



The Art and Heart of the Bike

Cycling is a sport so full of passion that it permeates into every nook and cranny. The passion that is so visible in racing is just as evident when you observe the fabricators. The people and companies that build frames, components and clothing. There are so many that have carried their expression to a high form of art. Much the way that luthiers, makers of fine instruments, make tools that do more than make sound. They make tools that do something to all of your senses save perhaps taste. Ever since I was barely two digits of age I have enjoyed viewing, touching and pushing these works of art to their limit. Some companies command an ability to create objects that perform extremely well, but just can't quite quality as 'art'. These companies focus harder on sales and have marketing budgets. The emphasis is on boosting the bottom line. Then there are artists that don't have sales people or marketing budgets because they are so intent on creating their art. They have sacrificed to their art forms. Their bottom lines have numbers with one comma in them and usually those sales are to people who heard about them via word-of-mouth or saw a masterpiece somewhere.

There's nothing wrong with having the companies out there that make the products that let more people enjoy cycling at a reduced cost. It's like having Ford and Chevrolet available to make some cars we can afford while still throwing out models like the Mustang and Corvette to challenge the World. Those cars are very cool. Stick your foot in them and they will set you back in your seat as fast as anything out of Bologna, Italy. They just don't have that 'whoa' factor. They're practically as common as dump trucks and cement mixers. You don't care if one stops so that you can caress its rear wing. I'm saying, another one of the great things about cycling is that there are people sitting with welding torch in hand right now in back alleys and old sheds brazing things that will never be created quite that way again. They're joining tubes and filing away on projects that not only could you bolt to wall of your foyer or display in a museum but you can go take out on a road or trail and wring its guts out. Talk about a great investment. That's what guitar investors say when they spend \$65,000 on a battered Fender Stratocaster from the 60's. "It looks great on the wall *and* I can play it." Generally, bicycle art does not increase in value like old guitars can at times. Bicycles don't return healthy profits. They return profits in health.

If Carrol Shelby never teamed up with Ford, they would have still achieved a 'sporty' essence within their brand. They may never have gained the racing flair they enjoyed in their heyday. He gave them that. The Shelby Cobra was a creation that invoked those special feelings. That musky combination of lust, danger and beauty. It's stationary shape gave a thick injection of adrenaline. That was a vehicle made with vision. Forethought from a Master. That was Shelby. The auto industry has it's Shelby. The bicycle industry has Keith Bontrager. Bontrager is known to most people today because his name shows up on

practically everything that Trek makes with the exception of their frames. I remember when frames are what Keith Bontrager did. He did them like no one else before him. He did most things that way.

When I was a punk, at least a younger punk, I hung out in a town full of all kinds of punks. Santa Cruz, California. When you get so many punks in one place, artists generally emerge. Uber Punks. One day I was driving around getting into different types of no-good with teammate Daryl Price. Punk capital P. He said "Hey let's go see Keith." I knew who he was talking about. This was the mid-80's and Keith's reputation was already abound in Northern California. We pulled down a back alley that looked like something out of Hill Street Blues and parked next to an unmarked door. We entered into a very small shop that had so many random tubes and scraps and tools packed into it that my eyes couldn't take it all in. Keith Bontrager was busy working on something but he took the time to ask what we were up to. We didn't stick around long, but I left knowing that Keith was the real deal. He was going at least as hard at his craft as we were with our young racing careers.

I spent some more time in Bontrager's shop in the years following that visit. I watched his operation grow from that small room to take over some of the surrounding space. In late 1993 I decided to switch from road racing to World Cup mountain bike racing. I sent Bontrager a proposal with the intention of racing his bike all over the World for a relatively small sum of money. Some weeks later, his business partner phoned me and said "I don't want to do this with you, but Keith does. So we are." I went back to the Bontrager shop after the agreement was signed. Keith had handmade machines all over the place hooked up to hydraulic pumps that were frantically stress-testing various components. We discussed my situation while I watched a new Bontrager handlebar prototype get bent up and down relentlessly. At the same time, a fax came through outlining a royalty payment for a Bontrager fork crown design that another company had used to sell two crap-tons of suspension forks. It was not a small sum. Keith didn't pay much attention to it. He was in his element and that meant working with hardware, not doing math on his bank account.

The crew that Bontrager had hired was core. They were rough and tumble and they obviously liked working with him. Some of them were artists and craftsmen in their own right. In their spare time they cut and welded objects that I now wish I had purchased with reckless abandon. Things like furniture and sculptures. Items that were for other purposes but retained the art and heart of the bicycle in them. Keith's people were living their life's work. It was infectious, and I was doing the same thing with the products that came out of that shop. I was doing the job that they were intended for and I was doing it well. Nothing Keith ever handed me was returned without a discussion with him directly. He also never put me on a prototype that failed. One day he handed me a road frame in the bright orange color that I specified. He said "This one's gonna be a little different for you but I think you're gonna like it. Let me know how it is." It was made of steel and had a severe rear-sloping top tube. When I built it up it looked tiny, but the dimensions worked. It was, to my knowledge, the very first 'compact' frame made. Within the first 200 meters riding it I knew that it was indeed special. Even made from steel it was better than any titanium or carbon frame I had owned. When I went back to the shop to give him my initial feedback, he handed me an old faded O'Neil collared shirt embroidered with the 'B' logo. It was part of the Bontrager merchandising program. "Sometimes we find used shirts around town and logo them. This is a good one." I still have that shirt. It fits me like a skin-tight cycling jersey now.

Within a year, Trek had purchased Bontrager's business, moved across the alley into an even larger space and ramped up production. Just a short time later, they padlocked the building, shut down production and restructured the entire business. Bontrager would produce no more frames and would work exclusively on outsourced components. The move

was necessary from a corporate perspective. One extra slash mark on a long balance sheet. My Bontrager bike from 1994 still hangs on a hook in my garage. It hasn't been ridden since that year. Drops of my dried blood and saliva are visible on it's scratched tubes. To me, it's like having a Shelby Cobra that Carrol himself made for me. I raced myself inside-out on it around the World. With Keith, you got one bike for the year because that's all you would need and you both knew it. Real Shelby Cobra's fetch a lot of money at auction. So do old Fender guitars. They deserve those prices because they are the true, usable art forms of their realms. My old bike wouldn't get very much on eBay. Doesn't matter. I'm not selling it. If there is a bike that deserves a tremendous premium on the used market though, it's a pre-Trek Bontrager.