

CLASSIC DRIVER

[Breakfast in Shoreditch with Supertramp's petrolhead sax player John Helliwell](#)

Lead

Throughout his time playing for sold-out stadiums and travelling the world making music that sound-tracked a generation, John Helliwell's passion for all things horological and mechanical burned bright. We met for a bite in London to hear the stories and learn more about the machinery involved...

After choosing the life of a musician in London over a computer programmer in Sweden, John Helliwell's role as saxophone player in Supertramp saw him travel far and wide with the renowned English rock collective. Given John's well-known love for watches, motorbikes, and cars, we caught up with the man himself in East London, amongst the delectable selection of custom bikes, gear, and hearty food at [The Bike Shed Motorcycle Club](#), to find out more about what makes this musician tick.



At what point did you really start getting into watches?

Before we went on our big 1983 tour, we were promoting it all over the world, covering South America, South Africa, and Europe, and we ended up in Switzerland. I decided this was probably the place to buy a good watch. At the time, I was wearing a Timex, so I bought two Rolex Datejusts, one for me and one for my wife. Unfortunately, I went swimming in Santa Barbara with mine on and it got lost at sea. After that, I ended up seeing an IWC and thinking that they were just more my pace, and I have stuck with them ever since.

How did your relationship with IWC develop?

It was around 2002. I was visiting a friend in Zurich and suggested we try and visit the factory. I expected to arrive and be part of a big group amongst other tourists, but when we turned up, waiting outside was CEO Georges Kern. It turned out he was a Supertramp fan. He called me a week or two later and asked me to play at a soirée in Geneva for the launch of the Jacques Cousteau Aquatimer, and after some pestering, we played a jazz set and threw in a few Supertramp songs for him. And then Georges kept inviting me back, and we've always stayed in touch from there. I love the Big Pilots and really love the Portuguese, such classic designs.



Back in the Supertramp days, was the reality of touring as glamorous and excessive as it's often portrayed?

It's quite hard work, and because our music was quite serious, we had to be sober to play it, so we couldn't be out of it like some bands could at the time. When we rolled into a different city, I would check out all the watch shops and see what everyone had — that was my thing.

When Supertramp got started, was it a rock 'n' roll thing to have a bike?

No, it didn't really come into it. I didn't start riding until I went to the States, and not one of the other guys were remotely interested in bikes. Though, the drummer did have a Corvette with the number plate GETAJOB, and he would always get pulled over by the cops...

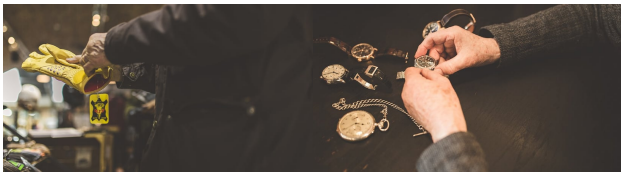


When did motorbikes start to become a big part of your life?

When we were living in California in 1976, I fancied a motorbike and got a Honda CB360T. I rode that for a while, and then, in 1977, we did a European tour, and the whole time I was thinking about bikes. One of our tech guys was into bikes, so we were constantly talking about them, buying magazines and so on. So, we arranged a tour of the BMW factory, which was amazing. Despite that, I got hooked on Moto Guzzis, and as soon as the tour ended, I ordered a Guzzi. Every Sunday morning, all the bikers would ride up to The Rock Store in the Malibu hills, including Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jay Leno. It was a nice little scene. All the canyons were a joy to ride, so that really got me into bikes.

Do you have any particularly memorable motorbike trips?

I got to know Patrick Pons, the French GP rider, through a mutual friend, and he invited us to see him race at Silverstone in 1980. Prior to this, I'd arranged to borrow a bike from him so a friend and I could go on a French tour. Unfortunately, Patrick was killed at Silverstone that year and this never happened, so I ended up getting a Honda CBX1000 for the tour, with my friend on his Goldwing. We even had somewhat-illegal CB radios for the trip — he was Roast Beef, I was Yorkshire Pudding, and the wives were Apple Pie and Custard — travelling through Brittany, Bordeaux, Nice, and the Alps. I ended up selling the Honda to buy a Ducati, a Mike Hailwood replica, which I picked up in Switzerland, drove through to Paris, and then had shipped to California, which was a massive mistake — it took about four years to get it through customs...



What were some of the cars you owned during your time in America?

I used to have an ex-Army long-wheelbase pickup Land Rover with the canvas back. You could just lean your head back behind the canvas and scare people into thinking there was no driver — that was good fun. I also spent a lot of time correcting Americans who asked what kind of Jeep it was. Then, we started to acquire cars as a band — the Army Land Rover, an Alfa Romeo GTV 2000, and a Ferrari Mondial. My son Charles was at a school in the canyons and we used to time our school runs. The little Alfa would always beat the Ferrari! Charles was always dropped off at school in a variety of vehicles, whether it be the Alfa, the Ferrari, the Landy, or even the Moto Guzzi.

Tomorrow, you're collecting a new Ducati Scrambler — what made you go for that?

My son is urging me to get back into motorbikes. Both my sons will be inheriting some of my bikes, and I fancied getting an easy bike. I've read nothing but good reports on them. I'm moving into a slightly older age, where I don't want to be hunched over the bars and where I can appreciate a better riding position, and I think I'll probably ride a touch slower than I used to. I'm about to buy another Land Rover, a seven-seater 110-inch Keswick Green, so we can hook up a trailer and get the bikes on the back, with plenty of passengers in the car, too.

Photos: Robert Cooper for Classic Driver © 2017

Gallery

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