

# Ready... Set... Action!

## Filming A Motorcycle Movie Stunt

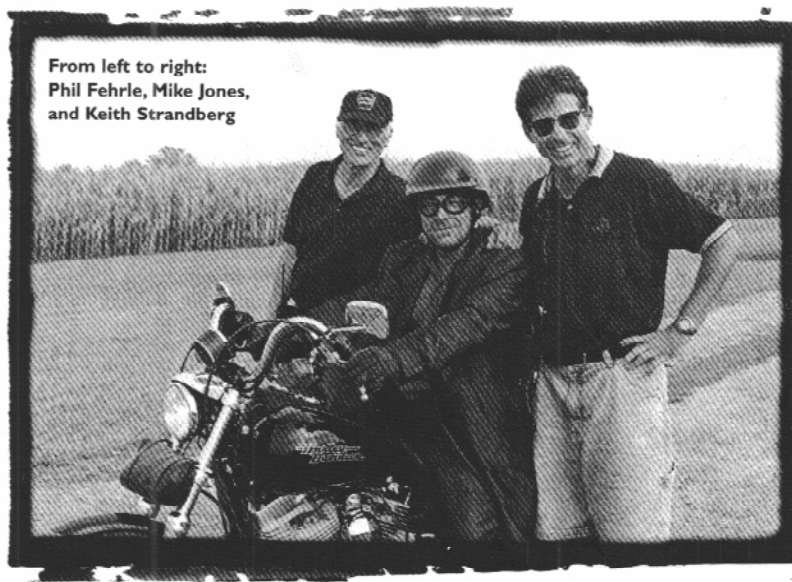
By Keith W. Strandberg

I was recently hired as the Unit Production Manager for the movie "Thomas and the Magic Railroad." Scheduled to release in July, this high-profile feature film was directed by Britt Allcroft and stars Peter Fonda, Alec Baldwin, Russell Means, and Mara Wilson. As UPM, I called all the local shots, while the producer Phil Fehrle and the company made the major decisions for the picture. After shooting on Britain's Isle of Man for six weeks, the production moved to Pennsylvania for three days of train filming.

It wasn't until after the location scout and about two weeks before we began shooting that I heard about the motorcycle stunt. "Motorcycle stunt?" I asked, my eyebrows shooting up. It was really more like a gag than a stunt, a simple matter of having a motorcycle cross in front of a speeding locomotive. But when you put a Harley in front of a large locomotive that can take up to half a mile or more to stop, nothing is simple.

First, I had to find a qualified motorcycle stunt rider. I called my good friend Mike Jones to see if he was available. Mike had slid a Triumph Speed Triple under a speeding tractor-trailer for my movie "Bloodmoon." (He wound up being featured on "Hollywood's Greatest Stunts" for it.) He was available to work with me his time, too, and my search for a stunt rider was complete.

The real challenge, however, was finding a black '97 Harley Super Glide to match the one that had already been filmed on the Isle of Man. Now, you might think that finding such a motorcycle wouldn't be too hard, and you'd be right — except for one thing. The owner of the



From left to right:  
Phil Fehrle, Mike Jones,  
and Keith Strandberg

motorcycle had to be willing to let us cut in front of a speeding locomotive with it. That reduced the prospective owners considerably. Sure, we had \$3 million worth of liability insurance, but no one was jumping at the chance to sacrifice his or her pride and joy.

### Finding the Motorcycle

A good producer never puts all his eggs in one basket, so when I started looking for a Super Glide, I asked just about everyone I knew. I asked

## Clear the Tracks!

Why didn't we have a shot of the train's engineer Billy Twofeathers putting on the brakes when he saw the motorcycle? Well, because that's not what an engineer would do.

"Engineers are trained to blow the whistle if they see something in their path," explained Linn Moedinger, vice president of operations for the Strasburg Railroad. "If you slam on the brakes, you'll never stop in time anyway. So it's best to blow the whistle and hope whatever is there gets out of the way."

Mike Jones if he had a Harley or had access to one. He owns a red Suzuki Intruder that looks relatively similar to a Harley. My backup plan was to cover the tank, frame, and fenders with black electrical tape and hope no one could spot the difference. I also called all the local dealers in central Pennsylvania, telling them what I was looking for. They started looking.

First, I found a black Harley Sportster for rent from Bill Ford at Mountain Thunder Motorcycle Tours of West Virginia. I booked it as another backup. Sure, it wasn't the exact motorcycle, but it was similar enough for our purposes. Mike Jones was doubling for an actor who had worked on the Isle of Man. Because we couldn't shoot tight enough in so that you could see it wasn't the real actor, I figured we probably would be far enough away to forgive any differences between the Super Glide and the Sportster. I still kept looking though.

Only a few days before the shoot, my transportation coordinator Glenn Hopple found a black '98 Super Glide. The owner Jim Winebrenner was willing to let us do the stunt, provided that we paid him up front and had a certificate of insurance to prove that we could replace the bike if we damaged it. I told Glenn to book the bike and have it delivered the day before we shot the stunt. As soon as the motorcycle was in our custody (and the owner had left the set and couldn't take his bike back), I canceled the rental arrangements in West Virginia.

## The Shoot

The day of the motorcycle stunt dawned fine and clear. The sun was up, the wind was calm, and Mike Jones had come in from Ohio. I had asked him to arrive the day before, to make sure there wouldn't be any problems with traffic or arrangements. We were planning to shoot the stunt in the afternoon. I had Mike report to the set in the morning so I could take him to the site and explain what was going to happen.

Before I go any further, let me make clear that this stunt was performed by a professional stunt rider on a closed road with every safety precaution taken. Do not try to recreate this stunt on a train track near you. Too many

things can go wrong, and trains cannot stop on a dime.

The stunt was to take place on a dirt road that runs alongside the tracks of the Strasburg Railroad, North America's oldest continuously operating railroad. It was chosen for the movie filming due to its pristinely preserved steam locomotives and coaches and the backdrop of the beautiful Amish farmland of Lancaster County.

The dirt road parallels the tracks, then curves sharply, cuts across the tracks, and continues on

through a field. This was where we wanted Mike to have a close encounter with the Strasburg Railroad's Locomotive #475.

One of the main problems with our plan was that the road surface was a combination of loose dust, stones, and hard-packed dirt — not exactly the Harley's home turf. If Mike got too much speed going and the back tire broke into a slide, he could wind up across the tracks. And there was no way the locomotive could stop in time.

Mike gets paid to do dangerous things, but he's no fool. It's his business to know what he can and can't do. He looked at the dirt road, the curve, and the train track, and said, "Okay, shouldn't be a problem."

I, on the other hand, didn't feel quite so comfortable. I talked with the producer to see if there was another way to get the motorcycle and the train in the same shot, without putting Mike at so much risk.

Well, it turns out that the company never intended for the motorcycle and rider to ever be in danger. Through a series of well-orchestrated shots, judicious cuts, and some movie magic, we were able to get exactly what we wanted. And the train and the motorcycle were never closer than 50 feet from each other, although it appears to be a near miss.

## How Did We Do It?

First, we shot the train speeding across the tracks. Then, without moving the camera, we shot Mike on the motorcycle, careening around the corner. Then, in the editing suite, we took the half of the frame with



the train in it and the half of the frame with the motorcycle in it, and married them together. In the final film, it looks like the motorcycle just barely missed getting hit by the train. Cool, huh?

## The Shots

The day was set up like this:

- Shots of Mike Jones on the Super Glide racing down the dirt road, no turn.
- Shots of Mike Jones powering across the tracks, no turn.
- Shots of Mike Jones stopped on the other side of the track, no turn involved.
- Shots of Russell Means as Billy Two Feathers in the cab of the train, reacting to seeing the motorcycle.
- Shots of the train barreling across the tracks at several different speeds — all very impressive and dangerous looking.
- Finally, we had to shoot the turn, and it was pretty dicey. The dust and rocks made the turn slippery. Mike felt the back wheel break loose a couple of times.

Later, he told me, "I never lost control, but I could feel the back wheel moving. I was glad there was no train coming, because it took some of the pressure off. I had enough pressure knowing that the producers would kill me if I dropped the Harley." He also had to watch out for all the people and incredibly expensive camera equipment alongside the road. One slip up, and both might be seriously damaged.

The good news is that Mike did a great job, we got the shot, and the movie got its stunt. When "Thomas and the Magic Railroad" comes out this summer, check it out. You'll already know how they did that amazing motorcycle stunt.

As for Mr. Winebrenner, he got his Harley back none the worse for wear. And the Super Glide is now a movie star. I wonder if it will come out of its star trailer. **MT&C**



Keith W. Strandberg is a freelance writer and award-winning writer/producer of feature films. Living in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, he is an avid motorcyclist and rides a '97 Suzuki Bandit 1200S. He is currently working on a screenplay for a motorcycle movie that's bound to become a classic.

# Riding Solo

By Thomas Jamrog

**R**iding along today on my white BMW R1100GS, it dawned on me that the majority of my two-wheel traveling these days involves meeting up with friends at the end of the riding day. More and more, however, I find myself riding to and from such get-togethers on my own.

My first long tour of any length was a five-hour ride to Massachusetts for a Vintage BMW Motorcycle Owners of America campout. At the time, I was riding my '64 BMW R60/2, which I had bought through an ad that 72-year-old Perley Cunningham had run in the *Bangor Daily News*. It was the one time that I didn't dicker. For ten \$100 bills, I got the big, black bike with a police windshield and enduro saddlebags. It had 50,000 miles on it, but it started right up with just two kicks. Eventually, I rode all over the north country on that motorcycle.

One of the reasons I bought that BMW was that a co-worker named Brad Lawson owned a red BMW /5, and I respected his judgment in all things mechanical. Brad and I planned our first trip to Massachusetts together, and he guided me safely down Interstate 95. After we rode for about an hour and a half, he pulled over to a rest area, informing me that it was time to stop, stretch, and clear our heads a bit. The seasoned rider, he continued to set the pace and I followed.

Traveling with Brad convinced me that when riding with a group, my place was in the back of the pack, behind more experienced riders. I followed around like that for quite a few years. The more confident a rider I became, however, the more likely I was to take the lead. Eventually, I decided to try traveling on my own.

One fine day, I again took a five-hour ride down to Massachusetts — this time alone. My plans included returning north the following day to meet some friends and spend the day at the AMA races at New Hampshire International Speedway. Starting off early with a whole day and the open road before me, I took off my watch and buried it in the tank bag.



When I got hungry, I pulled over, took a seat at a diner counter, and enjoyed a huge, grilled blueberry muffin and a hot drink. Back at my bike, I was just about to head off again, when a couple in an overstuffed Toyota saw the Labrador sticker on my saddlebag and came over to talk. I took off my helmet and spent the next 15 minutes convincing them to toss their intentions to explore Nova Scotia aside and drive directly to the ferry terminal in North Sydney, Newfoundland. And I didn't have to worry about keeping traveling companions waiting.

I pulled over whenever I felt like changing CDs on my portable unit. I stopped to punch in coordinates on my GPS. I took a break when I wanted to, followed the route that suited me, and rode at my own pace.

I did a lot of thinking on that first ride alone and decided that riding solo meant enjoying motorcycling on my own terms. In some ways, traveling by yourself requires more effort and attention. There's no one along to tell you how fast to ride, which way to go, or to help you troubleshoot when things go wrong. But the additional challenges that come with coping on your own just add to the feeling of accomplishment when you get where you're going.

There are those who would argue that you're a lot safer riding in a group. Several riders are more visible and can watch out for each other. Still, more often than not, I find that the solid satisfaction I get from time spent alone on my bike is worth the risk.

I've recently enjoyed several more solo trips, including a several-day ride to and from another BMW rally. Although traveling with friends means companionship en route, when I ride alone I never lack for friendly faces along the way. I enjoy spending time by myself poking along as it suits me, before rolling into camp and joining up with the gang. That way, I get the best of both worlds. **MT&C**

Tom Jamrog, a school psychologist in Maine, loves riding his RI 1100GS to northern destinations. He welcomes e-mail correspondence via the Internet at [balrog@midcoast.com](mailto:balrog@midcoast.com)