

Timeless, Not Retro

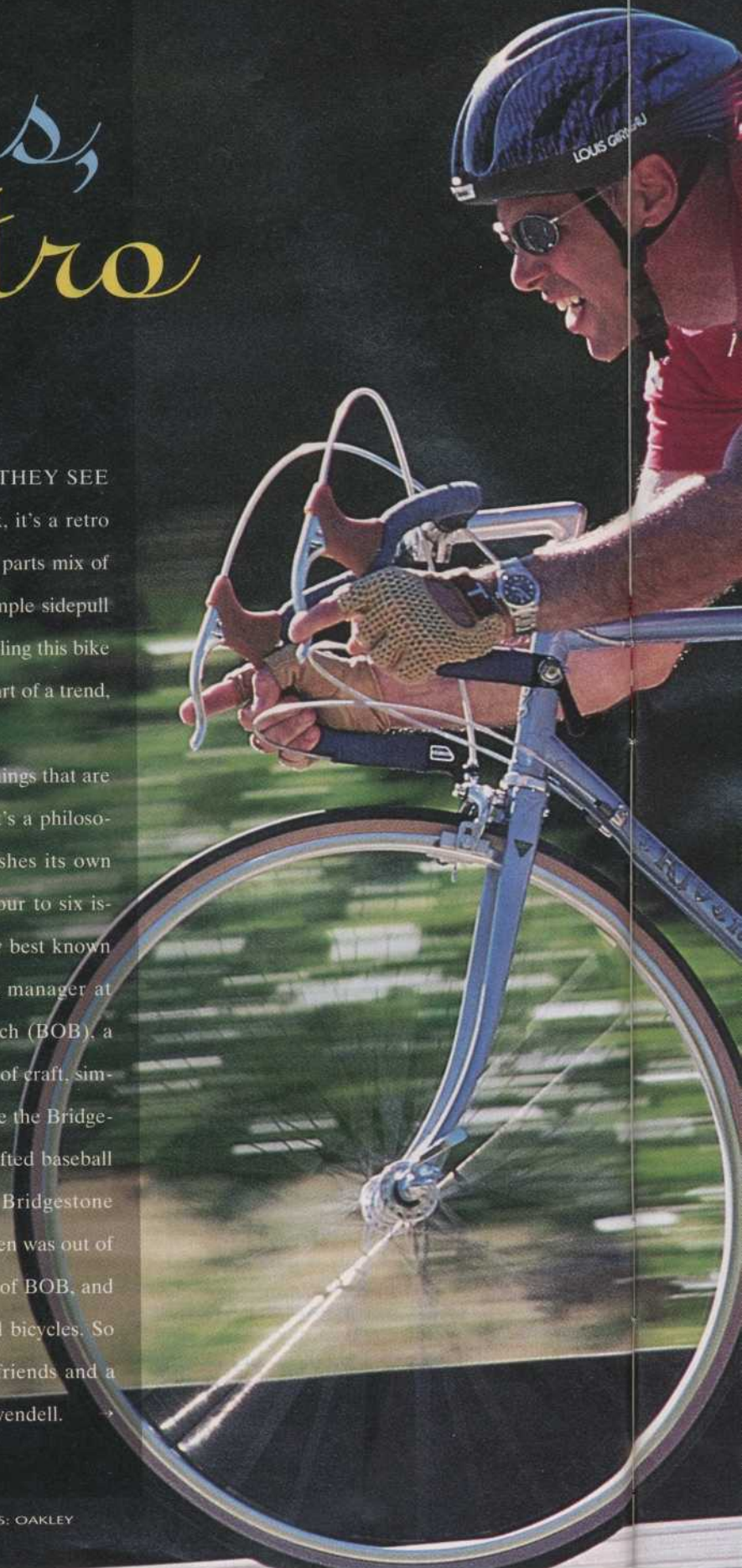
BY GARRETT LAI

THE FIRST THING PEOPLE SAY WHEN THEY SEE this bike seems to be something like, "Oh look, it's a retro bike." It's an understandable mistake given the parts mix of old Simplex derailleurs, Suntour nonaero brake levers, simple sidepull calipers and friction bar-end shifters. Be that as it may, labeling this bike retro (or anything else, for that matter) slots it into being part of a trend, and that's precisely what Rivendells are not about.

The philosophy at Rivendell is one of timelessness, of things that are made to last and transcend fads and marketing whims. It's a philosophy nearly everyone is aware of since Rivendell publishes its own newsletter, the *Rivendell Reader* (\$20 a year gets you four to six issues). Grant Petersen, Rivendell's proprietor, is probably best known as the outspoken, opinionated product and marketing manager at Bridgestone. He created the Bridgestone Owner's Bunch (BOB), a loose collective of cyclists whose adherence to the values of craft, simplicity and purpose transcended cycling to the point where the Bridgestone catalog contained essays on the virtues of hand-crafted baseball mitts, beeswax and esoteric French bike tools. When Bridgestone pulled the plug on its U.S. bicycle division in 1994, Petersen was out of work. But he had this tremendous following in the form of BOB, and he was having too much fun getting to design and build bicycles. So armed with a fistful of credit cards, good wishes from friends and a mailing list of like-minded souls from BOB, he started Rivendell.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEVIN WING

RIDER: GREGG STERN • JERSEY: DESCENTE • SHORTS: SUGOI • GLASSES: OAKLEY
GLOVES: HATCH • SOCKS: SIDI







From the beginning, the goal was to produce a line of frames that would be true to Petersen's ideals of durability, practicality and aesthetic appeal. But the design process (and the need for capital) meant the bikes would need time to develop. In the meantime, Rivendell

started up the *Reader*—combination newsletter, soapbox and catalog. Rivendell's stock in trade was bike stuff of the lasting variety. Holding to the idea that index shifting isn't a necessary invention, that 6-speed cogsets are enough for anybody and bar-end shifters are convenient enough means you can fill your catalog with "outdated" parts such as Simplex drop-parallel-gram derailleurs (which will never be index-compatible), Suntour Bar-Cons and Brooks stretched leather saddles. Then there are noncycling items that, somehow, fit the Rivendell philosophy: handmade wooden boomerangs, wallets of waxed cotton and the mysterious "newer darker sunglasses."

While this merchandising allowed Rivendell to keep its doors open and gave Petersen resources to design his bicycles, it also got people to think about bicycles in a different way. Petersen has definite ideas about bicycles and the bike industry, and he shares them openly with his readers. For example, recent *Readers* have featured pieces on stem quills (entitled "Squawking About Stems"), Petersen's philosophy in selecting heavier wall tubing and what makes a good handlebar. Petersen has a way of humanizing the industry, illustrated by an essay on Brooks saddles ("The most comfortable saddle I've ever ridden," he wrote) accompanied by a piece about George T. Flegg, Brooks' production manager. He throws in small tidbits about the people he works with while he grouches about something on his soapbox, like this bit about designing a lug: "The breakthrough came halfway through the process, when I suggested the curl on the side. Marc liked it but Chris didn't and Chris has excellent taste, so I was confused. Then Marc and Chris put their heads together and submitted a design we all liked." For other companies, this would amount to dirty laundry, but for Petersen, it's just something else to share with his customers.

22 July 1996 BICYCLE GUIDE



■ Our clipless-era mechanic routed the toe straps the wrong way. Once fixed, the ALE clips and straps were a happy piece of nostalgia.



■ The Bullseye hubs are sealed-cartridge units that were smooth and unobtrusive. The rear was custom spaced to 128 millimeters.



Something Different

Cast your eye on the Rivendell, and even without the old parts as obvious clues you can see that it's something different. There's that extended head tube

rising 15 millimeters above the top tube, for one thing. Then there are those ornate, curlicue lugs and that magnificent biplane fork crown. There's tremendous hand labor involved, amounting to about seven hours' worth for each

STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM BROWN

frame, start to finish. Most of that comes from filing, mitering and brazing—all processes that have been prolonged by the lug design. But it's when you get on the saddle that you realize a Rivendell is different in other, more significant ways. First off, there's the riding position. The handlebar is much higher relative to the saddle, which puts you in a more upright position. It gives a feeling that inspired my erstwhile partner Mark Riedy to say, "It feels like you're pushing a shopping cart." I like a low bar, but with a deep drop handlebar like the Nitto Model 175 fitted to our bike you never miss the low stem when you want to get down and honk. You might have to bend your elbows a little more to get low, but it's not that big of a deal unless you're going more than 90 percent (in which case you're racing and probably aren't interested in fancy lugs on your bike anyhow).

An Easy Rider

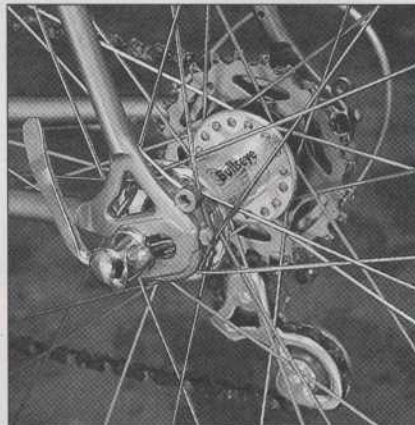
The Rivendell is a remarkably stable machine. You can ride with no hands at ridiculously low speeds, and it's comfortable on long rides and over nasty city roads. The ride quality itself is controlled and comfortable but with a bit of an edge. It's rather like a Mercedes-Benz in that regard: You can just galumph through potholes without bruising your backside on that hard leather saddle, but if you want to turn a wheel in anger or just have to make that yellow light, you give up very little performance at all.

The key to making the Rivendell feel the way it does lies in two elements: the bottom bracket height and the chainstay length. The bottom bracket height is critical, and it's the first point Petersen puts to paper in cycle design after selecting a wheel and tire size. The standard drop for a bottom bracket is usually in the neighborhood of 65 to 70 millimeters below the wheel axles, but Petersen uses a 75-millimeter drop. "It's just another 5 millimeters, but I think it's a noticeable 5 millimeters. I wouldn't bet my eyesight that I could tell the difference between a 70 and a 75," he said, "but I'd bet maybe the tip of a baby finger." The lower bracket gives a low center of gravity, which translates into that uncanny sense of stability. It also makes the bike easier to handle at speed, and the confidence it inspires will get you through corners faster and with less white knuckling.

The chainstay length for a Rivendell

is a very long 42.5 centimeters, and that's measured to the centers of the generously sized 10-millimeter horizontal dropouts. If you want, you can stretch the chainstay length to 43 centimeters or tuck the wheel under to 42 centimeters (which gets you within 1 centimeter of standard convention). It's the combination of longish chainstays and a relatively short front center that gives the Rivendell its balanced feel. It's definitely not like anything else out

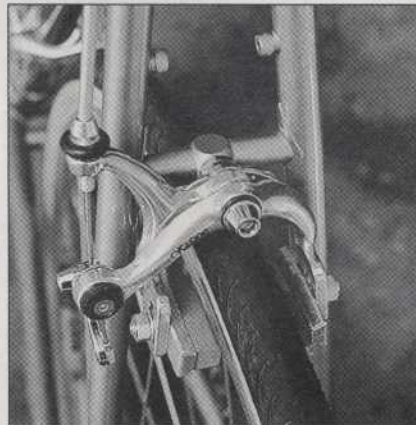
■ **The 10-millimeter-long dropouts and fender eyelets make the Rivendell more versatile than most, standouts in a vertical-dropout world.**



there. Really drive the pedals hard, and it's a stable bike that any idiot can ride in a straight line. But exert some body English and flick the bar, and the bike banks over and turns, *right now!*

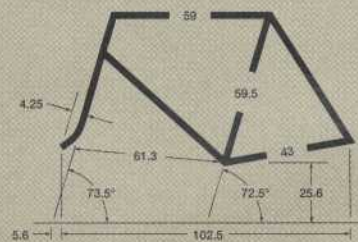
Petersen likes to think of his creation as an all-around road bike. As such, there are certain elements to the frame that make it unique. There's clearance for tires up to 35 millimeters in diameter, so you can mount up some bomber tires and cruise fire roads or just enjoy

■ **They're not fancy, but the Suntour sidepulls are plenty firm and offer huge amounts of tire clearance. Note the rack braze-ons.**



Rivendell Road

Price: \$1050 frame and fork, approx. \$2100 as tested
Sizes available: 50, 52, 54, 56, 57.5, 59.5, 62cm
Size tested: 59.5cm (center to top)
Frame weight: 4 lb 8 oz (2.04kg)
Fork weight: 1 lb 8 oz (.68kg)
Front-wheel weight: 2 lb 14 oz (1.30kg)
Rear-wheel weight: 3 lb 15 oz (1.79kg)
Total weight: 23 lb (10.43kg)
Frame material: lugged, silver-brazed Reynolds 753 heat-treated manganese-moly steel with split 7-o'clock rear brake cable stops, pump peg and chain hanger
Fork: Reynolds 531 manganese-moly steel blades with 753 steerer and Rivendell cast crown
Rims: 32-hole Mavic MA2
Spokes: 14-gauge DT stainless laced 2-cross front, 3-cross rear
Hubs: 32-hole Bullseye
Tires: Ritchey Road K Force 700x28c clinchers
Crank: 172.5mm Suntour Superbe Pro
Bottom bracket: Suntour Superbe Pro
Shifters: Suntour Bar-Cons
Derailleurs: Simplex SLJ front, Simplex 5500 rear
Freewheel: Sachs Maillard



Chain: D.I.D Super
Gearing: 39/53 chainrings, 12-24 7-speed freewheel
Brakes: Suntour Cyclone
Saddle: Brooks B.17
Seat post: 27.2x210mm Nitto Jaguar
Pedals: MKS Sylvan with ALE toeclips and straps
Handlebar: 42cm Nitto Model 175
Stem: 120mm Nitto Pearl
Headset: 1-in. Stronglight with needle bearings

Information

Rivendell Bicycle Works
 1547 Palos Verdes, #402
 Walnut Creek, CA 94596
 (510)933-7304

<http://www.veloworks.com/rivendell/>



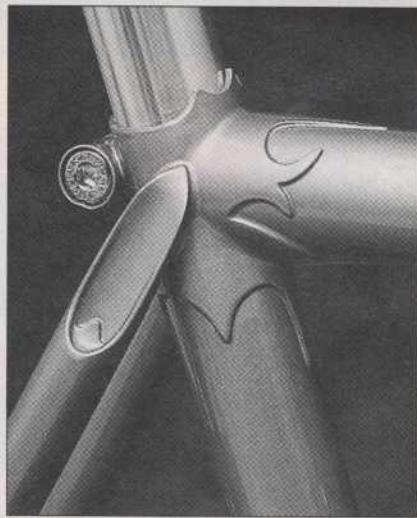
the plush feel of a fat tire as it swooshes along the pavement. The added clearance also means you can mount fenders (and there are fender eyelets and screws on every frame) or have some extra wobbling room for the wheel if you happen to break a spoke.

The oddest thing about the Rivendell is the rear axle spacing. It's 128 millimeters, which is neither today's 8-speed standard of 130 millimeters or yesterday's 6/7-speed spec of 126 millimeters. Petersen's line of reasoning is that most of us don't need that 12-tooth small cog anyhow, so 8-speed drivetrains weren't a necessary invention. Most of us should be on 7-speed bikes, he reasons, but since the majority of today's rear hubs are built for a 130-millimeter dropout width, 128 millimeters is a compromise that lets you run either spacing without trouble. I feel a little odd about bending the stays to fit the hub (although smarter folks than myself say it's okay), so I like the idea that Rivendell will build your bike with the dropout spacing you'd like at no extra charge. And the company will, for that matter, build your bike with the head tube extended 20 millimeters or not at all, if you don't care for the 15-millimeter rise.

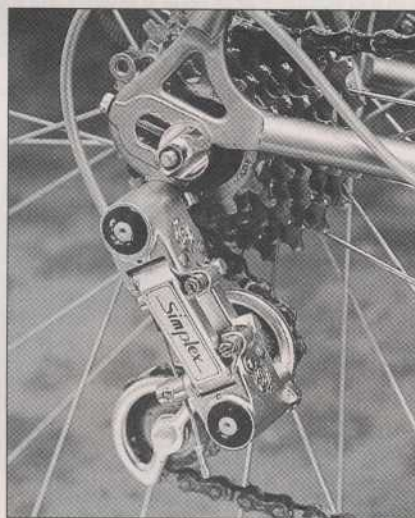
A Timeless Classic

With Petersen's devotion to things classic and timeless, it's no wonder that Rivendell chooses steel for its bicycles. The frames are built from Reynolds' tried-and-true 753 heat-treated manganese-moly steel. Petersen runs wall thicknesses that are somewhere between standard Reynolds 753 and 531. Reynolds 531 is basically 753 that hasn't been heat treated, so the customary wall on 531 is a bit thicker. Petersen uses a conservative spec, but he's more concerned with frame life and resistance to everyday mishaps like dings and handlebar whacks than he is with how far the bike tips a scale.

People seem to be more comfortable when they can classify things, which is why I think the Rivendell makes them uneasy. At \$1050 for a frame and fork, it's no beginner's bike. But with that longish wheelbase and free-ranging manner, it's no criterium bike so it's not one for the aspiring racer. It could be a good touring bike, but it lacks the cantilever brake bosses and low-rise front pannier mounts that tourists love. When asked what the Rivendell is, Petersen replied, "It's not a retro bike. It's a bike that's always going to work. It's never



■ Exquisitely detailed lugs and seatstay caps set this bike apart from its contemporaries.



■ The Simplex changer was quiet and responsive despite the lack of indexing.



going to be more out of date than it is now or less or more fashionable than it is now. It's a sensible bike. It's designed for comfortable, all-round road riding."

In my time with the Rivendell, I took it on everything I could. I rode it at 10 mph on the beach path to get Slurpees. I rode to the store and hauled groceries with it. I took it on some long days, the kind where I wished I didn't have to be home later. And although it seems as though you have to accept a lot of oddities with the Rivendell, you never really notice when you're on it. What you do notice is how easygoing it is on the road, how it is at once capable of anything, yet friendly and comfortable. It's surprising, since I tend to favor steep seat tubes (my road bike has a 74-de-

gree mast, and the Rivendell's is a mere 72.5 degrees) and low handlebars.

I think the most remarkable thing about the Rivendell is how utterly unremarkable it is. Yes, it has fantastic lugs—castings so finely detailed and intricate we'll probably never see their like again. And it has what might be the most beautiful head tube badge in the world. But throw a leg over the Rivendell and go for a ride, and you never really notice these things. You don't notice the oddities you're forced to accept like long chainstays and higher stems, low bottom brackets and laid-back geometry. The bike becomes transparent, and all you have to do is ride. That, my friends, is what makes this a remarkable bike. 