

MOJEH

MEN



COOL
CREATIVES

FEATURING

Rami Malek | Aston Martin | Mattar Bin Lahej | Nadine Labaki | SIHH 2019

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IN BENZIN VERITAS

On a quiet side street in one of Beirut's eastern neighbourhoods,
a motorcycle revolution is brewing

Words by Nabih Bulos



Rami Bishara stands next to an almost-completed project, a BMW R65 from the 1960s

Photography: Walid Ibrahim

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IT JUST CLICKED WITH ME:
YOU HAVE A VINTAGE BIKE,
MAKE IT SIMPLER.
RAMI BISHARA

It's Sunday morning, and several bleary-eyed souls have already gathered on this quiet side street in Beirut's Mar Mikhael neighbourhood. One, who is battling the effects of last night's partying, munches on a pastry from a bakery nearby. But the growing crowd's centre of gravity lies next door, where some glue their face to the glass, peeking in as they would before a toy store. In a sense, that's an apt description for this unassuming workshop, a place which is officially named – after several permutations – Assembly Motors. But it matters little; everyone knows it as Rami's. That's a reference to Rami Bishara, a 33-year-old graphic designer by night, motorcycle modifying mechanic extraordinaire by day (well, midday). By some unknown alchemy of tools, motorbikes, and coffee, his garage has become nothing less than a factory of dreams, and the main home of the café racer craze hitting Beirut. For those who don't know, café racers first found their origins in London, when riders would strip down and soup up their bikes, then zoom down the highways from one café to another, stopping for a quick coffee.

The café racer look – minimalist in fairing, yet distinctive in its styling – has even garnered the attention of manufacturers. Marque names including BMW, Triumph, and Ducati have all released stock café racer models ready to ride with no modification. But for purists, there's no alternative to taking a diamond-in-the-rough old bike and finishing it to gem-like quality. "It just clicked with me: You have a vintage bike, make it simpler," says Rami. Did you ever watch shows like *Grendizer*, *Knight Rider* or *Robotech*? When you were a child, did you imagine you had a loyal steed, or a trusty robotic companion that was a fixture in all your adventures? That's how bikers feel about their motorcycles every time they turn the ignition. It's not just a practical way of avoiding Beirut's fearsome traffic jams; the motorcycles we choose, even the way we ride, are

Rami's workshop is a treasure trove of classic bikes waiting to be customised



Rami spends hours adjusting and fabricating parts



Assembly Motors in Beirut's Mar Mikhael, a gathering place for the nascent café racer scene





THE ATTENTION TO DETAIL THAT PEOPLE
PUT INTO MUSCLE CARS, YOU SEE IT HAPPENING
NOW WITH VINTAGE MOTORCYCLES.

RAMI BISHARA



This Suzuki ST-250 is still a work in progress, but it's already taking shape

a reflection of how we see ourselves. Perhaps that explains why no less of an authority than writer Hunter S. Thompson once said: "Love is the feeling you get when you like something as much as your motorcycle."

That love makes Rami's job more than just one of a mechanic. He's also often plays the part of a psychologist, teasing out what a client is after, while working within the limits of what's possible when you have 30-year old engines. "I occasionally have to steer people away from bad choices, but there are times when they can be right... well, sometimes," says Rami. "But it's their bike. I have to take some input from them."

When Rami approaches a new project bike, he's driven by the same passion that, as a child, pushed him to go to Kuwait City and buy parts to modify his BMX bicycle. The skills, though, he had to learn from working on his own motorcycle – a 1974 Honda CB500. "I specialise in Arabic typography, so it means a lot of time spent behind the computer," Rami explains. "This was a way to punctuate my time and work with my hands."

But when Rami first saw that Honda on the street, it looked like it had spent 10 years in the rain. Still, he knew that underneath the grime was a strong engine, and a good foundation for his café racer. He returned the next day with US\$700 cash in hand, and bought it. And he already had a vision for how he wanted it to look. Researching on blogs and forums for his graphic design work, he had become well-acquainted with established custom motorcycle creators, such as the Denmark-based outfit Wrenchmonkees and Japan's Brat Style. They were the first workshops becoming

Below and bottom: Rami's 1974 Honda CB500



Rami's first client was himself, he customised this 1974 Honda CB500 to his taste

famous for their custom builds. "It wasn't established yet, as a scene. But the attention to detail that people put into muscle cars, you see it happening now with vintage motorcycles," Rami says.

Before any of that, though, he had to make the Honda road-worthy, a grueling process in itself. The patio behind his apartment became his first workshop. He stripped the bike down, cleaning its innards and removing the effects of a decade of neglect. There was the occasional fiasco. One time, two bolts snapped just as he was about to finish reassembling the engine, forcing him to take it apart all over again to retrieve the broken studs from the crankcase. Then, 500km of riding later he heard a strange knock in the engine; he had to replace the crankshaft. "Your first bike is your education," says Rami, with a rueful smile. As part of that education, he chopped and welded parts on the frame, then had it sandblasted and re-coated. He learned how to use two mouse pads as a makeshift seat, then drive to Beirut's industrial quarter and manufacture a new one. Luck played a role too – he pored over colors for the bike, then encountered just the right shade of green while he was walking down the street, having passed a house undergoing renovation.

"The bike became real when I wheeled it out to the back and just looked at it from a distance," he says,

as he scrolls to an image on his laptop depicting a frame propped up against a log, with the two rims positioned on the ground. "The bike just materialised." After that, he rented a space to work, and the rest was a matter of word of mouth. One client came to him after seeing Rami's bike on the road. Another, dropping by to see his friend's custom motorcycle, ended up modifying his own. Now, Rami's calendar for conversions is full for at least the next year.

People come for the motorcycles, but they stay for the company. At any given moment, a steady cast of regulars drop in to talk bikes, crowding themselves around workbenches and tools and hold forth with an espresso or beverage in hand. "It's adult daycare," jokes one frequent customer of Rami's.

But Sundays? That's for the group ride. By now, most people have joined the pack, their motorcycles dominating the sidewalk in front of Rami's. They admire each other's bikes as they suit up, don their helmets, and head to a nearby gas station to fill up. Soon they're on the highway. Once traffic thins out, they open up the throttle. Beirut's skyline disappears in their wake as they head for the hills. Their engines' collective roar reverberates through the streets; the verdant mountain landscape their companion as they savour another day in a brotherhood of asphalt. It's as the sign says above Rami's door: "In Benzin Veritas."