks at MGM, "but we're not about to let him get hurt." That's understandable enough considering that without Parks, there's no show. It's even Ekins who appears on the earlier orange H-D Bronson poster.

We arrived shortly after a brand-new Harley had been presented to Parks. It's made like the Bronson machine, except that it's chromed from headlamp to taillight and is painted black instead of red. There's a pearled-up gas tank that looks for all the world like it's made of imitation contact paper. Parks looks at it with respect: "Harley did all I asked. Must be a \$2000 machine." When one of the show people took it for a spin, Parks admonished the fellow: "Now you use the gears, you hear? Of course they're necessary. Why do you think they put them on there?" Most of the hangers-on seemed regretful of the fact that Parks hadn't had much of a chance to ride it. "He'll get to it—soon as the show is over," said more than one of them. Parks' own feelings were less enthusiastic. For one thing, he'd just bought a new jeep and was anxious to do some work on that. For another, "It was MGM's idea to use Harley-Davidson for the image. I don't much like the bike." He admonished us later: "Remember what I said? If you're going to write this story, tell them that I don't much like this Harley. What I'm going to do, you see?" (he showed all the enthusiasm with his hands). . . . "What I'm going to do is build my own bike. I've got some ideas. . . oh, I can't tell you," he teased, "but I'm going to build a motorcycle that's really radical. There's not an engine that's been made that's good. It's going to be a really radical engine. The Bronson bike. Yeah, I'll do a road test for you. . . . You tell them that the Harley-Davidson was MGM's idea."

A wager: more people know who Michael Parks is than know who is national number one. Michael Parks is Bronson, right? *Movie star.* "Going down that long lonesome highway. . . ." Just like the bus.

CAL AND MERT *Cont from page 54*

and take what they've got? Not only the promoters, but the industry people and dealers as well?

Lawwill: I can't go along with that because the car thing has gotten a lot bigger and the original people have grown right along with it. I used to feel that way about the AMA before the Congress was formed and the rule-making became democratic. There's a good balance between industry people, pro racers, and sportsman racers, now.



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