



December 18, 2005

Making Bikers Pipe Down

Armed with a decibel meter, a Laguna Beach police officer works to rid the city's streets of noisy motorcycles. He's a hero to some, an irritation to others.

By Hector Becerra, Times Staff Writer

A month after rolling out of Austin, Texas, on his Harley-Davidson, Zack Padilla could boast of plenty of air-through-the-hair biker adventures.

His friend ran over a deer as they rode out of biker mecca Sturgis, S.D.

Padilla, a Charles Schwab server administrator, spied plumes of wildfires in Idaho, took a tumble on a snowy road in Oregon and rambled past the mighty redwoods of Northern California.

"I had a sense of being in 'The Lord of the Rings,'" the burly black-leather-clad, goateed biker said. "I thought 'Treebeard' was going to come out and talk to me."

FOR THE RECORD:

Motorcycle noise — An article in Sunday's California section about a crackdown on loud motorcycles in Laguna Beach said an increase of 10 decibels is a twofold increase in sound. It is a tenfold increase.

Then at mile 4,666 of his adventure, as he rolled into the artsy town of Laguna Beach, Padilla ran into the "Wall of Sound."

That is, Officer Tom Wall, 60, keeper of the decibel meter.

A fit retired Marine with a buzz cut, Wall stepped off the curb and waved for Padilla, 33, to park his Springer Softail on the side of Pacific Coast Highway. The chopper's exhaust system rattled like a shivering giant's jaw.

"Now, if you give it a little bit of gas for me in neutral," Wall asked, as he pointed the sound measuring device at the motorcycle's exhaust pipe.

The motorcycle let out a roar. The numbers on the sound meter jumped into the triple digits.

"Your motorcycle noise level is 117.5," Wall said.

"Cool," responded an impressed Padilla.

The citable limit in California is 95 decibels, Wall explained.

If Padilla represents today's Harley rider — careerists who shed button-down lives to play out "Easy Rider" fantasies — then Wall represents the response to all that motorcycle noise.

For many, the throaty growl of motorcycles has long been part of the machines' appeal. So spiritually intertwined is sound to riding motorcycles that in 1995 Harley-Davidson tried to trademark the distinctive sound created by its V-twin motorcycle engines.

But with motorcycle ownership increasing by more than 34% since 1998, this year has been marked by a growing concern that bike noise is becoming a source of tension. Laguna Beach is far from the only place to crack down: Police have also stepped up patrols along some favorite biker routes, from the Sunset Strip in West Hollywood to Main Street in Daytona Beach, Fla.

Hundreds of thousands of bikers streaming into Daytona Beach's Bike Week this year were met with signs that read, "You're Back, We're Glad!" and "Ride Quietly, Please," along with tighter enforcement of noise ordinances. Some communities, including Myrtle Beach, S.C., are considering shortening, rescheduling or even doing away with motorcycle rallies.

The industry has taken notice of the complaints as never before.

In May, the 265,000 member American Motorcycle Assn. held its second "noise summit" in Columbus, Ohio, to tackle an issue it said represents the most pointed threat to bikers' rights.

"This is an issue which could affect our right to ride," said Tom Lindsay, a spokesman for the group.

Lindsay mentioned a Louisville, Ky., restaurant he visited recently. "They had a sign that said, 'No helicopters, horse trailers or motorcycles,'" Lindsay said. "That was very clever.... That was very disappointing to us, but it's also the handwriting on the wall."

Harley-Davidson has even asked dealers not to sell straight, unmuffled exhaust pipes, and last year it removed Screaming Eagle parts that are intended for off-street race use from its main catalogs.

But in towns like Laguna Beach that are magnets for weekend bikers, residents aren't waiting to see whether self-regulation works.

Laguna Beach relies on people like Wall, a foot soldier in the battle against noise.

As he stood guard near a grassy area along Pacific Coast Highway, Wall's eyes — hidden by sunglasses — scanned the busy street for traffic scofflaws. His ears were attuned to any break from the normal beach town sounds, the decibel meter often no farther away than a six-shooter would be from a gunslinger.

"My standing here with this thing in my hand sends a message. As people drive through, the legend continues to grow," Wall said with a chuckle. "It takes the subjectivity out of the equation."

It didn't take Wall long to show that Padilla's bike was too loud. Wall points the decibel meter 10 feet behind bikes' exhaust pipes and asks riders to let their bikes idle before revving them to operating or cruising rpm to get the maximum noise level.

Laguna Beach uses the California Highway Patrol's citable threshold of 95 decibels. An increase of 10 decibels may not seem like much, but it's actually a twofold increase in sound, Wall said.

Padilla's bike, at 117.5 decibels, was four times as loud as the 95 considered the lawful limit, Wall said. The Texan could have been fined.

"My job is to sell the citation and make a point. I try to use as much of what I call posture to get their attention and let them know I'm serious," Wall said. "Once we've reached that understanding, that I'm in charge, that this is my traffic stop and that this is how we're going to do it, then I give them a couple of options."

In his time with the Marines, Wall flew more than 1,000 combat missions in Vietnam and was shot down in seven helicopters. He was shot in the arm, and a co-pilot lost his leg during one attack.

After leaving Vietnam, he taught such topics as military history and leadership at the University of Minnesota during the 1970s, at a time when there were frequent campus demonstrations against the military.

By day, Wall works at a global engineering company. But on weekends, he dons his Laguna Beach police uniform. He joined the force nine years ago after impressing department brass by being the only person to complain about a street preacher who aggressively harassed beachgoers. He works 100 hours a month, every Saturday and Sunday and every holiday, and is paid about minimum wage.

For some bikers, many bent on conjuring a Steppenwolf, anti-establishment image — at least on weekends — Wall is about as establishment as it gets. To them, he is "RoboCop."

"It's ridiculous. They got one guy, an ex-military guy, and all he does is write tickets," said Ruben Hummel, an Orange County firefighter and Harley rider. "He's just badge-heavy. He just wants to show his authority."

Wall extends his patrol to traffic scofflaws and distracted pedestrians.

Recently, when a woman pushing a baby stroller entered the crosswalk just as the green signal was replaced by blinking red, he ordered her back to the sidewalk. He told one man whose car poked past a crosswalk line to avoid such intrusions in the future.

The owner of the Marine Room tavern, a popular biker hangout that features roots-rock bands, said some bikers have vowed no longer to visit Laguna Beach because of the city's and Wall's approach.

"He takes that approach that there's only black and white, no gray. It's terrible," said Marine Room owner Kelly Boyd, a former Laguna Beach councilman. "He takes no prisoners."

Boyd, a Vietnam veteran himself, said business has dropped since the crackdowns began two years ago.

"On a good Sunday we used to have anywhere from 40 to 100 bikes out on the street," Boyd said. "Now I hear we had 10 yesterday.... It's affecting my business, and that irritates the hell out of me."

It's with a certain Joe Friday style that Wall patrols downtown Laguna Beach, a colorful pastiche of restaurants, art galleries, high-fashion stores, ice cream shops and bars.

He believes "people crave example and structure in their lives, and I see it all the time. And I try to be a positive example for the other police officers and for people in town and provide some structure."

For Wall, structure means anything from "stern warnings to a ticket." A driver's license is a contract to adhere to certain rules, he said.

On the streets, he's by-the-book.

"You on the bikes ... those pipes are illegal," he recently told a middle-aged man and woman riding Harley-Davidsons on Forest Avenue. The woman's jaw dropped.

Laguna Beach City Councilwoman Toni Iseman is glad to hear that Wall has a reputation for being tough on loud motorcycles.

"I think he's my hero," she said. "It's a cheap thrill for some of these guys to make a lot of noise. People can't have conversations when these guys go by en masse, and they think it's so cute to make noise."

But because motorcyclists are a big part of Laguna's tourist economy, not all merchants agree with Iseman. To critics, the city's noise crackdown hurts business by driving away customers.

Once, after the anti-noise effort intensified, motorcyclists rode through Iseman's neighborhood revving their engines. It appeared, said Laguna Beach Police Chief James E. Spreine, that they were expressing their displeasure at the councilwoman's stance on exhaust noise.

"I'm not a hard-nosed guy. I want some type of happy medium. I want a win-win solution," Spreine said. "But I haven't been able to figure it out."

Beyond the crackdown, there has been much debate about Wall's methods. To some bikers, he comes across as almost confrontational.

To cool tempers, Spreine recently asked Wall not to station himself near the Marine Room because his presence might be seen as inflammatory. The chief said he strongly supports Wall but thinks some bikers are annoyed by his lectures.

Standing on the sidewalk outside the Marine Room, former police officer Dennis Sanders, 53, of Foothill Ranch said some bikers go out of their way to be loud.

"I don't blame the cops for writing tickets for people who are abusing things, who rev their bikes, bikes with no baffles in them, stuff like that," Sanders said. "But this one cop, he just sees Harleys coming and he pulls them over.... You can't declare war on people with their recreational vehicles, because this is a recreational town."

As he patrolled Pacific Coast Highway, Wall shrugged off such comments. "As long as my granddaughters hug me and tell me they love me," he said, "I don't care."

As a young Marine in the 1960s, he rode off-road motorcycles in the Saddleback Mountain area with his buddies, he said. He has owned three Harleys, including a Fat Boy and a Sportster.

"Riding a motorcycle is almost a cathartic experience," Wall said. "It's a chance for freedom of expression. There's nothing better than hopping on a motorcycle."

But he said he never for a second considered altering their exhaust systems to make them louder — or riding a bike without a full-face helmet.

"I was old enough to see 'Easy Rider' in the movie theater, and that whole approach in the '60s was completely against my character and training," Wall said.

He said loud bikes have been known to irritate motorists into violently lashing out against motorcyclists, so he views the issue as one of public safety. Therefore, a bike he can hear from a block away is a candidate for a traffic stop. "Like a small dog waiting for the owner to come home ... my ears perk up," Wall said.

A spirited confrontation with an affluent biker from Newport Beach prompted the department to buy the high-tech decibel meter that Wall now uses.

Wall had given the biker a citation for having loud pipes. The motorcyclist argued that the officer was making a subjective call and that he had a constitutional right to express himself through his bike, Wall recalled.

A hearing officer sided with the biker. Wall said it came down to a judgment call, and the hearing officer did not feel there was a definitive way of proving that the man's bike was too loud.

Enter the decibel meter — or as some bikers have called it, according to Wall, his "rectal thermometer." He still catches flak from many bikers.

Wall said at least one wealthy motorcyclist told him he probably "makes six times as much money" as the officer.

"I usually say, 'Well, you probably make more than that.... I just do it for fun,' " Wall said, setting up a punch line. " 'I just love writing tickets.' "

It appeared that Zack Padilla was going to be getting one of those tickets. Wall heard the rumble of his Springer Softail from a block away on Pacific Coast Highway. Padilla was also wearing an allegedly illegal helmet.

"I've never had anybody do a decibel meter on me in the state of Texas or any of the other 20 states I've been through in the last three weeks," Padilla said.

After checking Padilla's driving record and chatting about his trip, Wall gave him back his driver's license and cautioned him that the helmet he had bought at the Oregon border would not protect him in case of a fall.

"People won't find you until the buzzards do," Wall said. Padilla chuckled and nodded.

"You're clear, you've got a good driving record. I appreciate that," Wall said. "Zack, I appreciate your cooperation, and now you have a nice trip."

A few minutes passed, and Padilla hopped onto his motorcycle. Then, with a thundering roar, he rocketed back onto Pacific Coast Highway and headed south.

This time, luck was on his side. Neither Wall nor the decibel meter was in range.

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