

[hed] Shock and Hog

[dek] Harley chases young bucks, leaving withering traditionalists in the dust.

[by] Mike Miller

When you hear the futuristic howl of the LiveWire electric motorcycle, you might mistake it for a jet turbine or a Pod Racer from *Star Wars*—but you'd never mistake it for a Harley Davidson. And yet, it bears Harley Davidson's legendary badge. The Milwaukee-based motorcycle company recently announced the release of its first electric motorcycle, hitting dealerships in August 2019.

At first glance, you might say the LiveWire looks and sounds nothing like a Harley and you'd probably say the same at second and third glance, too. That's because it's designed not to. The 103-year-old motorcycle manufacturer is struggling to sell its burbling, throbbing, air-cooled V-twins to millennials and desperately needs a wild card to shake things up. Compounding the problem, Harley's older and more traditional bikers are hanging up their helmets or dying.

With young Americans eschewing Harley bikes or steering clear of motorcycling altogether, Harley Davidson needs a plan for the future—it needs to convince young riders to swing their legs over Milwaukee iron. The brand reports declining revenue from motorcycles and related products every year since 2014, and US retail sales dropped 13 percent in Q3 2018 compared to Q3 2017. The iconic brand even announced plans down a Kansas City plant, eliminating 350 jobs and relocating others.

Struggling to keep butts in seats, Harley designed their new electric streetfighter to appeal to young, urban riders. But will the old guard see it as a flagrant departure from the iconic bikes and gas culture they hold so dear?

"I think the purists will have a hard time with it," says Brad VanHecker, a Harley rider and enthusiast since 2007. "After 115 years of the iconic Harley, change will be hard within the group." And this group is not known to take change lightly. Take the V-Rod for example. Sporty styling and Harley's first liquid-cooled, overhead cam engine (co-developed with Porsche) was a bold departure from the iconic bike.

Breaking the mold to attract new riders to the brand, the V-Rod stands for everything that is decidedly un-Harley and quickly became the black sheep of the brand. After a troubled 16 year-run, the V-Rod quietly vanished from the lineup in 2018. If Harley riders couldn't accept the V-Rod—an unconventional but fun-to-ride Harley gas bike—the LiveWire is going to be even trickier to bring to market without alienating more traditional riders.

While the specs of the production model are still unknown, Harley showed off a prototype version through 30 US cities to solicit feedback from test riders. The prototype was capable of 0-60 in under 4 seconds and a top speed of almost 100 mph. Range, however has always been the Achilles heel of electric bikes, and the Harley's prototype was only capable of a paltry 55 miles

in economy mode. Switch the bike over to power mode for a small boost in horsepower at the expense of a cringier 28-mile range, begging the question as to why this mode even exists.

While the LiveWire's non-existent range might improve for final production, it would have to get *a lot* better to really hang with the hogs. It isn't uncommon for groups to put upwards of 200 miles a day on Harley's 700cc-plus baggers and touring bikes. VanHecker puts that kind of mileage on his 2009 Road Glide Custom when out with his friends, stopping occasionally on longer rides for fueling and snacks. "But if [the LiveWire] required waiting some time to recharge," he says, "they would probably be left behind."

Even if the range and charge time are acceptable upon release—and that's a big "if"—a lot of Harley guys still won't be able to get past the looks. It's sporty and athletic streetfighter styling is about as far as you can get from the classic cruiser design. "It'll be a very small niche machine until several issues are overcome like range and better styling, says a forum user who goes by TwiZted Biker on hdforums.com. "It's just too Buck Rodgers-looking for the old school guys."

With the LiveWire, Harley risks isolating its more traditional customers, who tend to identify strongly with the 45-degree V-twin bikes. With many existing riders unlikely to show their support of the LiveWire, Harley's only hope is attracting riders from other brands or those new to the motorcycling world altogether. Whether they actually will might come down to what's in their bank accounts more than what's in their motorcycles.

When asked about owning a LiveWire, VanHecker liked the idea of it. "Just like solar panels, I like the direction they are heading. People love engines and the wheels that move them." But when it comes down to actually owning one, there were a few stipulations. "Either a raise or winning the lottery by the sounds of it," he joked. "I would still keep or have a gas bike, though."