



HOME GIRL MARGO STILLEY, A LONG WAY FROM THE SET OF HOW TO LOSE FRIENDS & ALIENATE PEOPLE

HELLO CHAPS

The biannual Harley-Davidson rally in South Carolina attracts nearly a million bikers. The actress Margo Stilley, once a local girl, returns to Myrtle Beach for a hell-raisin' week of wheels, whiskey and late nights at Suck Bang Blow

Words by Margo Stilley | Photographs by Kate Bellm

I REALISE IT HAS been a while since I've returned home as I sit back on the flight to South Carolina and begin to peel away the layers. I am flying from New York, where I've just served at the Metropolitan Opera House as an honorary committee member for an Yves Saint Laurent gala premiere, but I'm dreaming of a simpler place. I order a Jack Daniel's on the rocks and put on some Ryan Adams, reinstate my Southern drawl and let my mind slow down and slide back to where it began, as we land at Myrtle Beach.

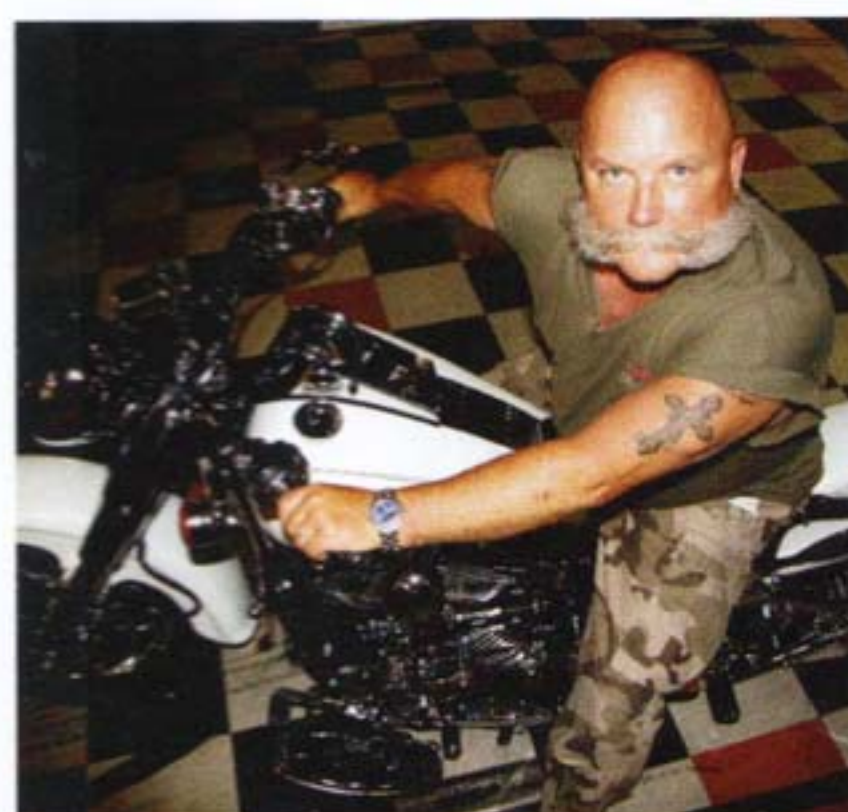
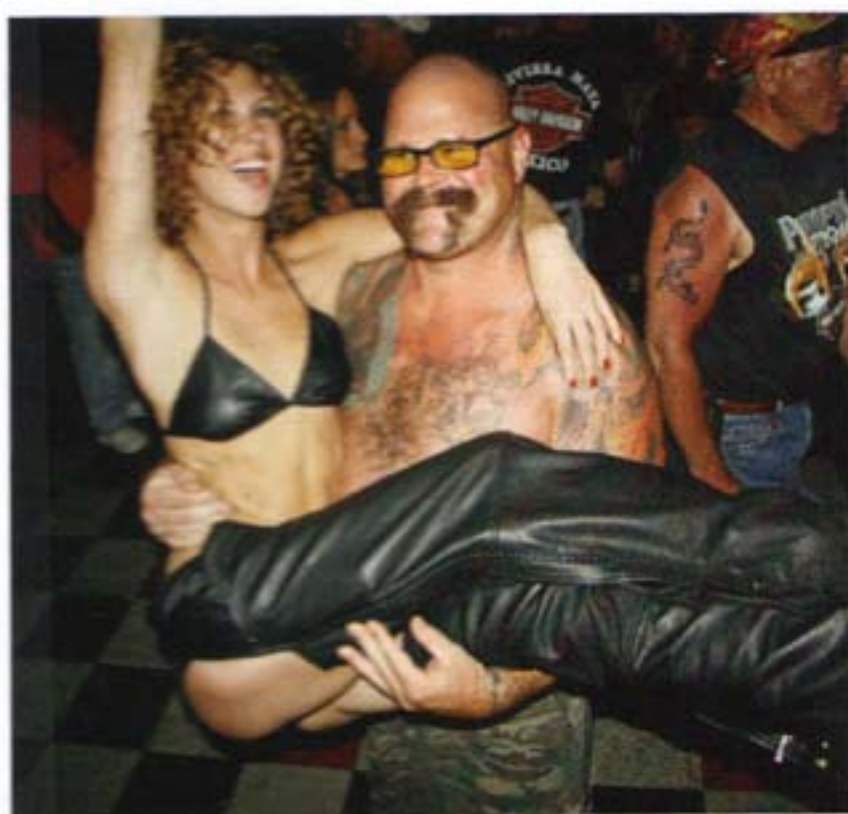
It's the airport where I took my first flight as a 16-year-old girl, running away to New York to escape a South that was, "too small, too boring, too racist and too Christian" as I later described it. Soon, I was working in Milan as a model.

The first time I returned home to visit, I arrived in time for the Myrtle Beach bike rally, an event that has taken place each spring and autumn for the past 70 years. That week, gone are the cute grannies in rocking chairs on porches with languorous Southern accents and offers of sweet ice tea. In come their poor, white-trash neighbours' hell-raisin' sons, sitting on the backs of hawgs, tearin' up the streets in leathers and T-shirts that say: "If you can read this, the bitch fell off!"

I got home and called my best friend, Christiane. "Hey! Thank God you're home," she said, in the thick country twang that I'd been missing so much. "You gotta come work the bar with me." You see, I have a privy view to the biker world through my friendship with Christiane.

THE TWO OF US met in high school. She was one of those pretty, popular girls who drove a convertible BMW and had a hot older boyfriend. She was also one of the first friends that I made after emerging from a rather long spell on the wrong side of the tracks. Christiane was a good girl who listened to country music and wore Abercrombie & Fitch. Or so I thought, until one day she invited me to go shopping after school and I met Nico.

I'd never been to Christiane's home before, but it was exactly what I expected as we pulled up to the big, waterfront house with a pool. She went to get something from her bedroom and I went to the kitchen to get a Coke and got the scare of my life. A little man, about 5ft 4in, with nearly the same girth, a completely bald, tattooed head, a pot belly and a long handlebar moustache jumped out and yelled: "Hey! Whuorz Nico at?" My scream brought Christiane running into the



FROM TOP, MARGO STILLEY IN CONVERSATION WITH SUCK BANG BLOW'S BOUNCER MR HAPPY; THE BEER TUB GIRLS WILL SHOW YOU A GOOD TIME, OR AT LEAST THE WAY TO THE PORTA-POTTIES; JIMMY MOTLEY CAN RIDE HIS 'TACHE RIGHT UP TO THE BAR

kitchen. She started laughing. "Daddy!" she yelped through her giggles. "Stop scarin' my friends!" Nico, I found out, was Christiane's redneck alter-ego, her middle name being Nicole.

Twenty years ago, Christiane's daddy, Jimmy Motley, an electrician by trade, started the world's first drive-through biker bar. Like most things in South Carolina, it started with a slow simmer and grew into a stew of full, robust, in-

your-face flavours. "I was sellin' beer outta a wooden shack I bought for \$50," recalls Motley now. "I picked it up with a trackhoe [excavator] and walked it across the road and set it down and put a beer sign on it. It said 'Ice Cold Beer.'" His no-nonsense, mind-ya-own-damn-business \$50 shack is now the largest biker bar in the South, and he's about to franchise the concept nationwide in a multimillion-dollar deal. The name of this oasis? Suck Bang Blow.

"It's a combustion motor! It sucks in the air, it bangs it around and it blows it out the exhaust," he explains. Motley, whose Uncle Sammy started riding him on the front of a bike when he was eight years old, has been riding ever since. He opened his bar when, after nearly 50 years of hell-raisin' and road-rippin' noise, Myrtle Beach started to move the boys out of town with high prices and big signs on hotels, bars and restaurants saying, "BIKERS NOT WELCOME". Motley thought, "If Myrtle Beach don't want 'em, I'm gonna build a place. I'm gonna build a place for the bikers. I'm gonna build a drive-through biker bar and we're gonna take all the business!" He tells me this while engulfed by smoke from someone tyre-spinning, eventually popping it, at the Burnout Bar, which sends the crowd of hundreds into a frenzy. You see, in Motley's place, you can drive your bike right up the ramp, through the wide double doors and straight under the raised bar that is armed with bartenders in gas masks. Motley laughs his trademark, staccato he-he-he cackle, tummy heaving, and spreads his arms like a king surveying his land. "And the rest is history."

This, of all places, is where I found myself seven years ago, only an hour after arriving home from Milan. I had been sure I'd finally escaped the redneck town I was born into; I had just got used to drinking champagne in nightclubs and had bought my first pair of shoes that cost as much as the rent. But it was no time at all before I found myself in a bikini top and chaps, jammin' out to Lynyrd Skynyrd, gettin' drunk and talkin' trash behind a beer tub, answering the two most asked questions of the week: "Which way are the Porta-Potties?" and "Which way to the mechanical bull?"

I made \$3,000 that week and as many friends. And by friends I mean the kind that are gonna be \$500 richer and you're gonna be one finger poorer if you don't pay them back their money kind of friends.





TOP: HE MIGHT HAVE A HANDGUN TATTOOED ON HIS BACK, BUT REALLY HE'S A BIG SOFTIE, DISCOVERS MARGO; BOTTOM: WHO SAYS THEY'RE DINOSAURS? POPPING OUT FOR SOME MILK

They're covered in tattoos and they've all been in jail or at least narrowly missed it (but, of course, we don't talk about that). I go back and see them almost every year.

THE SOUTH DOESN'T scare me any more. The longer I'm away, the more I miss the languid, humid nights filled with honky-tonk sounds and the hot summer days at the beach or on the river.

Fresh off the plane this trip, I buy myself a new pair of chaps. My first stop at Suck Bang Blow is to go find Lord Christ. Lord is a patch sewer and tailor straight out of *Easy Rider* with a wind-

worn face and the sort of voice that reminds you of a stereotypical hippie — he really stresses the “aaa” in the “maaaan” he uses to punctuate the end of most of his sentences. Many of the boys around Suck Bang Blow are from the South, some are from up north, but not many are from out west, which makes Lord a special breed of biker. Firstly, his name really is Lord Christ. “Yessum, that’s what my mother did to me. And then she sent me to Catholic school. Whooooa! Frustrated women in penguin suits... he-he-he.” But Lord’s claim to fame is unique, in that it doesn’t have anything to do with bikes or

his rambling ways but, rather, lies in a song (and it’s not “A Boy Named Sue”).

As he takes my chaps up to the 1936 sewing machine he hauls to all 30 major bike rallies in the country, he reminisces about when he used to drive the tour bus for Janis Joplin. “She was my friend. I drove for everyone who came through Columbia in those days: Morrison and The Doors, Garcia and the Dead, Hendrix. But me and Janis were good friends. You’ve heard that song, ‘Oh Lord won’t you buy me a Mercedes-Benz’? I was in the studio, sittin’ in the corner rollin’ a joint, and Janis was throwin’ some lyrics around. It’s a cappella ‘cause it was never written, ‘cause she just sang it to me and the recording equipment happened to be turned on.” Lord tells me, over the thackity-thack of his sewing machine and the bikes rumbling past, that he stopped driving the bus after Janis died. He keeps his eyes down, looking at his work through his round, rose-coloured bifocals.

Lord looks sweet and kind, almost grandfatherly, but when I ask him how long he’s been riding, he says with his old-time hippie inflection, “Since I was 13. I’m 64 now. I can give you a ride if ya want!” And with a big haha and a flash of his eyes, he reminds me where I am and that he is a man with no intention of being grandfatherly. Then, unprompted, he continues, “There’s an era here of time gone by, ya know. This isn’t really new wave, ya know. It’s the era of a time gone by, and that’s what this whole motorcycle thing was built on, man. The history of it, ya know. It started out there in California, in Hollister, and just over the years all the publicity, even bad publicity, developed it and turned it into a fantasy, and it took off about 20 years ago.

“You see, Hollister was a hill-climb race done by the American Motorcycle Association, and there was a real bad incident there that became national news, and there was a lot of bad publicity about oooooohhhh woow motorcycle gangs!” he says, with mock ghostly fear. Although there are still some bad boys riding, Lord assures me that the Myrtle Beach rally and Suck Bang Blow is all about people “who just love to ride”.

I never really messed around with any of the boys in the gangs, mostly because I barely saw any. “They pretty much stay to themselves to avoid politics, I guess,” says Lord. When I ask Motley about gangs at Suck Bang Blow, he says they didn’t really have a problem with them: “They don’t wanna go to a place where they don’t

rule and make the rules. It's not that they are overpowered, it's just that they're happy where they're at."

At Suck Bang Blow, pretty much the only rule is on a big sign that states: "Bike Parking Free, Car Parking \$5. NO COLORS". The latter, of course, refers to the colours the boys wear on their jackets to signify who they ride with. Alarming, Esquire's photographer, who has never been on a bike or to the South before, thinks it means no black people. I look at her with pure shock, but with the "N" word still fully functioning in South Carolina, how exactly is she to know any better? It is an aspect of the South — and particularly the bikers' world — that I've either got used to, or chosen to block out.

Christiane and I spent a lot of time together. Since she is so pretty, as well as the boss's daughter, she was always under the watchful eye of Mr Happy, a security guard at Suck Bang Blow who, at the age of 50, stands at 6ft 6in and easily pushes 350lbs of pure, tattooed muscle and belly. Surrounded by all this machismo and coaxed on by a few drinks, I ask him if there are many gay bikers. His eyes dart back and forth mischievously: "Well, my cousin used to go around gay-bashin' a few years ago. He'd go around beating up gay people, ya know. Everybody knew he was doin' it but he never got caught. So this one night, he goes into this bar and he finds this gay guy and he gets him outside and he's about to start wailin' on him when this gay guy gets a glint in his eye, makes a fist and says, 'The only thing I like more than fuckin' ass, is kickin' ass!'" Mr Happy starts laughing and his big belly goes up and down. "He put my cousin in the hospital for three weeks and then they put him in jail for 15 years, so I guess I ain't got nothin' against the gays," he says.

These guys are not big on conformity: their disaffiliation with society is what defines them as a group — that, and an ability to see humour in everything, especially the more asinine and horrific experiences that have befallen them. Their ability to absorb pain and hardship and continue on with a wry smile makes them unique, and it also makes them scary.

When bikers talk about their accidents, they don't make a big deal out of it. They just say "my accident" or "one of my accidents". "It's like being in a deli: when they call your number, it's time to put your number in," says Mr Happy, right before he tells me that, at 70mph, his handlebars came off his bike and he cut over three lanes of traffic, hit the guardrail, shattered



FROM TOP: GAS MASKS ARE A MUST-HAVE FASHION ACCESSORY IN THE FUME-FILLED DRIVE-IN BAR; ENOUGH SAID; LORD CHRIST, DRIVER TURNED TAILOR, HAD A SONG WRITTEN FOR HIM BY JANIS JOPLIN

his hip and hit the road. "Broke all my ribs. I got steel holding me together here [pointing to his pelvis], two broken bones in my back and none of these are mine," he says, flashing me a smile.

Mr Happy tells me that bikers paid his mortgage while he was in hospital. They had barbecues and charity rides, and people he didn't know helped him out. Happy assures me that he takes care of them, too, when the time comes.

Later on in the week, I start talking to a man who has been in two terrible

accidents and is still riding. The last one completely shattered his jawbone. He was left without any teeth and his entire chin is metal, leaving his lips as just a hole in his face. They had to graft skin from his wrist to grow over the titanium plate, which was fine, except both of his wrists were tattooed, so he's got a skull where his lower lip was. "It is what it is," he quips and climbs onto his bike.

I CAN'T REMEMBER the first time I came across bikers as a child. My parents were very conservative and I went to private schools; we had a big black mama who cleaned the house and took care of me, and we had a summer house at the beach. I would look out of the car window with disgust at these rebels and their boisterous ways and wonder who would ever sink so low. It's the kind of judgment only an ignorant child can make.

I was eight years old the first time I rode a bike. My Uncle Dicky made me promise to never ever ride with anyone I didn't know, and my Aunt Annette made me promise to always wear a helmet as she put me on the back of the bike and showed me where to keep my leg so it wouldn't get burnt on the exhaust pipe. I remember a sense of passing over, defiantly keeping my eyes forward and refusing to look at the cars and the children who, much like I had, suction-cupped themselves to the windows to stare at us. I had tasted rebellion and I loved it. Lord's mother swears that riding a motorcycle at a young age poisoned him, and I dare say the taste I got of rebellion — much like the taste I later developed for boys and booze — left me hungry for more.

This spring, I once more find myself riding on the back of a bike with the warm rush of whiskey coursing through my veins and the steady rumble of a Harley underneath me. I am once again in a familiar haze, in a foreign place with a man who I don't know. I understand now why these boys, these men, go to such extremes. It's a meditation, a freedom, and a big fuck-you to everything besides you and the bike and the rolling scenery.

Most of the men I have befriended over the years have had a speckled past, and here I am, once more, being filled with empathy for the "bad" boys. As different as my life may be, my ability to accept them for who they are and to shut the fuck up and enjoy the ride has, in some ways, made me one of them. Me, Christiane and Myrtle Beach will always be firm friends. **E**