

# RIDING WITH A GHOST

## LAPPING MID-OHIO ON CAL RAYBORN'S XR750

WORDS: Aaron Frank PHOTOS: Brian J. Nelson

**T**here was something indescribably spooky about swinging a leg over Cal Rayborn's Harley-Davidson XR750 at Mid-Ohio—and it wasn't just because his well-worn leathers and Bell Star helmet hung in ghost-like effigy outside garage number 20. The bike is *exactly* as Rayborn last raced it in 1972, with the same bubbled, cracking numbers, the same ancient athletic tape covering the footpegs and the same gouges in the right lower fairing from smacking the curb in Laguna Seca's Corkscrew. It was eerie to sit in the same saddle, grasp the same grips and peer through the same windscreen that Rayborn looked through during the last races of his life. It was like riding with a ghost.

The XR750's long, narrow tank, raw magnesium wheels and massive, rough-hewn V-twin all reek of racing purpose. The bike is surprisingly compact, just 13 inches separating the seat from the pegs. The bulbous fairing—famously designed in the Caltech wind tunnel—might still be the most aerodynamic ever, but it's

also the least ergonomic. The knife-sharp upper cuts into your hands at every turn and the narrow bars are located so far inboard that a high-speed tuck is the only permissible riding position. Rayborn never moved around on the bike because he couldn't.

Bump-starting the high-compression XR750 engine is challenging. After a half-dozen failed attempts, it finally erupts with a beastly roar. After jamming the right-side, reverse-pattern shift lever home and releasing the stiff clutch, the bike lunges forward like a real animal. As the revs rise, I feel the full force of what former XR750 racer Dave Roper describes as "two giants banging on the same anvil." At 4000 rpm I can barely see straight, and the grips seem to have grown 3 inches in diameter, they're vibrating so hard.

I've heard the XR750 described as "a classic American hot-rod—too much motor, not enough chassis." That description

seems spot-on. The bike is surprisingly fast. Mid-Ohio is not Daytona—where Rayborn was once timed at 168 mph—but there's room to reach 135 mph and the XR750 gets there in a hurry. The power profile is surprisingly similar to a modern, air-cooled, 1200cc Buell. The chassis is something entirely different. Long, low and slow to turn, it's a like driving a truck through Mid-Ohio's many off-camber and double-apex turns. The restricted riding position makes it impossible to move or hang off, and I'm surprised to feel my boot sole dragging through the Keyhole, my modern Alpinestars too stiff to let me rock up on my toes. Riding Rayborn's bike not only requires a different mindset, but a different wardrobe, too.

After 10 laps I've got terrible arm pump, and mad respect for the spirit riding as co-pilot. Racing this beast 200 miles at a time, and winning against lighter, infinitely friendlier foreign machines, must have been an amazing display of talent and human endurance. Cal Rayborn was undoubtedly one of the greatest racers of all time. And if his XR750 isn't the greatest racebike ever built, it's certainly one of the most charismatic. **MC**



Old #14 is nearly identical to when Cal Rayborn last raced it in 1973. The exhaust-induced heat blisters cutting across the "4" on the fairing are even visible in period photos.