

Bruce Gordon is sitting in the garden of his home in Petaluma, California, where he has lived for more than two decades. The sun is shining and it's 70 degrees in November. At age 64, he doesn't take his good fortune for granted, but Gordon has a lot on his mind, about his journey in life and where it has taken him.

Born and raised in Chicago, Gordon knows he can be on the caustic side.

"If there were an Olympic event for complaining, I would win the gold medal," he says over the telephone. "So I understand this. I've been complaining my whole life."

But, as he sees it, he has plenty to complain about. Start with the fact that after 38 years of making bike frames and becoming one of the best known and most respected framebuilders in the country, specializing in touring bikes, Gordon finds himself facing a financial abyss.

"People misunderstand me, thinking that I hate the bike business, or hate bikes, and that I'm focused on money," Gordon says. "That couldn't be farther from the truth. My entire career has been about making better stuff. I enjoy making, riding, and thinking about bikes. What I hate is the bike business stuff we're talking about."

This is not a recent development for Gordon. Six years ago, he said he sat down with a bottle of wine and a mailing from Social Security that laid out his earnings over the years and figured out that over his career he has made an average of \$24,000 annually.

"I'm not really obsessed with money, but I think that's pathetic, considering how famous I seem to be," Gordon said. "If I'm so famous, why am I so poor?"

A Brief Encounter

Dwan Shepard, co-owner of Co-Motion Cycles in Eugene, Oregon, has known Gordon since the mid-1970s when Gordon was building bikes in Eugene and Shepard was a "young starry-eyed bike nerd."

"I'd seen some pretty cool bikes in bike shops, Italian bikes and Schwinn Paramounts, but there weren't many people doing what Bruce was doing at the time," Shepard said. "Beautiful workmanship; fine, fine lug work; and exotic paint. Really neat stuff."

"The guy was pretty revered," Shepard

BRUCE GORDON HAS SOMETHING TO SAY



One of the most revered framebuilders in America is grappling with his future

by Dan D'Ambrosio
Photos by Matt Farruggio

continued. "Anybody that had the money and the good taste to buy a really elite bicycle in this area definitely bought it from Bruce."

A few years later, Shepard was learning to build bicycle frames from Gary Hale, another framebuilder in Eugene, when he was sent to borrow some lugs from the neighbor.

"Gary's shop was about a half block from Bruce Gordon's shop at the time," Shepard remembered. "Gary needed a couple of lugs so I went to Bruce's shop. I was very nervous and afraid of the master, but he was very nice. He showed me what he had. It was a very brief encounter, but it's branded in my memory."

Shepard may have been nervous partly because Gordon's reputation already preceded him, and not just for consummate framebuilding.

"He's known for being very abrupt and telling people exactly what he thinks, which I think is admirable, but it's not always pleasant," Shepard said. "As I get older, I'm more sympathetic to that style of thinking. People joke about the famous Bruce Gordon persona, but I think it's genuine and I admire it."

You Need to Sell Stuff

Gordon has an undergraduate degree in photography from Ohio University. He dropped out of graduate school at the Art Institute of Chicago to move to California in 1970 to work in a bike shop. He was drawn by the weather and the laid-back lifestyle.

Soon Gordon signed up for a framebuilding class from Albert Eisentraut, the dean of American framebuilders, who started building bikes in 1959 and taught many of the best-known builders in the country between 1973 and 1992. Joe Breeze was in Gordon's class, as were many others who ended up making their living from bicycles.

In 1974, said Gordon, Eisentraut had about five people working for him, and he was making about 60 frames a year. Eisentraut was looking for investors, and Gordon had some money to invest. He became vice president of Eisentraut Bicycles, Inc.

"That lasted two years; it wasn't going anywhere," Gordon said. "I moved to Eugene and started Bruce Gordon Cycles."

In 1988, with his business well established, Gordon moved back to California, again for the weather.

"I grew up in Chicago with lousy weather," he said. "I'll guarantee you it's not 70 degrees and clear in Eugene right now."

Over the years, Gordon's signature Rock N' Road Tour became the aspirational



bike for bicycle tourists everywhere. For a while, Gordon was selling up to 120 Rock N' Road bikes annually. Last week, he said, he finished number 6 for this year.

"The bottom line is I need to sell stuff," Gordon said. "Making stuff is the easiest part."

What has brought Gordon to this point in his life, uncertain of what lies ahead for him? He sees several factors. One is his own admitted ineptitude at marketing what he makes. But, he said, he has plenty of company.

"Almost every one of the top framebuilders, who I would consider the best, are all dismal, horrible at marketing," Gordon said. "What we need is help."

Another factor, Gordon says, is the cluelessness of touring riders — with the notable exception of the readers of *Adventure Cyclist* magazine, he is careful to point out.

"Probably 80 percent of the people who go bicycle touring are not really cyclists," he said. "Racers and mountain-bike people, they want to know every fact about their frame builder. For most touring cyclists, the bike is just a tool, like a kayak or backpack."

Gordon said he realizes now he had a basic misunderstanding of the touring market.

"The average bicycle tourist wants to buy an off-the-rack bike, racks, panniers, clothing, a tent, and sleeping bag. Do the whole thing and walk out the door with one credit card swipe," he says. "They have about as much emotional attachment to a bike frame as a tent. I'm not saying that's wrong, but it's a different sentiment. That's



In the zone. Gordon's attention to detail is legendary in the framebuilding business.

ness in 1988, the same year Gordon moved back to California, have had a very different experience than Gordon has had.

Co-Motion sells about 1,200 bikes a year to a nationwide network of dealers, some buying as many as 60 or 80 bikes in a single year, and the company employs 16 people at its Eugene factory where all of the bikes are made. Originally, Shepard built all of the frames himself.

"Dan was really instrumental in helping us get organized business-wise, and he concentrates more on running the machine

"I don't have to own Bruce Gordon Cycles anymore, I'm beyond that. I've done this my entire life for almost nothing."

been a big problem for me."

And those off-the-rack bike and racks? They particularly stick in Gordon's craw.

"I used to be sort of the gold standard," he said. "Bruce Gordon made the best racks and bikes. Nowadays I'm sort of looked at as the company that copied this cheaper gear. You know where this stuff is made? Everything — all of it — is made in China."

Relying on Imagination

Dwan Shepard and his Co-Motion partner Dan Vrijmoet, who started their busi-

ness in 1988, the same year Gordon moved back to California, have had a very different experience than Gordon has had. tools," Shepard said. "He heads up our production side nowadays, whereas I'm mostly involved in design and head up the office side of things — and sales."

Yet it wasn't always that way.

"To be honest, we started out without much of a plan," Shepard said. "We were pretty sure we could do something great, but it took about two years before we decided we were going to make a living at it. We needed to go beyond the local bike-club scene and figure out a way to sell bikes wholesale."

Shepard and Vrijmoet first made their

names with tandems. It was a conscious decision, said Shepard.

"At that time, there was really a renaissance of builders building mountain-bike frames," he said. "We figured we missed that boat. We could throw our hat in the ring with that, but could easily get lost, so I think the tandem decision was a really good one. It was pretty simple for us to show people a different way a tandem could be put together, which not only looked different but rode differently."

The other step Shepard credits for Co-Motion's success is the decision to define a line of bikes with specific geometries and component kits.

"It makes it easier for people to understand what you're doing," Shepard said. "When you sell custom bikes, you're relying a lot on the imagination of your customer, and it's really tough to make the imagination and the reality merge together enough that everybody is happy."

Shepard noted that Gordon has tried the formulaic approach with "mixed success." That's putting it mildly. It's called the Basic Loaded Touring bike, or BLT, and it is, said Gordon, a "major failure," not as a bike but as a product.

The idea was to take the Rock N' Road Tour and build it in Taiwan to Gordon's standards, so that one of the most respected and admired touring bikes in the country would become affordable for a much wider audience of touring cyclists.

Gordon was inspired by the success of the Surly Long Haul Trucker, which he learned at Interbike was selling 2,500 to 3,000 frames each year. Gordon figured he should be able to sell at least 500 of his BLTs yearly.

"When I had the BLTs made there, it took two years to get a prototype we liked," Gordon said.

Once he had that prototype, Gordon took delivery on 100 BLT frames, but he soon realized to his horror that a clearance problem he had caught and pointed out in the prototype stage had not been fixed in the production stage.

"I was ready to hang myself," Gordon said. "I had spent the last of my money and had 100 frames that needed to be fixed."

Gordon airfreighted the bikes back to Taiwan at the manufacturer's expense for the simple fix, and then told the factory they could airfreight one-third of the frames back and send the rest by ocean. With the fixed frames in hand, he began shipping to dealers.

Then the news came from a dealer that the front-fork rack mounts weren't right. They were located in the right spot, but they were 10 to 15 degrees off the axis of the bike, not a simple thing to fix, Gordon said, and not something he trusted the Taiwanese factory to do. Instead he insisted they make 100 new forks, but it took three months to get the job done.

"Once the frames were returned and the 100 new forks were delivered, I was quite happy with the frames," Gordon said. "They perform the same as a Bruce Gordon Rock N' Road frame made in California, but the Taiwanese factory made it clear they were not interested in making the bikes 100 at a time in the future."

Framebuilders Everywhere

Unfortunately, Gordon has been squeezed on the custom-building side as well as by the exponential growth in framebuilders.

"When I started with Albert Eisentraut, there were maybe 20 people in this country building bike frames," Gordon said. "I would guess there are 3,000 or more now. They have artificially brought down the expected value."

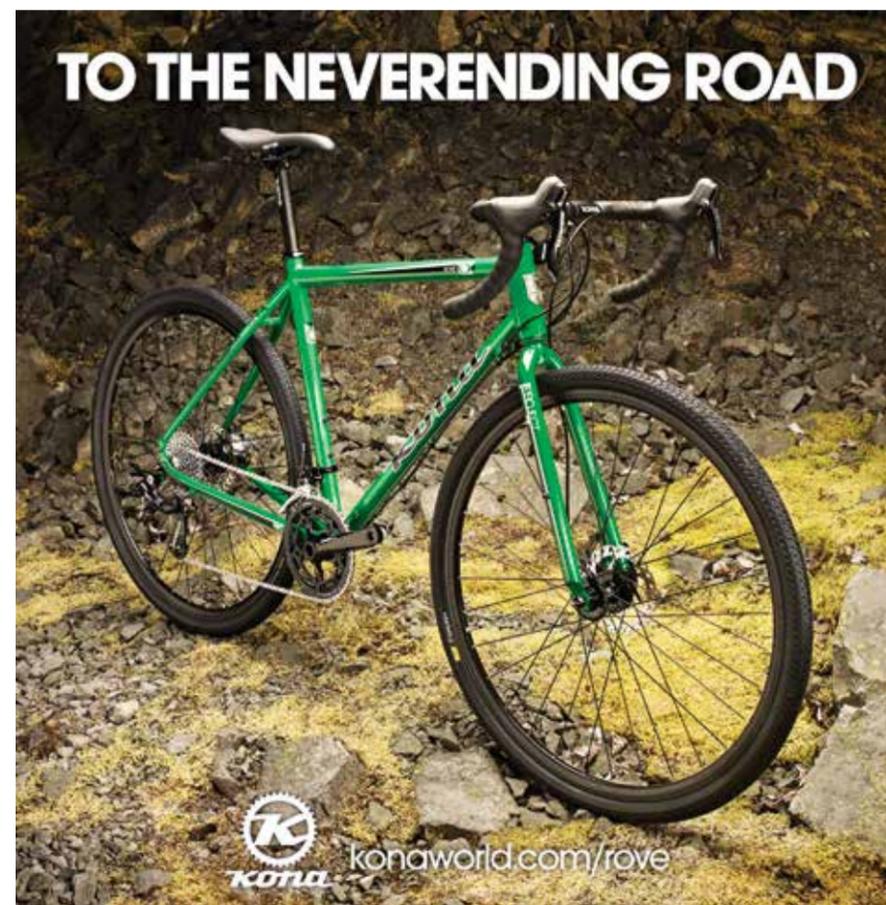
Gordon points to the North American Handmade Bicycle Show, launched in 2005, as symptomatic of the problem.

"I've been to four or five, and it was very innovative when it started," Gordon said. "Up until then, there was only Interbike, a big commercial fiasco. Now the best way I can describe the handmade bicycle show is a childhood beauty pageant. They make all these wildly intricate bikes, way above their pay scale and experience level, then realize they can't sell them for as much as a Richard Sachs. They have to price them near the Surly, and at that point they can't make money."

Shepard seconded Gordon's assessment, saying there are too many people who want to build bikes just because they think it's a neat thing to do.

"To be perfectly honest, they don't have anything to add to the genre, and that's unfortunate," Shepard said. "Maybe they should get a job within the bike industry. It might be better if they didn't try to start their own brand and become another flash in the pan for their own sakes, if not for the sakes of their customers, or potential customers."

Bruce Gordon, said Shepard, probably shouldn't be competing with "a guy who just took a class from United Bicycle



Institute," but that's what happens at the handmade bike show.

"The theme there is that a handbuilt bike is the best bike, and maybe it's not," Shepard said. "Some of those bikes are questionable. Some aren't going to last, and the builders aren't going to be around. If the frame develops a problem, who is going to fix it for you? The experienced builders know how to avoid problems in the first place and will be around to fix problems if they do arise."

Beyond ownership

At this "tender point" in his life, Bruce Gordon said he would not be opposed to someone buying or investing in his business in the same way a rich wine aficionado would buy a Napa Valley winery.

"I don't have to own Bruce Gordon Cycles anymore, I'm beyond that," he said. "I've done this my entire life for almost nothing. I'm looking for someone to take over the parts of the business that I'm not good at."

But Gordon does have three "non-negotiable" requirements for a potential buyer. One, "The stuff has to be made in America." Two, "I come with the busi-

ness." And three, "The stuff has to be sold directly to consumers, not in bike shops."

"I'm puzzled as to how to find this person," Gordon said wistfully. "How do you set this up? I know this person exists."

Gordon thought he had found his buyer when he talked to Brooks at Interbike, and the company contacted him later, saying they wanted to meet. Brooks, the iconic English company, had been bought by Selle Royal, the Italian company that is one of the premier bicycle saddle manufacturers in the world.

"I was on cloud nine," Gordon said. "I was so excited. Wow, this is my big chance!"

Gordon put together his best titanium-lugged bike with a titanium frame pump and titanium cantilever brakes, both of which he made as well, and took it to the meeting.

"This tall, thin Italian guy was drooling over the bike," Gordon remembered. "It was a pretty stunning bike."

It wasn't the first time Gordon had put together a stunner. He has about 35 bikes in his personal collection.

"When I get really depressed, I make a bike, and I have every one I've made," he

said.

As it turned out, the Italians were not interested in buying Bruce Gordon Cycles. They wanted Gordon to design parts for Brooks.

"I said that's not anything I'm interested in," Gordon remembered. "If you work as a designer, it's so stuff can be made in Taiwan or China. I don't want to do that."

So Bruce Gordon continues to wait and wonder how he will meet his bills. He said he's putting the question out there: Should Bruce Gordon Cycles continue to exist? If the answer is no, he said, "I'll just quit."

Dwan Shepard has a different take on things.

"If anybody deserves to get some sales, to sell some bikes, it's Bruce," he said. "I think Bruce Gordon does exactly what he says he's going to do, and he's a true master. He's a rarity." **AC**

Dan D'Ambrosio is a business reporter for the Burlington Free Press in Burlington, Vermont, and the former editor of Adventure Cyclist magazine.

Companions Wanted

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San Diego to Houston I'm a 60-year-old male from Denmark who will ride a part of the Southern Tier. I will leave San Diego on February 18 and need to be in Houston on March 22. Camping and motels. Self cooking and restaurants. Email simonkirk1@mac.com.

Pacific Coast to Ushuaia I'm a 32-year-old American woman doing a two-plus-year self-supported bike tour in March starting in Seattle and going south via the Pacific Coast to Baja California, Central and South America, and possibly to Southeast Asia afterwards. I plan on taking my time and taking smaller dirt roads, and whenever possible, hiking, rafting, climbing, and scuba diving. I'm planning between 50 and 75 miles per day, and camping with one to two days per week in hostels. I speak Spanish fluently. Email leeann.oneill@gmail.com.

Natchez Trace and Beyond Looking to ride the Natchez Trace and a little extra, from Nashville to New Orleans via the Trace in early spring from March 15 through 25. Looking to average 70 miles per day and take in the history of the Trace. Accommodations: Camping at campgrounds and probably two nights in a motel/hotel. Cooking will be camp-stove meals. I'm open to options as well as other ideas for a Southeast tour. Email rachtenb@gmail.com.

Sydney to Brisbane A few experienced cyclists request the company of riders to go from Sydney to Brisbane on the Gold Coast. We're leaving the first week of May 2013, and riding

in the hinterland using as many quiet backroads as possible, mainly camping with the occasional motel. We hope to ride approximately 80 kilometers per day with rest days when we want, so approximately 1,100 kilometers over 16 days or so. Email tonypenz50@gmail.com.

Los Angeles to Charleston - Summer 2013 Looking for riders to go from Los Angeles to Charleston, South Carolina, over June and July. Email marsterob@yahoo.com.

San Francisco to Virginia - May 2013 I'm riding the TransAm out of Oregon, and since I'm in the very early planning phases, I'm very flexible. I'm a 28-year-old male who may already have a friend coming along. Open to anybody as long as they're friendly. Probably camping most days. Prefer Bay Area resident to train with but not essential. Feel free to inquire for more details. Email d.mitnick84@gmail.com.

TransAmerica Trail Crossing - East to West First time touring, 54-year-old male, with a strong cycling background. I'm raising funds for cancer research. I hope to leave mid-to-late May of 2013 from Yorktown, Virginia, following the TransAm to Astoria, Oregon. I will also be returning east by way of the Northern Tier to Ohio, although I might be interested in following the Northern Tier to its terminus in Bar Harbor, Maine. Hoping for fellow riders on any or all parts of trip. I will be camping for most of the way and occasionally relying on inexpensive lodging. Email mbauduy@gmail.com.

Memorial Tour Starting in May I'm planning a 50-state tour in memory of my wife who recently passed away of cancer. I'm leaving Anderson, South Carolina, on May 10 and going to Cherokee, North Carolina. I'm picking up the Blue Ridge Parkway and riding into Virginia. My first major stop is New York City. On July 11, I'll be in South Bend, Indiana, for our 14th anniversary. I'm going to finish in Key West, Florida, and will be hitting all 50 states along the way. If anyone wants to ride all or part, call me at (864) 221-8973 or email eagle1golf@gmail.com.

Virginia Beach to Yorktown to San Francisco This will be my first tour. My tentative plan is to leave from Virginia Beach and ride to Yorktown, then head for Pueblo, Colorado, to pick up the Western Express. There is a possibility that I may opt to do the full TransAmerica Trail to Astoria, but I haven't decided. My desired departure date is March 5, 2013, my 70th birthday. I will be cycling to promote my novel, soon to be published, and to promote cycling throughout the U.S. I plan to camp most of the way. Email max5ties@yahoo.com.

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