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East Side Riders is a crew that functions in and out of the East Side neighborhood of Detroit, Michigan, USA. They ride, they collect parts, they build and fix bikes, they teach. Starting with two and now 27 members deep, ranging from 3 to over 60 years old, they are also becoming increasingly conscious of their role as a recognized grassroots community organization. Brothers Mike and Dywayne Neeley are natives of this area and are the two main people who began the initiative in 2008, along with Dywayne's 8 year old son Dywayne, after they spotted some interesting looking bikes riding around Chene Park. At that point, they were riding around on mountain bikes, three-wheelers and Swinn beach cruisers, and then moved on to make bikes complete with fresh coats of paint, flashing lights, speakers, TVs and even portable barbecues. The three began to experiment and explore the limits of the body modification of bicycles, fishing out old rusty parts from the trash or off the curbside, transforming and renewing them. They quickly became known around the city, as well as in their local neighborhood, for their inventive and extraordinarily artful approaches to bike culture. Of course, their work attracted the attention of the young kids in the neighborhood, who would watch from afar before showing interest in learning this craft themselves. Soon kids, adults and senior citizens were transcending out of the dark ages of riding around on rusty old bikes without brakes, and moving into this new time, where building and riding custom masterpieces is the local norm. Mary Hart is another central figure in the East Side Riders BC. She has worked closely with

Dywayne and Mike Neeley, since joining the club in 2011, to continuously develop their role throughout various communities of Detroit, as well as working towards collaborations with other East Side bicycle crews throughout the USA. Collectively, they learn from each other in order to enhance the consciousness of the club as a whole, developing expertise ranging from bicycle building and repairs to learning how to safely orchestrate group rides through the city. The movement of custom bikes in Detroit, which is known far and wide as "Bike Mecca," is a growing force; as it moves through the dilapidated landscape, its agency is highlighted as an essential contribution to the many collective efforts to beautify the city. But what is best, is that it is done not through an outside initiative, but through the natives themselves.





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INTERVIEW WITH MARY HART AND
DYWAYNE NEELEY OF THE EAST SIDE
RIDERS FEBRUARY 2017

Ashley Cook: East Side Riders is just one of the many bike crews that are present in the city of Detroit, could you name some of the other ones?

Dywayne Neeley: Well, it used to be 6 and now its over 30, so it wouldn't be fair to name. You've got clubs on the East Side, West Side, Southwest Detroit, North End, Highland Park, Hamtramck. We've got clubs in Pontiac and also in Cleveland, Ohio. We all ride together. Our East Side Riders, we've got a club in Detroit, a club in California, a club in Indiana, and there's a new one finna start in Tennessee. And we're travelin' to each other. But I'll name the Real Riders from Southwest Detroit, and you got GMOB(Grown Men on Bikes) on the West Side, you got the North End Riders on the North End, North End Bandits they're called.

AC: How often do you conduct collective rides through the city?

DN: We pretty much can do a ride everyday. Everybody rides the Slow Roll on Monday, and then there's a Soul Roll, which is also every Monday night. That's the D-Town riders, they're also out of the North End too; they conduct a Soul Roll ride. And then Tuesday, they proly do a Taco Tuesday ride, then they proly do a West Side Ride Wednesday, then a Thirsty Thursday ride and then everybody just ride on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. There's also the Soul Roll on Saturday; they do two rides, they do it on Monday and they do it on Saturday.

AC: What are some of the most important things that you have learned through orchestrating these rides, from a practical points to considering what they can do for communities?

DN: Well, we have some rules for people that ride, pretty much stay to the right and we can be long but not wide. The East Side Riders also started the Angels' Night ride, we got all the clubs involved in it now, where we all ride on Angels' night and keep an eye out for the neighborhood. We do that, we also do community rides where we go out and pick up paper, we cut lots, we feed the homeless. For the kids in our neighborhood that are 15 years and younger,

we work on their bikes pretty much free, we're tryin' to teach them to do it so we don't have to keep doin' it everyday. Show 'em how to fix flats, take the wheels off and stuff like that.

AC: When the bike crews from various neighborhoods of Detroit come together, how many custom bikes would you typically expect to see?

DN: Around 3,000 bikes on a Monday, during the Slow Roll or the Soul Roll. Then it breaks up and there will be smaller rides and there will still be a lot of people for the after rides. Somebody might say, "Well, we're ridin' on the East Side today," and it can be anywhere between 50 and 300 bikes. Or they say, "We're meetin' at Harmony Park, we're ridin', anybody wanna come out, come out," same thing. We can assemble, say, 400 people and we don't get harassed by the police. They ask us to leave, we gone within 5 minutes, and they don't understand. Ya see, we're breakin' barriers with this right here. Because, bein' from the East Side, I proly wouldn't mingle with the people from the West Side, because they're different than us. All of these communities is ridin' together and we get along and the police can't understand why we're not fightin'. And what they don't know is, we police ourselves, because if we get into it, then the police will just make us stay in the neighborhoods, and that ain't cool, because we're used to just riding anywhere and everywhere we want.

Mary Hart: I would have to say that proly 95% of the bikes that come out are custom. Not one person that I've ridden with hasn't done somethin' to their bike, between puttin' a teddy bear or strip lights on it, or a horn. Even if it's a Walmart bike and everybody else has it, maybe there's six Walmart bikes that are the same bike, but every girl did somethin' different to the same bike. Like one girl made the bike butterflies, the next girl made hearts, the next girl used flowers. So, between the Slow Roll, the Soul Roll or any other day of the week, about 95% of the people have done some kind of magic to their bike.

DN: That's how the Slow Roll is, but at first they was lookin' at us like, "Why y'all got lights on your bikes?" Now everybody is doin' it. But the reason we put lights on our bikes is first, we didn't have street lights. We would be downtown until real late, then we gotta peddle back to the neighborhood, and I want you to see me. It's a little bit of showing off,





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but if I put these lights on my bike, and they're real bright, you can't say you didn't see me when you ran me over in your car. That's the main point of the lights, to be safe.

AC: Is there ever competition amongst the different neighborhood crews?

DN: Well, this is how it goes, there's no competition, but there's competition. I do an annual bike show, and other people do bike shows in other cities, and you put your bike in. But for the most part, there's really no big bike show other than when we go to Vegas.

MH: It's all in good fun. The guys all have good humor, you know, laughin', at the end, there ain't no hard feelin' or anything like that. The sound is a little bit louder on that bike, so that's why that bike won, but you'll never see people fighting amongst each other, there ain't nothin' like that. We all learn a lot from each other. When we go out to OBC (One Big Bike Club show in Vegas), there are people out there that have been building custom bikes for 25-35 years, so we can definitely learn from them. So, there is competition but there's not, it's more of a constant learning stage.

AC: I read about a woman named Georgia Johnson and efforts that she made to engage with the East Side Riders at an early stage, when the crew was just beginning. How was her cry for help instrumental in initiating or enhancing your role in the community?

DH: Right, Georgia Johnson contacted us because she needed help spreadin' the word about some woman that were going missing in the neighborhood. We showed up, because the group that she was with was older, and so they started using us to pass out information through the neighborhood and stuff like that.

AC: What started as a personal hobby turned into a grassroots organization quite quickly, as it began responding to the wants and needs of the surrounding community. Of course, being conscious of this would also lead you to envision its future form. What steps have you taken in order to guide its development, bringing it already to the point it is at now?

DN: Right, my brother, he started his own club in the North End called the D-Town Riders, and they're the ones who do the Soul Roll ride now. As far as community rules, I'll give you a few. Pretty much be courteous to the next person. The thing is, you don't want to be mixing with people in a bad way, because if you do, they might see you again and run you over in the car. But, we have rules, it's non-tolerance for drinking and smoking, you gotta have tools, gotta have an inner-tube, patches. We're not responsible to get you home, but we will get you home.

AC: Do you have specific rules that the members are responsible for upholding?

DN: The members pay \$20 a month, it's supposed to be, but some people don't have it, it is what it is. You can't get no East Side Riders hat, shirt, nothing that will say East Side Riders on it, if you don't do community service. Right now, at this point, you can't even buy one of our shirts. A guy offered \$200 to buy one of our shirts, and we wouldn't sell it to them because we want you to do something in the community and not just be wearing our gear. The dues pay for bike parts, merchandise and for people to go to the different functions. We've got a grill bike that comes out, and everybody knows when they see that, they gotta chip in some type of way to help with that too.

AC: And what do you see for the future of the East Side Riders?

DN: We're gonna eventually open up a bike shop where we can customize bikes, build frames, music, lights, whatever you want done, we wanna have a one stop shop.

MH: And we aren't only tryin' to stay in the community and help out the people in the community, we are trying to really spread ourselves around the country, offer what we can in other communities and bring back what we can to keep things growing here.

AC: It is evident that you are interested in repurposing / recycling old parts to create new, custom designs. Each person has control of their own design and innovation is obviously encouraged. When designing, where do you and the other crew members you look for inspiration?











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EAST SIDE RIDERS

DN: It's my imagination, but I tell a person "What you want your bike to be?" and they might say "well, I like Scooby Doo" and so we'll try to find anything Scooby Doo, stickers, materials, stuff like that.. It can be anything. We also teach people how to customize their own bikes. We could teach someone to customize a bike for under \$100, something that's real nice, something that's unique and different, and nobody else got it, because, guess what...we just made it up.

AC: I was recently researching, more in-depth, the movement of Afro-futurism, and its effort to re-think the narrative of African American history, focusing on the contemporary issues that people of color face, while also attempting to critique and re-examine the historical events of the past. The movement encompasses elements of science fiction and techno-culture, to develop and implement a shared, progressive vision of the future of African American people. When I think about this movement, of course, I cannot help but notice the influence that it has had on various subcultures throughout the history of Detroit, and vice versa. I think immediately of George Clinton, Parliament and Funkadelic, or the Belleville Three and their contribution to the invention of techno music, to name a few. These musicians contributed to the discourse through their repurposing of technology to create new forms of music. I bring this up because I see what you are doing with the East Side Riders, and the custom bike movement, also known as Bike Mecca as a whole, as another avenue for Afrofuturism to resurface through the subcultural communities of Detroit. You are re-purposing technology to create new forms as well, through the lights, the speakers, etc; it is very inventive what you do. Have you ever considered how your efforts contribute to the discourse of Afrofuturism? I think it is very interesting, and I wonder how you would see the movement of East Side Riders, Bike Nation and Bike Life as a process of envisioning and implementing a progressive future for you and other participating communities?

MH: I wouldn't say it in that sense, that it's a new movement that is related to the past with the African history, I would say that it is really more of an unconscious thing that they're doing here. I don't think they realize what they're doing, besides that they're bringing the movement, breakin' the

borders and bringin' them back together like they are, but they're more or less doing it unconsciously. I can see what you're saying, how it could turn into something along the lines of George Clinton and all that stuff; I think in a few more years, it will be more understandable and we'll see what the outcome is, but now, I don't think anyone really realizes what exactly is going on, even including us.

DN: We just can't call it "African," because it's everybody. There are African bikes out there, with their Red, Yellow and Green, but the biking is touching all the communities and all the races. It's just not black.

AC: I feel that it is a very interesting time for Detroit right now. There are many new initiatives taking place that are attempting to confront some of the issues that the city has been facing for nearly half a century. It is interesting to see the new real-estate developments that are happening, like the renovation of historic buildings, as well as the demolition of unsalvageable houses, creating space for new things to happen and enhancing the presence of nature within the city. Usually, when a place experiences a sudden increase of attention from investors, leading to growth and influx of inhabitants, there is a fear that soon the effects of gentrification will show their ugly face, and we all know what happens then. But, as I am seeing the developments of outside investors, I am simultaneously seeing a number of local community movements gaining speed, for instance, urban farming, which allows for the native Detroiter to take control of their city and determine, for themselves, how they want to live within it. I also see the presence of the neighborhood bike cultures as another force that allows the native Detroiter to claim their territory through positive, productive means that aims to develop the growth of community as opposed to the typical aim of gentrification, which is capital and making money. My question here is, how do you think that the community initiatives of native Detroiters, like urban gardening and the custom bike movement, have inspired the new developments that we are seeing in Detroit these days? And what do you think can we do to continue to encourage a community based focus for developments within the city, to ensure that Detroit remains a city that grows from, and remains for, its people?

DN: We are part of the Georgia Street Community

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Collective, with Mark Covington, which is one of the initiatives in the city that does the urban gardening. There are places like the HUB or the community gardens in the neighborhoods, where we work for free and after a certain amount of time, you can come in and get free parts or take food. And as far as community, like I said, I cut our grass, I've been cutting the grass on my block since I was 18 years old. Haven't got no money for it, but I cut 9 lots. I also show the young kids and stuff how to work the lawn mowers, and, like you say, if we don't cut the grass in our neighborhood, the grass will get high and the rats will be runnin' everywhere. And to get by, we pretty much have to barter, say, for example, I got some chicken, you got some mashed potatoes, you got some green beans, we all sit down and we share it. You know, Detroit is a giving city. For the most part, if you grew up here, a lot of us really ain't got no money. Maybe last week, I gave you some chicken, and this week, I say "let me use your law mower," something like that. All without a "you gotta pay me back". Detroit, this city is on a comeback, and it ain't as bad as people say it is. It all depends on what you are doing; if you're in a bad element, you're gonna get the bad. But, if you come here to just visit, or hang out in the downtown area, it's the safest place you can be. Only thing I can say is Detroit is cold, but it's fair.









