



detroit RIDES!

Detroit may have been built around the automotive industry, but as the Motor City looks ahead on the road to recovery, its streets aren't filling with cars, but **motor-less, pedal-powered, two-wheeled** machines. From manufacturers and mechanics to Monday night Slow Roll, Detroit's becoming a bike town — and it's just barely gotten rid of its training wheels.



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THIS PAGE PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSH SCOTT



The Rapid Rise of Slow Roll

FIVE YEARS AGO, MONDAY NIGHTS IN DETROIT WERE JUST LIKE ANY OTHER. NOW, THEY'RE A CELEBRATION OF CYCLING, COMMUNITY, AND THE CITY.

BY JEFF WARANIAK // PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSH SCOTT



“SLOOOO ROLL! ... DEEEE-TROIT!”

Every Monday night between spring and fall, this is the chant echoed loud and proud in the streets of Detroit.

It's recited by everyone from black teens on lowriders and white hipsters on fixed gears to senior citizens on road bikes and suburban families who've come downtown for an evening cruise.

Outside of metro Detroit, the chant may not be the most familiar element of Slow Roll. Instead, it might be the yellow shirts of “squad,” Slow Roll's safety personnel, as seen in an Apple iPad commercial last year. Or maybe it's the river of riders flooding the streets of London or Chicago in a Slow Roll offshoot of their own. Or maybe it's the black dreadlocks of Slow Roll co-founder Jason Hall and the bushy beard of fellow co-founder Mike MacKool.

Whatever Slow Roll's trademark is, you've likely seen or heard or read about Michigan's largest weekly community bike ride before. In the past five years, Slow Roll has become the poster child not only of a growing bike community in modern Detroit but also the modern Detroit community at large.

And in the discussion of Detroit's future, where the terms “rebirth,” “renaissance,” and “recovery,” are beginning to lead, “Slow Roll” is never far behind. It's a phrase and a brand that, whether chanted or spoken, has become a source of city pride, an emblem of community, and if nothing else, an invitation to a good time.

bonding over bikes

The Slow Roll origin story is a short one, at least according to Hall. In 2010, he and MacKool met through a mutual friend, and despite a 10-year age difference, Hall, then 35 and MacKool, 25, hit it off right away. Over the next few months, the two Detroit residents bonded over two hobbies: video games and bikes.

“We were spending a ton of time playing *Call of Duty*,” Hall says. “At the same time, I was riding bikes with some friends of mine and Mike was just getting back into biking, too, and we really clicked on that. And that's when we came up with some concepts for a T-shirt company.”

The company was Bikes and Murder, and with his background in the marketing and entertainment industries, Hall knew that if their T-shirts, hoodies,

and stickers were going to sell, he and MacKool needed a creative way to get them to the people. For that, they would turn toward their bikes.

“Mike and I thought, ‘Why don't we start a bike ride?’” Hall says. “A ride where anybody can come...and that's it.”

And so it began. Slowly, at first, with only a dozen or so Slow Rollers showing up to ride in the fall of 2010. Hall admits that the first few outings mostly materialized as an excuse to get together with friends, cruise through the city, and have a glass of wine halfway through the trip. But when he and MacKool kicked things off again in spring 2011, things started to take off, leaving the T-shirt idea in the dust. Still, it was a while before Hall and MacKool realized Slow Roll's potential, and, on a community level, it took a different set of eyes to see what was brewing beneath the surface.

“We have a friend named Walt,” Hall says. “And he told me one day, ‘Do you know what you have here?... You bring people to Detroit. You show them a different way of thinking. You're bringing people together. Look around.’”

Until that moment, Hall says he hadn't truly looked around, and when he did, he saw a rapidly



MIKE MACKOOL (LEFT)
JASON HALL





growing number of riders young and old, black and white, experienced and new.

"That's when it all changed," Hall says. "That's when it became about the goal and the mission of bringing people to Detroit and seeing Detroit in a different light."

fast ride to mainstream

Slow Roll today is a far cry from two T-shirt entrepreneurs with a dozen riders in tow. In 2014, weekly rides drew an average of 2,000 riders with a peak of 4,000 packing the streets on cool summer nights. Roads are now blocked off by squad to ensure safe passage, and there are even official sponsors like Shinola and New Belgium Brewing Company.

For Hall and MacKool there have been personal changes, too. Between Slow Roll and North American Bicycle Week—events organized by Detroit Bike City, Hall and MacKool's organization dedicated to promoting cycling in Detroit — bikes have become a central part of their work lives.

MacKool says the pair has always shared organizational duties at Detroit Bike City, whether that's making fliers or planning routes for the Slow Rolls, but as with any partnership they each play to their strengths.

"I have always been heavy in making routes, creating the code of conduct, doing the announcements, crowd control, [and] leading the ride," MacKool says.

And while MacKool typically leads the Slow Roll pack in Detroit, Hall leads the charge on the road, speaking at schools and conferences like TEDx where he touts the health, environmental, and community benefits of cycling. Last year, he also toured as a spokesman for Apple.

Ah yes, Apple. The company has been kind to Slow Roll following its 2014 iPad commercial. The 30- and 60-second ads, which first aired last August, feature Hall and his ability to coordinate Slow Roll with the help of his trusty iPad and organizational apps. The publicity led to news stories, national headlines, and an appearance on Esquire Television.

If Slow Roll didn't already have the attention of the Detroit community before, it did post-Apple commercial. The level of interest and the number of riders have both increased since the commercial aired, and although the growth initially gave Hall cause for concern, he says his expansion worries will be less for the 2015 season, since the city has stepped in to help. For the first time, city police will be riding as part of the Slow Roll pack, helping to block off streets and ensure safety. Hall understands that this might cause some friction among longtime Slow Rollers, but he considers it a necessary adjustment.

"People have to understand that to keep them safe and keep this thing going, certain changes are going to come," Hall says. "We're not businessmen. We're not bike race organizers. We started some-

thing new that the city's never seen and so as long as we can all work together to understand that, that's cool."

But aside from the inevitable changes that come with the kind of growth Slow Roll has seen, the ride has stayed true to its mission of community building and self-expression.

breaking things down

Slow Roll isn't like a lot of other group bike rides. It's not about going fast; it's not about winning. It's about "seeing a city for what it is," as MacKool explains it, whether that's cruising through a struggling neighborhood or meeting up at a downtown hot spot.

No matter the route, Slow Roll offers "a great opportunity for dialogue," according to Hall, and whatever social divides may exist within the city's borders or beyond, part of Slow Roll's mission is to break them down.

"We've created these barriers like Eight Mile and the suburbs, but our people have always wanted to see what's on the other side," Hall says. "When we started Slow Roll, that's where it came from. It came from everybody finally being able to see what's on the other side."

Slow Roll doesn't like barriers — social, physical, or otherwise (though traffic barriers are admittedly a plus). The ride has inspired numerous people to hop on a bike who may not have otherwise, and it's even led some to set down roots in the city.



“The first time someone told us that they moved to Detroit because of Slow Roll, I was almost shocked,” MacKool says. “But now it’s been a common occurrence.”

Slow Roll has also helped sustain an entire subculture of custom bikes, particularly among Detroit bicycle clubs like East Side Riders, Grown Men on Bikes (GMOB), and Grown Ladies on Wheels (GLOW) — three groups that are helping to break down barriers on their own.

“When you think about biking, there’s a picture that comes to mind, and that picture’s never them,” Hall says. “They’re a part of Detroit that people need to see.”

What you see in Detroit’s bike clubs are men and women who are just as crazy about bikes as any other cycling subculture. You see denim jackets with official club patches. You see LEDs, boom boxes, radios, and barbecue grills attached to chrome and neon frames.

East Side Riders founder KingWayne Neeley says ESR’s bikes weren’t always so flashy, and when the group first formed, they salvaged what they could to rebuild and decorate, using everything from discarded couches to spray paint. Now, Neeley says, when they roll through a neighborhood, “people pretty much clap,” and the ability to showcase their original work is one of the reasons the club initially embraced Slow Roll.

“You don’t want to be speed riding,” Neeley says. “You want somebody to look at you. You put

all your time and work in your bike, and you want somebody to see it.”

As much as clubs like ESR enjoy Slow Roll for the chance to be seen, Hall says the friendship is mutual. He and MacKool originally invited Detroit’s bike clubs to bring their flash, music, and energy to the ride, but the clubs brought even more.

“They keep us safe,” Hall says. “They’re our street cred. That’s what I told them in the old days when we used to take 100 white people through the ‘hood.”

down the road

As Detroit looks forward, Slow Roll does, too. Hall and MacKool plan to take the ride, or at least a version of it, everywhere from Grand Rapids to Atlanta. Closer to home, Hall and MacKool also plan to expand Slow Roll’s reach outside of downtown into neighborhoods like Brightmoor and Southwest Detroit.

And although Slow Roll’s future is always in flux, Hall says he’ll continue to do everything in his power to ensure that as both the ride and the city that gave it life continue to grow and change, the driving force behind Slow Roll will be those who ride.

“We always felt like we were just providing a vehicle,” Hall says. “And Detroit was really who was adding the parts to the machine.” h

Slow Rolls for 2015 were scheduled to start in late March. For more information, visit slowroll.bike.



RULES OF THE ROAD: A GUIDE TO SLOW ROLL

- ▶ **SQUAD IS KING.** Squad is the group of Slow Rollers in yellow shirts keeping the ride safe and fun for all. Follow their lead.
- ▶ **BE READY TO RIDE.** Each ride is 10-12 miles and lasts about 1.5 hours.
- ▶ **SHOUTS OF JOY ARE ENCOURAGED.** Slow ROOOLL! Dee-TROIT!
- ▶ **TRICK OUT YOUR RIDE.** Streamers? Horns? That’s old school. Think LEDs, high-rise bars, cup holders, boomboxes... Just remember to play music respectfully.
- ▶ **DON’T BE A SHOWOFF.** Popping wheelies and hopping curbs are good fun, but it ain’t called Slow Roll for nothin’! Slow = safe.
- ▶ **CHECK YOUR BIKE.** Don’t let Slow Roll be your first ride of the year. Make sure your bike is functional and comfortable *before* you ride.
- ▶ **MAKE FRIENDS.** Slow Roll brings people together, and good things happen when you talk to the people around you.
- ▶ **COMMUNICATE.** Use hand signals for turns and stops. Is there a car behind you? Shout “Car back!”
- ▶ **SMILE AND WAVE.** It might not be a parade, but bystanders love it.
- ▶ **SAFETY COMES FIRST.** Get a helmet. Get a tool kit. You won’t regret it.





A Pedaling Pack of Wolves

WITHOUT THE 'SQUAD,' SLOW ROLL WOULDN'T EXIST

BY CASEY NESTEROWICH // PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSH SCOTT



AT THE CORE OF SLOW ROLL

you'll find a pack of wild bike enthusiasts known as "squad." These are the people who make the ride happen week after week, safely leading thousands of riders on the 10-12 mile journey through the city.

Their canary yellow T-shirts have become somewhat of a trademark for the Slow Roll brand after an Apple commercial featured squad members and Slow Roll co-founder Jason Hall planning a Monday night route with the help of an iPad.

"Everybody wanted to get on squad, especially after the Apple commercial. Everyone wanted a yellow shirt," Hall says.

But you have to earn that shirt. It's not handed out to just anyone; they aren't for sale. They're for select Slow Rollers who have proven themselves.

"The core group of squad started out as my friends ... the people that really bought into it, understood what we were doing, and just wanted this ride to go on and last forever," Hall says.

Today, there are six squad captains and dozens of volunteers at each weekly ride. They're the Slow Roll masters who protect the pack and have watched the ride grow from dozens to thousands of people each week.

With echoes of "stay riiiiight" or "car back" throughout the ride, squad does an excellent job at keeping everyone alert by enforcing the Slow Roll Code of Conduct. Communication is key, and squad is geared up with walkie-talkie applications on their phones to keep in constant contact with each other. They're also prepped with tools to take care of any flat tires or other issues that might occur along the way.

"I'm usually in charge of communication, so I make sure every intersection has a squad member there...while all the sweepers are trying their best

to keep their riders to the right side of the road and keep a lane open for traffic," says squad captain Maria Nash.

In her fourth season of Slow Roll, Nash's duties go beyond helping fellow bikers. She also stands in the road to direct car traffic from interrupting the flow of the ride.

"We have a pamphlet we hand out to drivers stating who we are, what we do — and the Slow Roll Code of Conduct is on the back," Nash says.

Nash is also on a squad with her fiancé, who she met at Slow Roll. And every squad member will proudly tell you that squad is more than just a team of biker friends.

"They become family, man. I've never cried more than I've cried in the last six months hanging out with these fools," Hall says. "It's always somebody's birthday, or someone's getting married ... our first squad baby [is] coming [in April]."

Starting this season, the squad won't have to secure the streets alone. Hall has been working with Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan and city officials to create an even better Slow Roll experience. "The police will be on the rides this year," Hall says.

Squad will still play a big role in corralling the Slow Roll crew, but the city is helping plan new routes and assisting in traffic control.

"They used to say doing business in Detroit was difficult and all this," Hall says. "But I've worked with the greatest group of people that have been so supportive — from the mayor, to special projects, to the police tactical — everybody's excited about the energy that Slow Roll brings to Detroit."

The bottom line is that Slow Roll really does unite all walks of life; it's a unique experience that is helping build a better Detroit. Squad is there to ensure this special ride lives on forever. h

BOOZE CRUISE

// BY JEFF WARANIAK



WHERE THERE ARE BIKES, THERE IS BEER.

In recent years, the bicycle industry and the craft beer industry have enjoyed surges, fueled by a legion of loyal customers bent on tasting the latest batch of IPAs and venturing to new breweries on fixed gears and cruisers.

But for a reason *why* the two industries have prospered, it's best to turn to those cashing in on the happy marriage between cycling and suds.

Stephen Johnson is the owner of Motor City Brew Tours (MCBT), a bus and walking tour company. He established MCBT in 2009 and two years later, began replacing the bus with bikes and the brewery stops with historical sites associated with Prohibition and brewing history. He dubbed the offshoot Motor City Bike and Brew Tours, and it was an immediate hit — all 20 of the 20-person bike tours sold out in their first year.

Johnson's theory as to why the bike and brew communities have seen such swells in popularity can be attributed to their similarities in culture.

"Bike shops aren't necessarily trying to compete against each other," Johnson says. "At this point, most breweries aren't real competitive with each other, either. They're more of a community within, and so is the biking community."

There's also the influence of the local food movement and a mutual respect for the outdoors.

"People have kind of gotten back to their roots of enjoying their surroundings," Johnson says.

"That gets more people out on bikes, more people going to a local brewery and enjoying something that was made there."

Colorado's New Belgium Brewing Co. has embraced the outdoorsy ethos, particularly biking. The company's phrase; "Born on a bike seat," refers to co-founder Jeff Lebesch's bike trip through Belgium that led to the creation of Fat Tire Amber Ale and other bike-inspired beers (such as Shift Pale Lager and Slow Ride Session IPA).

So it's little surprise that the craft brewery became an official sponsor of Slow Roll last year.

Asher Attick, New Belgium's Michigan "field brander," says the decision was an easy one, particularly since both brands share a mission to showcase the health, community, and environmental benefits of biking.

With the Detroit Greenways Coalition installing more bike lanes in 2015, sustainability seems to be part of the city's immediate future. And with new breweries like Corktown's Batch Brewing Co. setting up shop, it seems there will be beer, too.

"The city is ripe for resurgence and a renaissance," Attick says. "And craft beer, cycling, and groups like Slow Roll are what are going to lead that charge." h

For more about Motor City Bike and Brew Tours visit motorcitybrewtours.com.



ZAK PASHAK

Gearing Up

DETROIT BIKES OWNER WANTS TO GET AMERICAN-MADE BIKE MANUFACTURING BACK ON A ROLL

BY JEFF WARANIAK // PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN MACONCHIE



THERE ONCE WAS A TIME WHEN America built bikes.

In the '60s, Schwinn was cranking out Sting-Rays in Chicago. In the '70s, Trek models rolled off the line in Wisconsin. And up through the '80s, most Huffy products were made in Ohio.

But those days were relinquished to a global economy and the cost-effectiveness of China and Taiwan. Of the 16 million bikes sold in the U.S. in 2013, only 56,000 were manufactured domestically.

But if Detroit Bikes founder and president Zak Pashak has anything to say about it, the days of American-made bikes aren't over yet.

In 2012, Pashak launched Detroit Bikes, a manufacturer on the city's west side that builds frames, wheels, racks, and chain guards for its two models. Other parts come from American producers and the bikes are assembled in a 50,000-square-foot space that Pashak hopes will eventually churn out the largest number of bikes in the country.

"We have the setup to produce 50,000 bikes a year," Pashak says. "But our challenge now is to have sales grow in concert with [our] capacity."

Last year, Detroit Bikes sold 1,000 bikes, but gained recognition near and far. This year, the company is slated to build more than 2,000 bikes for a national brewery. And locally, they've popped on the radar of bike enthusiasts, including its very first customer, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan.

"I wanted to give him a promo bike," Pashak says. "But he was very adamant that he was the first person to buy a bike from Detroit Bikes."

Pashak also expects Detroit Bikes to grow with the launch of its first retail space in April. Along with the shop, Pashak plans to expand his marketing campaign, a task he's come to know well over the course of his career.

Before coming to Detroit in 2010, Pashak, a native of Calgary, Alberta, had enjoyed success in the music industry, both as a DJ and promoter, earning a spot on *Alberta Venture's* list of 50 Most Influential People. But after chasing an interest in politics and an unsuccessful run for city council in Calgary, he felt it was time for a "bit of a change."

"I'd always had this kind of fascination [with Detroit]," Pashak says. "When I traveled, there'd always be neighborhoods that people say you shouldn't go to, and I would always find that those ended up being the neighborhoods that I had the best conversations in...Detroit was just kind of an extension of that."

Whether Pashak's combination of Detroit pride and Canadian business acumen can revive the American-made bike is a story that time will tell, but Pashak feels the timing now is right, the interest is high, and Detroit Bikes is where it needs to be.

"I didn't come here to make bikes because I thought that this was a great cycling community," Pashak says. "I came here because I thought this was a great manufacturing community, and it's been a very pleasant coincidence that this really interesting cycling culture is developing in the city. It's been a good surprise." h

For more information visit detroitbikes.com.







HEATHER NUGEN

Wrenching for a Ride

DETROIT NONPROFIT BACK ALLEY BIKES OFFERS OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH (AND ADULTS) TO BUILD, REPAIR, AND RIDE BIKES ... AND HAVE FUN IN THE PROCESS

BY JEFF WARANIAK // PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN MACONCHIE



WHEN OMARI NORMAN WAS 15 years old, he needed a new bike. His old one was mangled after a car accident, and his bike was his ride to school.

His mother took him to Back Alley Bikes — the nonprofit bicycle shop and community center in Detroit's Cass Corridor. She'd heard of the organization's Youth Earn-A-Bike program where, over four weeks, kids ages 10-17 could get a used bike for free. All they had to do was learn to build it themselves (with a little help from an instructor).

Four weeks later, Norman had his new bike — one he'd stripped and put together himself — and with it came a new set of mechanical skills, a new network of fellow riders, and a new hobby.

"It really opened my eyes to biking culture," Norman says. "I would use my bike to get to school, but I didn't go on rides or go to conventions or stuff like that."

In the two years since his first visit to Back Alley Bikes (BAB), bikes have evolved into a steady hobby for Norman. He's become a regular at Slow Roll, a volunteer at Tour de Troit, and twice he landed a spot in BAB's Mechanics-in-

Training program — a paid summer internship for high schoolers in which students learn in-depth mechanics, become peer-to-peer instructors, and eventually repair bikes in BAB's retail space, the Hub of Detroit.

"It was my first job, so that was cool," Norman says. "But it also taught me how to be a teacher of sorts. I didn't really think I was a teacher type of person before I started working there. But when I did, I really got in tune with the kids."

In addition to Mechanics-in-Training and Youth Earn-A-Bike, BAB offers adult mechanics classes, volunteer programs, and a youth riding club — all to support its mission to promote cycling education, sustainable practices, and community access.

Heather Nugen, executive director at Back Alley Bikes, has overseen the shop's programs for three years. And since 2011, she says youth participation has grown steadily. At least 300 kids came in for services last year — and that's not including a lot of return customers.

"We've seen a real big uptick in how many kids come back after their initial Earn-A-Bike session," Nugen says. "They come back to volunteer, they

come back to repair their bikes, they come back to help their friends, neighbors, and other kids."

The increase in participation is also a plus for the youth's parents.

"In urban environments, it can be such a pain for parents to drive [kids] to events or get them different places," Nugen says. "When you put a kid on a bike, they can take responsibility for their own transportation, and in Detroit specifically, the bus system is really unreliable. Because of that, parents are pretty hesitant to let their kids take the bus, since you don't know how long your kid is going to be at the bus stop waiting."

Independence has always been part of the bike's lure for any kid old enough to ride one. And while the staff at Back Alley Bikes knows this as well as anyone, they also know that programs like Youth Earn-A-Bike offer something extra for anyone willing to get her hands dirty.

"Every kid needs a bike," Nugen says. "And there's nothing cooler than riding a bike you built yourself. There's just nothing cooler." h

For more information on Back Alley Bikes visit thehubofdetroit.org/back-alley-bikes.

