

Swarm and destroy

It sounds like another rally fashioned after the likes of Sturgis or Laughlin, and in a way, it is. There are bikes, booze, a drag race, and bands cranking out tunes. There's often boxing, some raucous riding, and perhaps some fireworks. But there's something different about this new rally in Kalamazoo, Michigan, that occurs on Memorial Day weekend: pedals. And karaoke.

Say what?

In the topsy-turvy world of fashion, everything moves in cycles. What once was *de rigueur* becomes *passé*, and if it stays *passé* long enough, it just might become so laughably nerdy that it will make a comeback, and, through some strange law of fashion physics, become cool again. That, and the rising price of gasoline, must go some way toward explaining the recent renaissance of the pokey, pedal-assisted motorbikes known as mopeds. Now, in their own marginalized way, they're arguably more anti-establishment than the motorcycle culture, and the counterculture that's forming around them is starting to bear an uncanny resemblance to Harley culture.

In addition to the aforementioned informal rally which has gained steam in Kalamazoo, there's a national moped club called the Moped Army (their motto: "Swarm and Destroy"), which has 18 chapters

nationwide (bearing such names as Mosquito Fleet, Puddle Cutters, The Bombardment Society, and Hell's Bombshells).

There's also an emerging trend of customizing these rides. Stock, they go up to 50cc and only reach speeds up to about 30 mph, but a little wrenching can transform them into tricked-out rides with a little more pep. Since most states have fewer regulatory requirements for mopeds compared to motorcycles, customizing can be easier. In some places, a moped doesn't need to be insured or registered. "You're living off the grid," said Nate Eversole, a moped rider from Louisville, Kentucky, who rode 375 miles to the Kalamazoo rally on his moped, though he towed it the last few miles due to a breakdown.

If you think that one aspect of biker culture the puny little mopeds will never emulate is the long-distance road trip, think again. Graham French and Lee Levenberg, a couple of San Francisco moped riders, used the rally to screen the world premiere of their documentary film, "Moped to South America," which follows their five-month, 13,000-mile ride last year on a 1979 Puch Maxis moped from San Francisco to Argentina. (Check it out: www.mopedtosouthamerica.com).

"It's the closest thing to the '50s hot rod culture going on," says Zac Amendolia, a 24-year-old artist/waiter who came to Kalamazoo with the San Francisco Moped Army branch called Creatures of the Loin.

"Anyone can get on a Harley and look cool," said Josh Dahl, a 31-year-old teacher and moped rider from Boston. "On a moped you need to earn your cool." You sure do, Josh.

If bikers don't look out, they might find that these unlikely little rivals will draft right past them, and the moped will supercede the motorcycle as the coolest thing on two wheels. Or not.