

# JUSTIN BARNES

BY JENNIFER WARREN  
PHOTOS BY TARYN FUNCHEON

It was an early Saturday morning and Justin Barnes had all the tell-tale signs of a late night: overly-tussled hair, bags under his eyes, and a staggered gait. Clad in a wrinkled t-shirt, blue jeans, and work boots, the unassuming 29-year-old owner of JB GRAFIX clutched his styrofoam Dunkin' Donuts cup and its much-needed caffeine like a Titanic passenger clinging to a life preserver.



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"We had a long night over here, working on a bike until two in the morning to meet a deadline, but we made it," he said. Barnes has been "making it" in a big way in the painting business lately.

The go-to guy for putting the final artistic touches on more than ten Orange County Choppers motorcycles until a break-up with the Teutels in late 2004, Barnes' resume includes the P.O.W. Bike, the Comanche Bike, the Snap-On Bike, the New York Jets Bike, the Dixie Chopper and the Fire Bike. Despite the popularity of the Discovery Channel's weekly O.C.C.-based bike show, however, Barnes prefers the company of his two shop canines – pit bull "Lady" and Rottweiler "Buddy" – and co-workers Marty Gross and Letisha Wood to an intrusive television film crew.

Lady prances over to her owner for some T.L.C., which he is happy to provide. Grease and paint – trademarks of his 70+ hour workweeks – cover both hands and fingernails, and Lady gets an unintentional makeover as he pets the dog. Work has had a way of finding Barnes, dating back a dozen years when the then-17-year-old motocross junkie toiled around with helmet painting during long Sundays at the track.

"A buddy talked me into doing some helmets when he saw me drawing one day between races," Barnes recalled while offering Lady some more lovin'. "Soon, I got an airbrush and people were coming up to me with more and more helmets to paint. I just loved it."

And the first helmet he created for himself? "It was green and black with the Looney Tunes character Marvin the Martian painted on it. I actually wore it in my first race," he said. "Unfortunately, I don't have it anymore because I got in a really bad crash that day and ended up in a coma for eight hours."

Since that helmet's demise, however, Barnes has rebounded and become the mainstay painter for Factory Yamaha motocross racer Tim Ferry, whose factory helmets he adorns. One features a flat black background with hot rod style pinstripes and gold leaf



flames. The design was so well received, a replica of it is being made, providing potentially lucrative dividends. Yet another Ferry helmet with the Barnes' signature touch is a bright orange tribal design.

Although a great success, Barnes quickly stopped limiting himself to helmet design, and motorcycle piecework soon evolved. The eager and talented self-taught artist was more than happy to meet the challenge. Banging away at metal and painting in his parents' shed, he knew bigger working quarters were necessary, especially with the flood of assignments pouring in.

"My friend's dad hooked me up with this place in Newburgh (NY), which started out as just a two-door garage, but now it's about five times as big," said Barnes, who has dabbled in designing cars and boats as well. "We need all the room we can get, because the work just keeps on coming in... people just seem to find us."

And locating JB GRAFIX is not an easy task. Barnes uses no advertising. The only phone that exists in the nondescript shop is his personal cell phone. So how do people track down this amazing team?

"Word just gets around. Someone sees our work, they like it, and they talk," he said, glancing at his watch, eager to return to his current project, a poker-themed bike for a Florida-based gambling aficionado. "It's not like we look for the work. We're booked four months ahead all the time. If anything, it's more like we're hiding in a cave back here in the shop."

This "cave" actually contains the nuts and bolts of Barnes' operation: In the paint, welding and prep rooms, two barren motorcycles are on lifts. Specialized equipment occupies each room and paint fumes fill the air. Rock tunes blare out of a nearby boom box. Gross, the bodywork expert, and Wood, who assists Barnes with drawing and painting duties, can be heard laughing in the back, munching on some breakfast while leafing through the paper. Next to them lies a motorcycle seat intricately covered with the Joker and other playing card memorabilia, all designed by Wood. Works in progress are everywhere.

"It's not easy, it's a lot of hard work," Barnes said. "A typical job set of a gas tank and front rear fender can take anywhere from three to three-and-a-half weeks. Having deadlines can really suck, but there are a lot of rewards that come from doing good work."

And a solid product sometimes entails sacrifices. Barnes, who does "find time to party and socialize," is not naive about the fact that good things come at a price.

But despite all the positive feedback on his creations, he remains his biggest critic. "I work my ass off because I'm just never satisfied," Barnes said in his charmingly shy manner. "Every time you work, you learn something, and you always get to witness that progress... it's a great thing."

The fruits of his labors come in the form of his customers' reactions. "I love seeing people's faces when they see a completed bike," said Barnes, smiling at the thought of the creative freedom most customers allow him with designs. "The way they freak out, bug out, man, is just so great. The truth is, I would do this work no matter how much money I made."

Perhaps the most complimentary reactions surface from one of Barnes' favorite masterpieces, the O.C.C.-built P.O.W. Bike: white and black with barbed wire separating the colors, the patriotic machine features a back fender similar to the Vietnam Wall memorial in Washington, DC.

But for Barnes, who no longer does work for the O.C.C. outlet, it's all about diversification. He recently painted a Game Cube for Nintendo. About eight inches wide and four inches deep, the video game system sports a silver metal flake base, faded into red candles, and atop it all lie tribal black graphics. The colorful cube is scheduled to appear in an assortment of national men's magazines, including Maxim and GQ.

Taking his painting game to yet another realm, Barnes has also done up some original

designs for Gibson, the guitar manufacturer based in Nashville. To date, he has completed three Les Paul Supremes. While branching out, however, Barnes remains loyal to motorcycles, working on a few from Newburgh's Dees Ultimate Cycles (black, mythological fantasy is the present genre of choice) as well as several other private jobs for owners across the country, many who found him through his website, JBGRAFIX.com.

"I think variety is really good; you just get stuck in a rut doing the same thing over and over," said the reenergized Barnes. "We no longer put all our eggs in one basket, like we did with O.C.C. Having so much pressure on us, we had no time left over to take on any other jobs. Now, we can afford to be more diversified, and we're really enjoying it."

Reflecting on all of his work, Barnes is hesitant to designate a favorite, for his priorities lie elsewhere. Of the 100+ motorcycles he has put his artistic signatures on over the past 18 months, he says he likes each one for a different reason and no one better than another. In fact his passion for airbrushing just might make its way to the educational circles. The intensely reserved Barnes, who claims he "would never be able to actually get in front of people and teach something," is playing with the possibility of composing "how to" videos, sharing his knowledge with the growing number of youngsters intrigued by this painting artform. So one might ask where the time and motivation would come from for yet another lofty project. For Barnes, the answer is easy.

"I just feel so lucky every day to get the chance to do something I love; there is nothing better in the world than that." ◊