

PHOTOS: WILLIAM SAWALICH

JOE BELL

by Patrick Brady

UNLIKE THE STANDARD

subjects of "Hot Tubes" who work with a torch, Joe Bell is known for what he does with a spray gun, an X-Acto knife and masking tape. You've seen his work countless times—regularly, in fact—in this column. But because he's a painter (instead of a builder) he has never received the attention his work so richly deserves.

He got his start back in the '70s customizing

bikes in his garage and hanging out at San Diego's best pro shop—Casa de Oro Cycles. It was there that Bell (JB, as most everyone refers to him) came into contact with Bill Holland, who trained him how to hose bikes with DuPont's Imron paint. Holland had decided to concentrate on building bikes and Bell began painting all of Holland's output. In the years since, Bell has developed a reputation for uncompromising quality and giving what he calls, "the wet look that lasts." He adds, "Bike painters break a lot of rules that car guys say you can't do," meaning they mix colors that are said not to work or thin the clear coat to the point that it almost runs. "It's really nice to be able to find something you really dig and makes you tick."

In 1986 Brian Baylis moved to San Diego and began teaching Bell new masking and sanding techniques. Baylis was already an accomplished painter,

Bell says, "that brought me up to the next level." Baylis wanted to stop painting for outside clients and began recommending Bell's work to his customers. Among them was Richard Sachs. "Richard was a little skeptical," Bell recalls.

The frame shown here is one of Sachs' creations (his first new frame for himself, in fact, in eight years) and features the Connecticut master's signature hand-cut lugs. Bell's relationship with Sachs is now more than 10 years old. It epitomizes Bell's more understated work. The red is so rich it appears not yet dry while the cream panels are just whiter than antique. What gives the frame its real appeal are the yellow accents filling the lug cutouts and the black, green, red and yellow accents inside the cutouts on the inside of the fork crown. Everywhere you look the details are perfect.

Given that each paint job is individual, it's impressive that Bell paints approximately 25 bikes a month. No less than a dozen different builders send him their work on a regular basis. Turnaround time is about three weeks. Does he work alone? No way. He has a staff of three, two preppers (Tony and Rob) and one sprayer (Ralph). "If I didn't have Ralph, it would be a lot harder; he gets it 90 percent there." Bell confesses that he has a hard time delegating responsibility: "It's hard to communicate to someone exactly as you want it."

Most of Bell's job nowadays is detailing, applying decals, masking cutouts, spraying fades and flames. "Guys have tried to get my look in one-third the time, but you just can't do it." He says 90 percent of all problems emerge when trying to rush the work. "When you're doing your own business, your reputation rides on quality work; you have much more incentive to do a good job and do it right." Ultimately, Bell puts his hands on every frame that moves through the paint booth. "If I'm not happy with it,

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then I have to make it right before it leaves. I'm the quality control guy."

Lest anyone think that painting a bike is like shaking up a fancy can of spray paint, we asked Bell to detail the steps involved for a one-color paint job. The 27 discrete steps include sand blasting, mixing the paint, priming the frame, baking it, inspecting it, putty work, sanding the putty, priming the frame again, sanding, applying color (three coats), applying decals, spraying clear, baking, more sanding, applying more clear (three reduced coats) and finally baking it. And you thought framebuilding was hard.

"I've had people ask me to do everything from boats to Indy cars, but it's not really my medium. Bicycles are what I specialize in and what I'm good at." Bell's more exotic work has run the gamut from jungle prints that recall the work of painter Henri Rousseau to flames that wouldn't look out of place on a Harley. He once finished a Hetchins frame in a pearl candy blue, with the lugs painted white and then pinstriped around them. One chainstay and the dropouts were chromed as well. Due to the complicated nature of that job, the customer spent \$2000 for finishing alone, but Bell says that case was extreme.

A Joe Bell paint job begins at \$150 for one color with no clear coats. His signature finish, which features a clear coat so thick there's no ripple over the decals, costs \$300.

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