

NO.33 BUELL X1 LIGHTNING

PR'S GUILTY PLEASURES

Big, tall and odd, Matt finds lots of common ground with this naked

REGULAR READERS OF this column will be familiar with my love of Erik Buell's brilliant-yet-shite motorcycles. They've always cultivated my love of the quirky and bizarre. Alongside a Benelli Tornado, a Morbidelli V8 and an MZ1000SF streetfighter, my lottery-win dream line-up of freakish bikes would have at least two Buells in it – an XB12R, and this, the X1 Lightning.

The X1 was the start of Buell making road bikes that were almost OK. The former racer had made his name putting together sweet-handling motorcycles reluctantly powered by big, throbbing Harley-Davidson motors. They handled well, but always looked, frankly like lash-ups: the S1 Lightning which the X1 superseded was visually rank – gorky lines, a weird backwards-leaning stance and huge plastic airbox on the side of the bike that looked like it had fallen from a Scania.

The X1 moved things on, with sharper



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styling, a better chassis and enough refinement to become a genuine buying option: proper adjustable Showa suspension, a huge six-pot Nissin caliper that looked like it had come straight from the WSB grid and a wheelbase about the same as sports 600. And when it came to the motor, the team at East Troy, Wisconsin had managed to turn a sow's ear into a pork purse. The air-cooled 1203cc 45-degree Harley-V-twin started out as a feeble 60hp ditch-pump that resided in a Sportster. But now, thanks to new 'Thunderstorm' cylinder heads with bigger valves, re-shaped ports and combustion chambers and their own fuel injection, it gave out about 85hp at the back wheel.

It's been 16 years since my one and only ride on an X1. As a junior, jobless journalist I was plying my trade anywhere I could and was working for a few weeks on one of motorcycle's more sensible publications. Each year they had a huge reader survey and my job was to plough through a gigantic spreadsheet looking for anything 'interesting'. It was dull, tedious work, enlivened by the daily opportunity to borrow a ludicrously fast motorcycle to do a McDonalds run.

That week I'd nearly seen terminal velocity on a Honda Blackbird, dragged my knee on a borrowed R6 (not easy with a Big Mac in your Aktos) and now I was on the Lightning. The guttural, motive force of the motor dominated everything. It drove from zero revs and hooked up and fooked off like a two-wheeled Shelby Mustang, hitting 130mph on lunchtime dual carriageways. There was McFlurry everywhere.

That wasn't a shock, really. But its handling was. Calm, assured and with a serenity while cranked over that really surprised, it was awesome for blasting around an urban environment and the memory has ingrained itself. Since then, I've fantasised about owning one. With prices around three grand they're not impossible buys and are now so far behind the performance naked curve, they'll never date or go out of fashion.

With Buell now no more, they're also unique – exciting, optimistic, if unreliable bikes from a company looking like it was about to go down the pan.



RELIABILITY PROBS
Drive belts breaking, wheel bearings falling, engines throwing rods and loads of bits falling off!

PERFORMANCE TUNING
A huge aftermarket is still available thanks to Harley rods, pipes, heads, pistons, cranks, name your price.

NOT MANY LEFT
There are 78 X1 Lightnings in active service on UK roads at the moment.