



Harry Campbell; below, Lars Klove for The New York Times

**THRILL SEEKERS** No hand brakes, no shift lever, no coasting: the hallmarks of fixed-gear bikes.

# Unstoppable

Riding a bike without brakes on the streets of New York may sound insane. But to the zealous adherents of fixed-gear bikes — fixies for short — they are a thing of beauty and a way of life.

**W**HEN is a bicycle not like other bicycles? To begin with, when it has no brakes, or at least no visible brakes, or possibly just a front brake. That means you can't ride this bike very well on your first try, and certainly not very gracefully, easily or safely.

The rear cog is bolted directly to the hub, so that whenever the vehicle is in motion, the

pedals go around, making coasting impossible. This bike doesn't have a shift lever or extra sprockets, and the chain is shorter and wider than on traditional bikes.

There are no fenders, and the rear wheels are probably bolted onto the frame to deter theft. You slow down by reversing the pedals, or skidding, or doing a skip stop. And that's just the beginning of the differences between your run-of-the-mill 10-speed and a track bike, or fixed-gear bike — fixie for short — as it is also known.

Many fixed-gear adherents contend that their bikes are the ultimate and all others are pretenders. And these fixed-gear zealots are

a growing presence on the streets of New York. Perceived by some as nuisances, or as troublesome, anarchist Dumpster-diving punks who happen to ride bikes, they are occasionally reviled, but they are also the subject of curiosity and interest. Just as die-hard skateboarders 15 years ago stood on the cusp of providing a new lifestyle, so the fixed-gear bike culture could be the tip of something that nobody can accurately predict but something that is huge.

Riders of fixed-gear bikes are as diverse as bike riders in general. Messengers are big fixie aficionados, but more and more fixed-gear bikes are being ridden by nonmessengers, most conspicuously the kind of younger people to whom the term "hipster" applies and who emanate from certain neighborhoods in Brooklyn. You see these riders weaving in and out of traffic without stopping, balancing on the pedals at a stoplight and in the process infuriating pedestrians and drivers alike.

In Williamsburg and points south of Grand Street, these bikes are legion. But they are fast gaining popularity, not just in those bastions of trend followers, and not just among 22-year-olds. Fixed-gear bikes are being ridden all over New York, by messengers, racers, lawyers, accountants and college professors — a diverse and not necessarily youthful cross section of the city's population. They're

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**FIXIES ON THE MOVE**  
"The prettiest bikes out there," says Gina Scardino, owner of King Kog.

# Unstoppable

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being ridden by people who work in sandwich shops and don't know or care about gear ratios and bike history, and by people who have been racing these bikes for years in places like the Kissena Velodrome in Flushing, Queens, with its banked, elliptical track. They're ridden by militant vegans who are virtual encyclopedias of arcane bicycle history, by thrill-seeking members of renegade bike gangs like Black Label, by shopgirls, street racers, Critical Mass riders, your aunt.

There's also the phenomenon of city riders returning to fixed-gear biking's roots and getting back to the track, entering races like the Cyclehawk Velo City Tour, to be held at the Kissena Velodrome on May 6.

These disparate riders represent a rainbow coalition, a movement that's about bikes as part of a way of life, as an identity. Although fixed-gear bikes can be seen as a trendy accessory, they also allow a mild form of rebellion against what many of these bike riders see as a wasteful and insipid way of life. Fixed-gear riders embrace the contrary notion of taking a different route.

"We own the streets," the spray-painted stencil reads. Not really, but fixed-gear riders are, in a benign way, promoting an alternative to accepted norms.

## Anarchy in Motion

So what's the big deal? It's just a bike, right? On some level, yes. Two wheels, a chain, a cog, a seat and handlebars. But in the way that one of Marcel Breuer's vintage Wassily chairs is just a chair that costs \$10,000, the top fixed-gear bikes are just custom-made bikes that cost 10 times as much as a regular factory-made bicycle. The pinnacle of two-wheeled transport, they are beautiful objects with simple, clean, stripped-down lines that make them look fast even when they're standing still.

"They're the prettiest bikes out there," said Gina Scardino, owner of King Kog, a store on Hope Street in Williamsburg that sells only fixed-gear bikes. Indeed they are, with a modernist blending of form and function and a look that matches what they're made for, which is going really fast on a banked velodrome track.

But the question arises: Especially in this city, isn't it insane to ride a bike that you can't easily stop? By riding a bike that's meant to be raced around a special track on the chaotic streets of New York, aren't you risking life and limb?

It doesn't make sense. But that may be the appeal, and has been ever since the bikes appeared on the scene more than a century ago.

Fixed-gear bikes have a rich past. Before the invention of the derailleur, the device that made multiple gears a reality, fixed-gears were the racing bike. The original Madison Square Garden, built in 1879 at 26th Street and Madison Avenue, was built for a velodrome. Races testing speed and endurance drew huge crowds, with the top riders among the sports stars of their day.

The bike races at Madison Square Garden were all the rage around the turn of the last century. A velodrome circuit flourished around the country, with the best racers earning \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year at a time when carpenters were lucky to make \$5,000. And all this was happening on the forerunners of the bikes being ridden today.

Johnny Coast's Coast Cycles sits at the end of a desolate cul-de-sac in the heart of Bushwick, Brooklyn, near the Myrtle Avenue stop on the J, M and Z lines. Mr. Coast, a 31-year-old with dreadlocks down to the small of his back, is a former squatter and current member of Black Label.

Coast Cycles is not your typical bike store stocked with rows of three-speeds and road bikes, along with locks, water bottles and other doodads. It is an old-fashioned, one-person workshop where chickens wander in from the yard. Here, Mr. Coast builds two or three custom-framed bicycles a month, most of them fixed-gears, "tailored to suit a body's dimensions, to an individual's geometry and affording the maximum of comfort, design and style," as he put it in an e-mail message.

Mr. Coast, who works surrounded by Bridgeport lathes, jigs and blueprints, is a believer in fixies as a metaphorical extension of a squatters' lifestyle that connotes, as he puts it, "living a certain way, subsisting on recycling, not wasting, finding liberation, freedom as a revolutionary act, like in a Hakim Bey sense, primitivist, spiritualist anarchism."

He laughs at the absurdity of a brand like Mountain Dew approaching Black Label with an offer of sponsorship, as he says happened last year, and is wary of exploitation of the fixed-gear bike culture by corporations that have little to do with biking. "I saw what happened to skateboarding and surfing and punk," Mr. Coast said grimly.

## Look, Ma, No Brakes

The dangers of a small world getting bigger were vividly illustrated a few months ago when a hipster wearing square-frame glasses wandered into King Kog. The store, which sells fixed-gear bikes starting around \$800 and going up to the thousands, also carries Jason Chaste's Fortynine Sixteen clothing line, named for a gear ratio, and high-end parts like Sugino cranks, Izumi chains, and Dura-Ace and Ciocc frames.

"Um, I'm looking for a track bike," the



Photographs by Lars Klove for The New York Times

visitor said.

"What's your price range?" Ms. Scardino asked.

"Three hundred dollars," the visitor replied.

"Hmmm, you might want to try Craigslist or eBay," she suggested gently.

When Ms. Scardino asked the visitor how he planned to use the bike, he answered, "I'm just going to be cruising around." You got the sense that this wasn't the place for him, but also that he might come back one day. As he put it when he left: "I like your shop. It's neat."

At Bike Kill, an annual racing event sponsored by Black Label and held in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, nobody seemed worried about the issue of fixed-gear biking becoming too popular; everybody was having too much fun.

Vehicles used in the event, held on a blustery autumn day near the Samuel C. Barnes

Elementary School, included tall bikes (two frames on top of each other with a seat about six feet off the ground), bikes with metal rollers as front wheels, tiny bikes and BMX bikes (little single-gear bikes used for tricks) and, of course, fixed-gear bikes.

## Stopping on a Prayer

Mr. Coast was there, along with members of Black Label's Minneapolis and Reno, Nev., chapters and members of other biker groups like C.H.U.N.K. 666, which has footholds in Brooklyn and Portland, Ore.; the Rat Patrol, from Chicago; Dead Baby, from Seattle; and the Skidmarxxx, from Austin, Tex. A lot of unwashed dreads, denim, leather and facial tattoos were in evidence, along with a carnivalesque assortment of voodoo top hats, orange jumpsuits, bunny ears, Mexican wrestling masks and a Pee-wee Herman doppelgänger waving from his Schwinn cruiser.

There were copious drinking, including a contest to see who could ride around in a circle while drinking a six-pack fastest, and the "Blind Skull" event, in which riders wearing big foam skulls over their heads pedaled until they fell over or ran into somebody.

Toward 8 p.m. the drunken tall-bike jousting began, with knights of both sexes armed with padded plastic "spears." The only dissonant note occurred when a cassock-wearing interloper on Rollerblades with a motor attached was expelled by a Black Label member. "Get your motor out of here!" the biker yelled.

That's the cardinal rule. No motors. For environmental reasons. Or practical ones, recalling the West Indian messengers who pioneered urban fixed-gear riding in the 1980s, bringing their ingenuity to New York from the islands, where bikes that didn't have much of anything on them to steal were a decided advantage.

But pinning down what constitutes the

## ONLINE: NO STOPPING THEM NOW

At a racetrack in Queens, at a bike shop in Brooklyn and on the streets of Manhattan, fixed-gear bike lovers talk about their particular two-wheeled obsession in an audio slide show:

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fixed-gear movement gets complicated. After all, what does the insanity of Bike Kill have to do with someone like "Fast" Eddie Williams, who runs the bicycle-themed Nayako Gallery in Bedford-Stuyvesant, has published a book of photographs of messengers and competes in Alley Cat and Monster Track street races?

Mr. Williams's scene is the messenger scene, in which he has been a participant since the early 1980s, when he first encountered the West Indian messengers hanging out at Washington Square Park. "I saw them riding," he said. "I liked how they maneuvered, stopped at a red light and didn't step down. And I thought, 'How do they do that?'"

Mr. Williams got a Matusuri, a fast fixed-gear bike, and started working as a messenger. Twenty-five years later, he's still at it, looking incredibly fit and younger than his 43 years. "Track bikes are not made for street," he conceded, "and sometimes I need a hope and a prayer to stop short." But he rhapsodized about their charms. "It's like playing chess," he said. "You think out your moves from a block away."

John Campo, the salty-tongued director of the racing program at the Kissena Velodrome, is another fixie aficionado. As with Mr. Williams, the fixed-gear lifestyle seems to be a healthy one; Mr. Campo looks at least 15 years younger than his 60. Biking isn't his profession — he's a jazz musician who has played with Miles Davis, among others — but it is undeniably his passion.

Mr. Campo missed out on the glory days of the Kissena Velodrome, but he tells tales about the father of Vinny Vella, the actor who plays Jimmy Petrille on "The Sopranos," racing at Madison Square Garden to win enough money to buy a scale for the pushcart he sold fish from, then earning enough to open a fish store on Elizabeth Street. Mr. Campo remembers all the Polish, German and Italian bike clubs, and he remembers Lou Maltese, a member of the Century Road Club who held many cycling records, including the 100-mile national record in a race from Union City, N.J., to Philadelphia.

## 'A Zen Thing'

Far from worrying about fixed-gear bikes getting too popular, Mr. Campo yearns for them to return to the their prominence of a century ago, and he welcomes street riders to Kissena. "These kids are lovely," he said. "They come; they win, lose or draw; they have a great time. This is an American spirit thing, to be free, to do what you want to do and express yourself in your own medium, like surfing or skating."

Surfing and skating are mentioned a lot in relation to fixed-gear bikes. Something about these activities prefigures much of what is going on today in the bike community. Surfing 50 years ago and skating 25 years ago were small, below-the-radar pursuits with their own rituals and secret codes and vernacular. Now they're billion-dollar industries, popular the world over. And in the opinion of many aficionados, a little bit of soul was lost along the way.

Bicycling is obviously different; there are more bikes than cars in the world, and bikes have a longer popular history, not to mention the fact that fixed-gear bikes predate "regular" bikes. But something about the trajectories of surfing and skating from unexamined, semi-underground secret societies to blown-out cheesy "sports" could forecast the future of the fixed-gear bike.

Surfing and skating retained some of their rebelliousness, in part because of the varied, unpredictable demographic of who is involved: 5-year-olds and 80-year-olds of both sexes, doctors and garbage collectors, law-abiding citizens and criminals. That makes the skating or surfing "movement" hard to locate exactly, just like the amorphous bike movement.

Johnny Coast. Gina Scardino. Fast Eddie. John Campo. The menagerie at Bike Kill. It's a broad swath. The group also includes people like Toni Germanotta, a 42-year-old owner of an art studio that serves the apparel industry. "When you're on a fixed gear," said Ms. Germanotta, who works in the garment district, "it gives you a higher skill level. You have to be constantly aware, always watching the road. You don't just ride, and it feels a little crazy."

And it includes Kyle Fay, a designer for Urban Outfitters who is a relatively new convert. "You take the blame if you get hit," he said. "It's self-reliance, being responsible for yourself. It might sound kind of corny, but it's a Zen thing, being one with the bike."

And it includes Alex Escamilla, a 23-year-old book artist from Fort Greene, Brooklyn. "I had a couple of friends who made fun of me for riding one because it was trendy," Ms. Escamilla said. "But the problem with looking at bike riding as a trend is that you lose sight of everything that is positive about bikes. You know, the renewable energy source, exercise, convenience, saving money, saving time, community, seeing the city in a whole new way, blah blah blah."

Besides, she added: "Track bikes are fun. And they're beautiful."