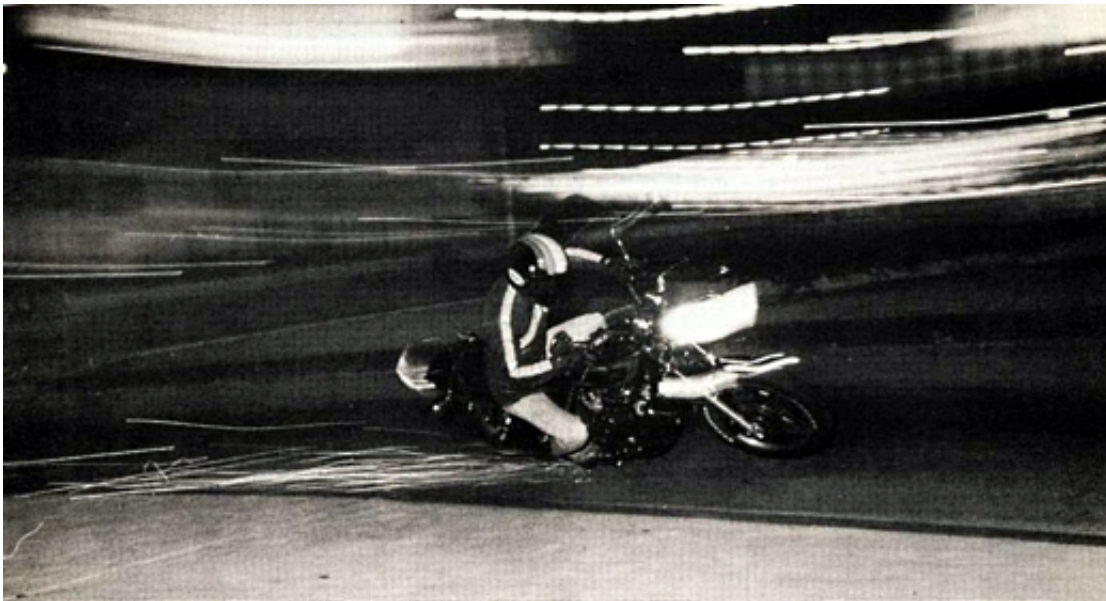


HONDA CB650SC NIGHTHAWK

This Bird Comes Down to Earth With Styling You Can Ride.

A road test report from Motorcyclist, February 1982



Sooner or later, it had to happen. Honda's 650 Nighthawk has finally provided the rakish look of a Saturday-night boulevard-troller without significantly compromising the function of the motorcycle. Styling and function have always been at odds, and not just in the relatively new breed of soft-core choppers. The speedy look of an all-out cafe racer was accompanied by the butt-numbing agony of thinly padded saddles and the heavy low-speed steering and overloaded shoulders that go with low, narrow handlebars. By sacrificing a little of the racetrack flash, the manufacturers have recently given us still sporting but much more practical machines like Suzuki's original GS1000S, Yamaha's 550 Seca, and Kawasaki's GPz models.

The semi-chopped, semi-tough styling that stormed into motorcycling a few years ago created the same sorts of problems. Stepped seats have traditionally been uncomfortable. Pullback bars are awkward and become uncomfortable out on the highway. And those little peanut tanks don't hold much peanut oil. However, even though magazine testers were generally critical of those points of function, motorcyclists bought the machines in record numbers. Encouraged, the manufacturers soon began fine-tuning the formula. Some of them worked on refining the original concept. Suzuki, for example, introduced an intermediate series of T-models with much more conservative styling and a greater emphasis on functional considerations.

Honda's Custom models also tended to be conservative and traditional, but even they suffered in functional comparisons to their sporting or touring brethren. Comfort was the sorest spot (so to speak). Nonetheless, they consistently outsold comparable F-models (Super Sports) by a substantial margin. With the Nighthawk series, their latest entry into the Styling for Dollars contest, Honda has produced a slightly different formula. Judging by the 650 we tested, it's a formula that can please everyone.

Although its fat 16-inch rear tire, four short megaphones, stubby mirrors, stepped seat, and chopped fender make it clear the Nighthawk takes some of its cues from the established factory-chopper concept, other influences are also obvious, including a strong suggestion of the Triumph flattracker look. This is

accomplished by lengthening the bike and incorporating what Honda calls "flow-through" styling, which unifies the lines of the tank, side panels, and tail section. On each side, a single chrome stripe travels from the tank to the tail section without interruption.

Of course, the photos tell you how it looks. How does it work? Surprisingly well. The seat is a good example. Normally, we lower ourselves onto stepped seats and groan. Even if we don't groan right away, we're groaning and squirming after 30 miles or so. But, to a man, every staffer who plopped down on the 650 Nighthawk said something like, "That's not bad." We were still making the same claim when, after 150 nonstop miles, we paused for gas. The seat works because it's fairly long, thanks to the stretched wheelbase. Even though there is a step, it's relatively far back, so the rider can slide around and change his position without being prodded by the corner of the step. The saddle is wide enough for comfort, and the padding is quite adequate, although it is not remarkable.

Handlebars have been another traditional complaint on boulevard cruisers, but Honda has found a way to please almost everyone: they made the Night-hawk's bars adjustable. Each handlebar slides into a clamp bolted to the bottom of the top fork clamp. Loosening each handlebar clamp (four alien bolts) allows you to slide the bar up and down through a 1.5-inch range and pivot it through approximately 60 degrees. Each bar can be pulled back to an angle of about 45 degrees or rotated forward beyond a point that anybody would find comfortable. Adjustment takes about two minutes (if you don't count the four minutes it takes you to jam the tool kit back into its tiny compartment and stretch the rubber retaining strap around it). After some experimenting, we placed the bars at their lowest setting and rotated them back just enough to meet our hands at a comfortable angle (which varied slightly with the rider). If we'd been going for chopper styling, we could have raised them all the way and pulled them back to their stops.

With the bars set for comfortable control, the CB650SC demonstrates there's some sporting blood inside that chromed exterior. Fast cornering revealed a bike that was steady, precise, and still reasonably nimble. Stretching the wheelbase an inch and a half has made the bike steadier during cornering; the Nighthawk is fun to ride on twisty roads, despite less-than-average cornering clearance. The tubeless Dunlop Qualifier tires won't win any road-races, but they stick well enough to make the 650SC feel secure when you're dragging the folding pegs. The Nighthawk's excellent brakes also create confidence. Dual front discs are stopped by a pair of Honda's twin-piston calipers, which give lots of power, fade-resistance, and control. Although the rod-operated drum rear brake is an entirely different type, it offers the same control and abundant power as the front and has the added advantage of working consistently in the wet.

Although the Nighthawk's styling hasn't created any serious compromises, the bike isn't flawless. It has its share of problems, most of which are traditionally associated with the Honda 650 engine and drive train. To start with, the engine is fairly peaky and won't pull with any real authority below approximately 4000 rpm. Even when it has popped into its powerband, the 627cc Honda four doesn't make as much power as the 654cc four in the Maxim/Seca 650s or the 673cc four in Suzuki's GS650E/G. Taller final gearing (38/17 instead of the 39/16 ratio used on last year's CB650C) hasn't made it a quicker sprinter either. Although the Honda's smooth throttle response is an asset, the carburetion is very lean, which may be partially responsible for its low-rpm reluctance. The lean mixture also causes the bike to surge at steady highway speeds, especially when the air is cool and damp. It would probably work quite well at higher altitudes, and, of course, the lean mixture also provides good fuel mileage. We averaged 50.4 mpg overall and about 54 on the highway. During touring use, we normally got 140 miles before it demanded a switch

to reserve.

The clutch operates lightly, although there's a slight but unavoidable lurch partway through its engagement span. The five-speed gearbox also has glitches. We missed a larger-than average number of shifts, although with a little familiarity it was possible to tell when it hadn't engaged a gear properly, thus avoiding any 13,000-rpm surprises. The mechanism worked without excessive pressure, and neutral was easy to locate. Honda made some changes in the material, pitch, and dog designs of the gears this year. The drive train was fairly free of lash and, except for a noisy chain, quiet. The engine is not rubber mounted, and we noted some vibration over a narrow range. The tingling only reaches annoying proportions in the footpegs, in a 400-rpm-wide band around 5000 rpm. That little bit of vibration seems to be the only comfort complaint. The suspension — air assisted up front and standard unadjustable VHD dampers in the rear — isn't outstanding by 1982 standards, but it certainly isn't bad. Our only criticism is that the rear shocks frequently bottomed with a passenger. The footpegs are located at a position which, with the roomy seat and adjustable bars, provides a happy medium for riders of various dimensions.

Maintenance is relatively simple. The single-overhead-camshaft engine is easy to maintain. You don't have to acquire shims to adjust the valves, and the electronic ignition is fiddle-free. You also get useful items like a bright QH headlamp, a registration pouch, and a helmet lock. There are no gimmicks or gadgets on the instrument panel or elsewhere. It is basically a very straightforward motorcycle. *Actually, "straightforward" is a good way to describe the CB650 Nighthawk. What you see is pretty much what you get. The seat is as comfortable as it looks. The bike is as unified as its styling suggests. It looks like a high-ticket item, and it costs \$300 more than the standard CB650. It also delivers more—and not just in looks. However, it also shares the standard 650's engine and gearbox weaknesses, which ultimately place it behind the Suzuki and Yamaha 650 on the performance scale. Nonetheless, the 650 Nighthawk represents a milestone in motorcycling; it offers styling that seems to follow contemporary tastes without interfering with the way the bike works.*

OFF THE RECORD

Ever since the preppy choppers arrived on the scene, we've been between a rock and a hard place. We've faithfully reported they are less comfortable, slightly less manageable, and generally less practical than their more conventional counterparts; our attitudes have been pretty standoffish. The flak starts arriving about the same time the magazine reaches the stands. Various departments and agencies associated with the manufacturer in question barrage us with phone calls and letters stating that we haven't got a clue, that we are certainly incompetent, that our understanding of the marketplace and of motorcyclists' requirements is less than zilch, and that we should go back to doing something for which we're qualified — like drooling in our soup. A certain segment of our readership concurs, claiming our preference for sporting bikes and well-done tourers is elitist snobbism. After all, they harmonize, don't we know that buck-horn-barred, slim-tanked, step-saddled boulevard-trollers outsell comparable standard models by 87.6 to 1? Doesn't that indicate people want all those things we complain about so religiously?

We don't think so. We don't think anyone wants uncomfortable seats, bars that interfere with control, limited range, reduced fender protection, or other inconveniences that go with this kind of styling. They may like the styling enough to suffer through some of the other problems, but everyone likes to be comfortable. We don't believe it's our job to judge styling. Anybody qualified to buy a motorcycle is qualified to evaluate the styling. But he won't get to ride the bike and find out how it works. That's the

service we're supposed to provide. Our impressions of the motorcycle's function and his impressions of the appearance and features will form the sum of his opinion about the bike. I thought we were in for another round of phone calls and letters when we decided to test the 650 Nighthawk. I was surprised and pleased to learn the Nighthawk works as well as any CB650 can be expected to, yet is still styled with what seems to be mass appeal. It's too bad the engine and gearbox aren't any better; otherwise, you might even get me to buy one. Nonetheless, I really like the machine. Without all those phone calls and letters to deal with, I can probably get a few extra days of riding in next month.

— Art Friedman

I've never been a fan of styling for the sake of styling, so the Low Slingers and Customs and Maxims and LTDs that sell so well have always left me a bit cold. They cost more than the nearly extinct standard models of the same displacement classes — and offer what are to me overdone styling, torture-rack handlebars, and a seating position that seems to want to turn me into the hunchback of Notre Dame.

When I got my first look at the Nighthawk series, though, I knew Honda was on to something. The Nighthawks are low, slim, and flashy enough for the Burger Bar set, and at the same time are set up to run through the twisties with the best of the all-out sport bikes. I think there are a lot of buyers out there who share my conviction that a 450cc Sportster replica with a "made in Japan" sticker on it is just a bit beyond the bounds of good taste; and I think they're going to scoop up Nighthawks like they were lead-lined undies on Three Mile Island.

—Dexter Ford