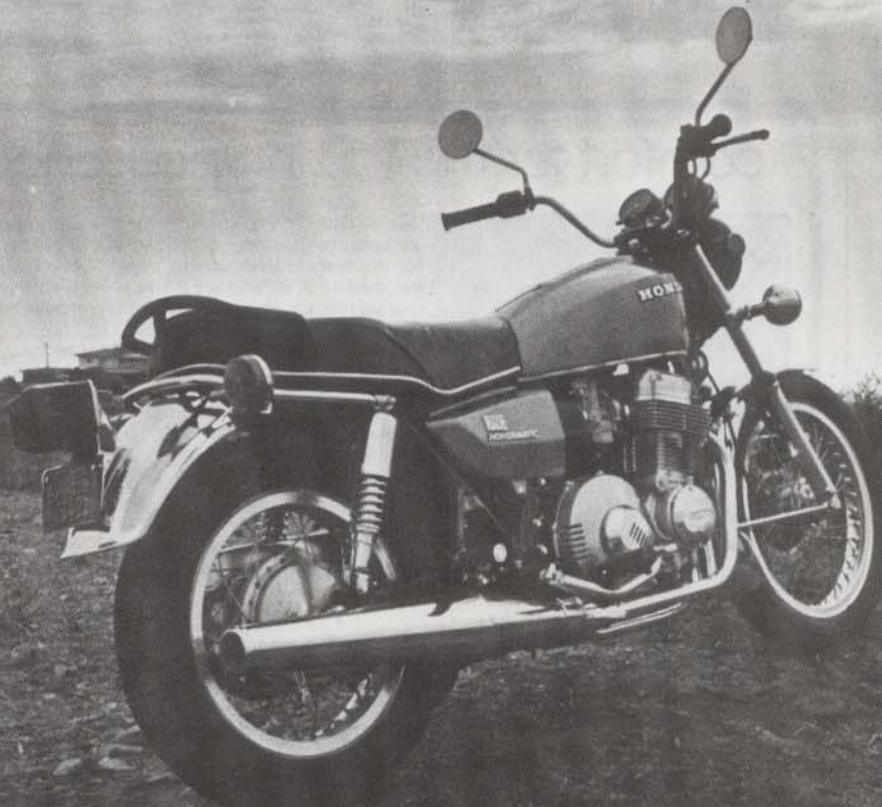


Something Old,



Something New

A LONG-DISTANCE APPRAISAL OF THE NEW/OLD, SEMI-AUTOMATIC TRANSMISSIONED HONDA 750A

BY R. L. CARPENTER

Something old:

Obviously the tried and true, four-cylinder, 750 cc engine which has been the mainstay of the Honda touring banner these past eight-going-on-nine years.

Something new:

Just as obviously the ingenious dual-range, automatic transmission to which the "something old" has been mated.

If you want to extend the marital analogy there's also, "something borrowed": The cross-over, four-into-one exhaust system which has been lifted from Honda's sporty "F" series — and the rear tire, the fuel tank and fuel gauge; all of which have been purloined from the 750A's other stablemate, the GL 1000.

Unfortunately the bottom line of the connubial jingle reads, "something blue". Since the 750A comes only in candy red and candy green, the only blue note involved may turn out to be the emotional attitude of at least a few dealers who feel they might have a hard time moving Honda's latest attempt to attract nice people to their marque. But we'll kick that pessimistic speculation around in a moment.

Basically the "A" in the model designation "750A" is a small torque converter which is very similar to the slush-box on the family automobile. Two circular components (torus members) are located inside an oil-filled housing just aft of the two righthand cylinders. These components are shaped like shallow bowls facing each other — and a series of blades or vanes are situated around their inner surface. A third component, called a stator, sits between the two other members. The outer torus member is driven

by the crankshaft via a Hy-Vo chain. As it turns, its blades push the oil through the vanes of the stator. (The stator's function is to direct the moving oil so that flow efficiency is maximized and the slippage which is usually associated with automatic transmissions is held to a minimum.) The oil then presses against the blades of the secondary torus member,

RODE TEST

7580

miles

forcing it to rotate. This inner component is hooked up to two small, pressure actuated clutches (one for each drive range) which turn the gears which turn the countershaft sprocket which spins the number 530 "endless" chain which turns the sprocket which turns the wheel . . . which lives in the house that Soichiro built.

The automatic transmission isn't completely automatic — there is a choice of two driving ranges which can be selected by the rider, and which must be actuated by a standard left foot shift lever. This selection however, is made without benefit of a clutch lever. (The left handlebar is shockingly denuded.) Shifting is a matter of great simplicity; a simple nudge with the foot is all that's required to move from gear to gear or into neutral.

In terms of function, the only possible criticism that can be lodged against the system is an absence of that accelerative

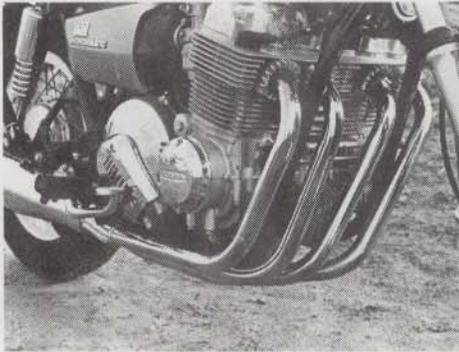
gusto which is generally associated with motorcycle takeoff. Where moving away from a standing start is concerned, the Honda 750A is decidedly of canine extraction.

That's not as bad as it sounds. Presumably the not-so-performance-oriented types which are reportedly the target market for the 750A don't give too large a hoot about off-the-line pizzazz anyway.

Passing acceleration, on the other hand, wasn't at all shabby in most circumstances. Once the bike arrives at highway speed it is satisfactorily responsive to throttle control. A quick yank at the handle does not cause a compensatory jerk at the neck-bone — rather the bike gives out an impressive, but muted, roar and moves smoothly and positively into uptempo for the passing maneuver. The only time this phenomenon doesn't occur is when the whole scenario takes place on an upgrade at altitudes above 7,000 feet — in which case you're back to square one and will have to learn to love riding behind large trucks and small Winnebagos.

Low range is recommended for speeds up to 60 m.p.h., but in practice that probably should read considerably less. Around 45 m.p.h., Low range acceleration begins to sound and feel like the bike is being strained severely. It is neither comfortable nor advisable to use the Low range as a passing gear except at the lower speeds.

During the Canadian Caper which constituted our test route, I found myself developing the habit of using Low range for initial starting, then shifting into Drive within 100 feet or so. Although the Drive range is the recommended "normal" range for most riding conditions, the Low

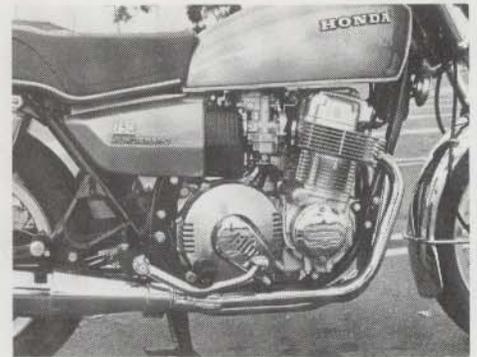


The 750's engine is basically the same Honda Four unit which has been around long enough to prove its exceptional reliability quotient. Bore and stroke dimensions of 61 mm X 63 mm give the Four a displacement of 736 cc's. The four-into-one cross-over exhaust system does not interfere with oil filter removal.

OTHER STUFF Honda 750A



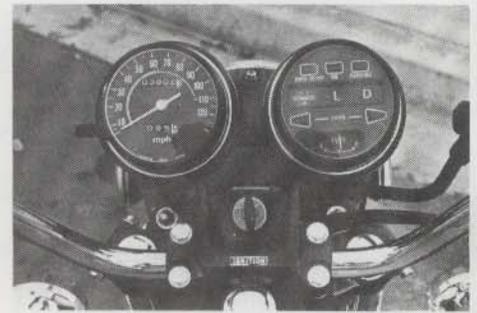
A full fuel tank runs the Honda's weight to approximately 590 pounds, qualifying it as a legitimate heavyweight. Wheelbase is 58.3 inches, seat height stands at 32.3 inches. The combination of disc brake on the front, internal expanding shoe on the rear is an excellent choice for touring. The front tire is a 3.50 X 19, the rear tire is a 4.50 X 17. Alloy rims and semi-valanced front fender are features first introduced on the GL 1000.



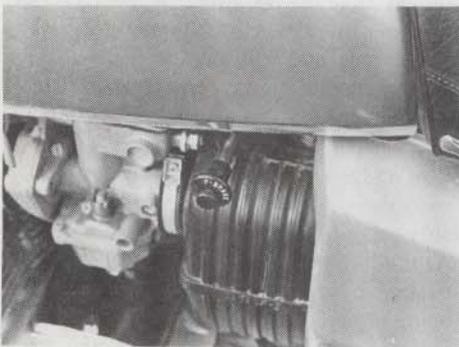
The automatic transmission is officially classified as a "two-speed, semi-automatic with torque converter". (Two gear ratios which must be selected manually prevent the system from being fully automatic.) The clutch is fluid coupling, actuated via oil pressure.



The shockingly naked left handgrip is yet another reminder that the 750A is not quite like anything else that Honda sells.



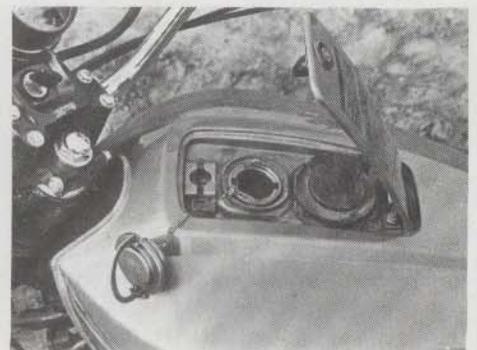
Odometer error was a respectable 1.25 percent — just enough to require some gas mileage correction if the owner is extraordinarily conscientious. Right dial is distinguished by fuel gauge, three-position gear locator (which is excessively bright at night!) and parking brake indicator.



Parking brake can be set by pulling out on this knob and "setting" the brake with a firm step on the rear pedal. To release the brake, the small center-knob is punched, the rear brake is tapped to deactivate ratchet. The system is efficient, providing positive braking even on sharp grades.



The gear selector is still around, even though its function has been diminished to semi-retirement. "Shifting" pattern is down for neutral, up for Low Range, up again for Drive. The sidestand automatically returns the transmission to neutral when deployed.



Fuel tank capacity is a tour-sized 5.1 gallons. Compression ratio of 8.6:1 permits use of low-lead fuel. The gas cap is secured to bike by a chain. The locking cover closes over gas cap and fuel gauge sending unit.

range start more closely resembled what I was used to . . . and gave me something to do with my left foot.

The engine is the identical unit featured in Honda Fours since January, 1969 when they first debuted at the Tokyo unveiling. There have been minor changes along the way — mostly in the nature of upping or downing performance — but the engine itself has remained as immutable as gold. It's a four-stroke, four-cylinder item displacing 736 cubic centimeters, with an 8.6:1 compression ratio, and an overhead cam opening and closing the valves.

Over the years there has been a lot of badinage tossed in the direction of Japanese machines in general and Honda in particular. Much of it has been directed at the "funny metal" used in the construction thereof — and how this was a sure bet to mean lots of mechanical problems . . . lots of breakdowns . . . lots of despair in a touring context.

It seems only fair to take a moment now and then to reflect on just how shortsighted those comments have turned out to be. Japanese machines — Hondas in particular — have proven to be as reliable as any motorcycles ever produced — more reliable than most. In the industry and among the owners, the four-cylindered 750 cc engine has been a hallmark of long and dependable service. Based on a relatively demanding 7,500-mile trek, the 750A appears to be trudging along stolidly in the same well-grooved track. Whatever questions are being raised by the installation of an automatic transmission, there should be no doubt that the new transmission was at least given the benefit of a long-lasting engine with which to operate.

That does *not* mean that everything is all sunshine and roses. As with any marriage there are some rough spots. Like for instance the throttle return spring. There's no question about that piece of sadism. It's terrible. It's also an item that is

mentioned negatively by just about everyone in the motorcycle press, and complained about vehemently by just about every Honda rider who ever saddled up. Yet the Honda folk keep installing the dang thing as if it were vitally necessary to prove they don't do everything right. (I sometimes suspect that Honda Motor Company keeps sticking crummy seats, horns and throttle springs on their machines just to give us nit-picking magazine flacks something to crab about.)

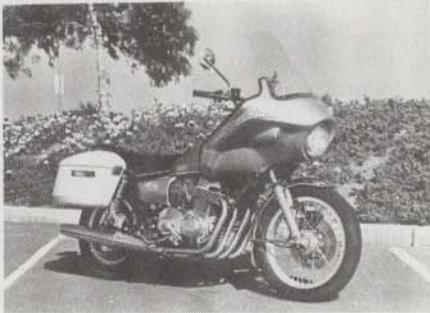
On a long trip the throttle spring passes out of the realm of inconvenience and can become excruciating. Literally. In our own family, wife Patti came home from last year's trip to Daytona on a Honda 550 with a bone spur on her right wrist. The 750A journey to Canada resulted in what I hope will prove to be only temporary nerve pinching in my very best right thumb. (I now have a numb thumb to match my numb skull.) Both injuries were directly attributable to the miserable task of holding a Honda Four

When road conditions are less than ideal, the automatic transmission is a boon — permitting the rider to devote his full attention to maintaining the most advantageous line of travel or maneuvering safely in heavy traffic.

Photo: Dick Johnson



THE ACCESSORIES



The Honda 750A as equipped for the 7,500-mile Canadian journey.

The Pacifico "Shadow" fairing is a frame-mount unit available for most bikes in the touring category. In terms of installation, mounting hardware and general function, the Shadow is aptly named in view of its adherence to the much copied methods pioneered in Rantoul, Illinois several years ago. Stylistically the Pacifico differs somewhat in terms of its sculptured configuration and curved windshield. The result is attractive, different enough to evade the "carbon copy" label, and offers a minimal improvement in aerodynamic relief to the frontal surface. In addition to sharing the advantages of the basic design (improved stability at high speeds, increased storage area), the Shadow also shares the disadvantages. It sets rather far forward on the motorcycle, placing additional weight on the front suspension and moving the effective area of protection forward correspondingly. Driving rain, swift-flying bugs and assorted airborne debris can and do come over the top for an occasional direct hit. In addition the passenger area is subject to considerable buffeting since it is situated in the area of maximum burble. Wind and rain protection of the Shadow also compares favorably with other frame-mounts which share the basic design concept. Maximum protection is afforded the torso and upper thighs — peripheral spray encroaches on hands and face in prolonged rain conditions — the legs from the knee down are unprotected. Water can also enter the rider vacuum from the front fork area although the semi-valance on the test bike's fender (Honda 750A) kept this to a minimum. Quality of construction is excellent throughout. The fairing is very solid and sturdy. It was virtually unaffected by rough roads and emerged unscathed from one un-

scheduled structural integrity test (i.e., crash). The Shadow's most worthy (and most original) feature is the lockable, foam-lined storage compartment lids. These lids are tremendously effective, forming a waterproof, dust-proof seal. The fairing storage compartments were the only places on the whole bike where the powdery dust encountered on the test route could not penetrate. Summary: Strong, well-constructed, good looking. As good as anything else in this basic category. The lockable storage compartments alone are worth extra consideration where a choice has to be made.

The Shoei Saddlebags are constructed by a relatively new technique wherein traditional fiberglass methods are combined with a vacuum molding process. (Resin-impregnated fiberglass cloth is molded into the desired shape under pressure.) This results in a fairly thin, extremely light product with exceptional strength and resistance to weathering. The manufacturer's recommended weight limit is 11 pounds per bag (a thoughtful label is attached to the inside of each lid). Due to the voluminous nature of the Shoei bags, this limit can be easily exceeded if the packer isn't careful. The thin sidewalls of the bags allowed noticeable flex when packing bulky objects and occasionally some "encouragement" was necessary to get the lid seated properly. The lid seal suffered slightly from inadequate overlapping, but functioned well in all conditions except heavy downpours and excessive dust. Latches and hinges were first rate, doing their job efficiently while resisting corrosion. The Shoei system incorporates the rear turn signals into the saddlebags. The protruding plastic lenses are enclosed in a thick rubber collar which protects them from road shock and prevents water, grease, et al from getting inside. During installation the mounting bracket system was highly suspect in view of its "universal", multi-adjustable nature. However under reasonably severe test conditions the bags were held securely in place. They never shifted from their original position — nor did the attachment nuts ever require tightening. Summary: A new construction concept which offers a strength factor which is out of proportion to weight. Capacious without being oversized. Easy to install, easy to live with on the long haul.

at road speed for several consecutive touring days.

Yes, the return spring can be "fixed" by enterprising riders. It can be overridden by any of several helper devices on the market. It can be removed and the rider can live with a dead-stick throttle. Or — as one exasperated Honda dealer advised an equally exasperated Honda owner — you can do exercises to develop your wrists. But none of those solutions should be necessary. It is difficult to believe that a company whose innovative research corps can turn out an automatic transmission is totally incapable of making a throttle return mechanism that will keep the Department of Transportation's inane regulations satisfied without crippling the people who own the machine.

And then there's the seat.

What can I say? It's a Honda seat. For years the touring riders have been pleading for a Honda seat that was possible to sit on for longer than thirty minutes. So far they haven't got any action. Part of the blame here has to fall on the shoulders of the biker press. A short ride without a fairing keeps the resulting comments about the Honda saddle fairly non-committal. Every new addition to the Honda line calls forth proclamations to the effect that the new bike's seat is a great improvement over the old bike's seat. By now most touring owners know better.

Pain and suffering are a direct product of sitting up behind a windshield and riding for a week or so's worth of lengthy mileage days. Until someone can convince Honda's saddle designer to ride the machine in that manner, stock Honda seats (not just on the 750A) will continue to be the major contributor to the success of the custom saddle builders.

I don't want to dignify the ridiculous object that passes for a horn by saying anything about it. I've heard squeeze toys that are louder.

As always it's much easier to talk about the positive side of the Honda. For instance the ease of starting. Pull the choke (located next to the ignition key on the handlebar crown), push the button. The Honda fires quickly every time — irregardless of temperature (at least down to 36 degrees, nothing colder was encountered during the test) or altitude (Mt. Evans, 14,260 feet above sea level). Once it's started it takes for-



The success of the marriage between proven engine and innovative transmission will ultimately depend on Honda Motor Corporation's assessment of the potential market.

ever to warm up sufficiently, but that's another story.

The disc brake up front combined with a drum brake at the rear hub constitutes what I consider to be the ideal combination for touring. Even when the rain wipes out the disc, the drum can provide adequate stopping power at rain-cautious speed. When things are dry and twisty the front disc offers superior finesse for a fling at a mountain road.

The Honda 750A follows the trend established by the "F" series Hondas and

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duplicates the sport model's four-into-one exhaust. That must be considered a plus for the touring riders who want to install saddlebags. The exhaust note coming out of the single muffler is subdued, quiet and legal — if totally without personality. But that's what the world is coming to . . . Honda is among the leaders in reducing motorcycle noise pollution.

Top notch instrumentation is generally a Honda trademark and the 750A is no exception. The automatic transmission makes a tachometer unnecessary. Instead,

the right-hand dial of the matching pair consists of a three-position gear indicator (Neutral, Low, Drive) behind which pretty green and blue lights show you which of the three positions you're in while simultaneously blinding you on a dark night. There is also a fuel gauge, turn signal indicators, and the now-traditional idiot lights for high beam and oil pressure — and a new one for the parking brake.

The new parking brake is a nice touch which was necessitated by the sidestand/neutral interlock. Since it would be im-

practical to leave the automatic transmission engaged when the bike was parked on the sidestand, deployment of the sidestand automatically shifts the transmission into neutral. In turn this means that parking on a hill might mean hard times — ergo the parking brake. Pulling out the plunger just under the gas tank on the left side of the bike actuates a ratchet-like affair at the rear brake pivot. Depressing the rear brake lever brings this ratchet into play, holding the brake “on”. A quick punch at the release knob in the center of the plunger trips the spring-loaded mechanism and a light tap on the brake lever frees the ratchet, returning the brake to its normal method of operation. It’s a positive, secure system which works a lot easier than this description does. Hopefully a similar device will find its way to other models, other brands.

On the road the handling qualities of the Hondamatic reflect the “top-heavy” heritage of the old CB750’s which has been so well documented over the years. It has the familiar feeling of needing a shove to get it into a corner — and then needing another shove to get it back up when the corner’s over. The trait is emphasized by full touring gear, but most Honda owners have lived with it so long it’s no longer necessary to dwell on it. The 750A handles well enough for 90 percent of all touring requirements. If the owner insists on achieving Nirvana on Racer Road, he has at his beck and call an entire aftermarket which has been created for the express purpose of changing stock Honda Fours into non-stock Honda Fours.

At low speeds, the heavy, ponderous nature of the machine is apparent. The 750A weighs upwards of 580 pounds with a full tank of gas. That plus the traditional clumsiness of the Fours equals some difficulty at foot-paddling speeds.

But there is an interesting footnote where the handling of the 750A is concerned. In heavy traffic or on exceptionally rough roads, the automatic transmission permits the rider to devote his total attention to safe maneuvering and/or establishing and maintaining the most efficient line of travel available. No matter how experienced the rider; no matter how “internalized” or “reflexive” his hand-foot coordination with a standard clutch, the ability to maneuver safely on wall-to-wall Interstates or a gravel backroad is greatly facilitated by the automatic transmission. True — there are times (in the mud for instance) when a *very* delicate touch on the throttle is required, and it would be nice to be able to slip the clutch a bit. But those times are few and far between unless you’re an out-and-out motocrosser, and the smooth operation of the 750A’s transmission more than makes up for that minor quibble in most of those inevitable situations which border on Impending Panic.

Gas mileage for the 7,500-mile journey — pushing a frame-mounted fairing and about 240 pounds of rider and duffel — worked out to a noteworthy 46.2 m.p.g. Cruising speeds — both in Canada and in the U.S. — were normally held around the 60 m.p.h. mark. On the gravelled Mackenzie Highway, speeds averaged about 35 to 40 m.p.h., but gas mileage figures from this portion of the trip

(58.3 m.p.g.) were not averaged into the final tally in view of their atypical nature. Both low-lead and premium gasoline were used on the trip (in some places we put in whatever we could find) with a ratio of about three tanks of regular to one tank of high-test. The Hondamatic ran well regardless of what it was fed until the latter stages of the trip where temperatures shot into the high nineties and the bike began to ping under load when using low-lead.

The oil consumed itself in a rather peculiar manner. The 750A was content to hang onto all its oil when the going was relatively flat — but when mountain grades and higher altitudes were involved, it turned into an oil gobbler. On two separate occasions, both occurring in mountainous country, the 750A abruptly gave up its miserly ways and showed a proclivity for swallowing its oil at a rate of approximately one quart per 750 miles. Don’t ask *me* why — I’m just the guy who stood around scratching his bald spot every time the dang thing fell off its dipstick.

In addition to its primary purpose of propelling machine and rider(s) forward, the automatic transmission *may* have some interesting side effects. It has been suggested that increased chain and rear tire life will result from the slight cushioning effect produced by transmission slippage. Based on the test jaunt (which began with a new rear tire and chain that had 3,000 miles on it), I think I’ll have to drink to that . . . as long as the suggestion is being made relative to the “K” and “F” series 750’s.

At approximately mile 8,000 – which included the increased wear rate imposed by some 900 miles of gravel – the chain was ready for burial. I refused to pay the ransom demanded in Canada; we arrived in Spokane, Washington on a Monday when the shops were closed; so it wasn't until we reached Vancouver, Washington some 1,500 miles later that the pathetically bedraggled chain finally was relieved of duty. In terms of useful, unbedraggled life I would estimate a solid 8,000 miles per chain – with a possible 1,000 or so more for good behavior.

The rear tire was replaced by Honda service personnel shortly before we picked up the test machine (3,707 miles on the odometer). At the end of the trip it was beginning to look a tad thin and I wouldn't have trusted it to begin another longish sojourn – but with cautious riding it would still have been safe for another 1,000 miles of around-town commuting and weekend riding. Conservative estimate: about 8,000 to 9,000 miles of safe, useful riding (solo with moderate baggage). That also represents a mentionable gain over the conventional 750 Honda – and even moreso (according to the GL 1000 owner's reports which are coming in) over the life expectation of the identical tire as used on the Gold Wing.

Which brings us to “something blue”.

During the trip, most of the conversations about the motorcycle were primarily concerned with the differences it represented in contrast to conventional ma-

chines. There were two questions which popped up often enough during these roadside dialogues to warrant some consideration here: “Why did you buy the automatic?” and “How do you like it?”

The first question was asked most often by the Honda dealers we met, all five of whom expressed some concern over the difficulty they anticipated in selling the automatic transmission concept. One Honda mechanic referred to the bike in uncomplimentary terms which can't be printed here, and the overall effect of the question, “Why did you buy the Hondamatic?” left me with the feeling that what they really were asking was, “Why did you buy the Hondamatic instead of a motorcycle?” The most optimistic dealer voiced the hope that “they” would put the transmission into next year's Gold Wings.

On the other hand, “How do you like it?” was typically the question of fellow riders. Again most of them were asking about the transmission, not necessarily about the bike. As the test progressed and I gained respect for the bike, I found myself answering that question on two levels. From a technical standpoint the 750A is assuredly a triumph of engineering knowhow. As a mechanical contrivance the machine deserves nothing but high praise. But from the standpoint of esthetic appeal . . . well, without trying to sound like those grizzled diehards who believe the manufacture of “real” motorcycles came to a grinding halt simultaneously with the demise of the British motorcycle industry, I would be less than honest if I professed more

than simple admiration for a job well done.

It isn't easy to say harsh things about a sturdy motorcycle which has seen you safely and surely through a big adventure. Certainly, as with most motorcycles on today's market, there are *many* more things right with the 750A than there are things which are objectionable in a touring context. Yet I am left with nothing more than a fondly ambivalent regard for the hard-working machine. I could not fall in love.

The overriding point is that it doesn't matter in the slightest what I think about it – or whether the dealers believe it will sell or not. The final verdict will rest with Honda Motor Company's unique and sometimes mystical ability to detect a potential market. Whether *I* like it or not . . . whether the pundits go into paroxysms of rage over the radical change it represents in the traditionalist's view of motorcycling . . . is totally irrelevant. The fact is that it works. It works smoothly and efficiently and reliably and there are probably a lot of people who want a machine which does just that.

One thing is a safe bet. If there is to be any kind of cultural revolution among the riders of motorcycles, Honda Motor Company will be the first to discover it, and among the forefront of those manufacturers seeking to capitalize on it. In that context the Honda 750A – like its predecessors – is most assuredly a sign of the times. It will undoubtedly be a happy marriage.

[RR]