

Rocket Man



Two years after he first strapped a helicopter engine between two wheels and dubbed it the Y2K Superbike, Ted McIntyre has become the motorcycle maker for the stars.

BY SIONA LAFRANCE
FEATURED IN THE TIMES-
PICAYUNE

It even looks fast standing still.

Long, sleek and low to the ground, the Y2K Superbike looks like a motorcycle, more or less, but only in the way a switchblade looks like a putty knife.

It is powered by a 300-plus horsepower gas turbine engine originally built for a helicopter, accelerates like a dragster and is so powerful that a driver with enough open road, skill and guts could take it from zero to 200 mph in 15 seconds. Its theoretical speed is 250. It sounds like a jet on the road, but its roar is deafening even when it is idling.

The price tag? Try \$150,000, which makes it the most expensive motorcycle to ever go into series production.

But even if you have that much handy, don't pull out your checkbook yet. The bike's maker, Marine Turbine

Technologies near Franklin, has built only three Y2K Superbikes so far and plans to build only five a year from now on. Mike Tyson, Nicholas Cage, and Ben Affleck have said that they want one; "Tonight Show" host Jay Leno bought the first, a shiny black model, without ever seeing it in person.

"He told me he'd seen the bike on (the cable TV network) SpeedVision and in a motorcycle magazine," MTT President Ted McIntyre recalled, "and he said, 'I'm a member of the more-money-than-brains club and I'd like to have one.' He asked how much it cost and I told him and he said 'Whoa!'"

Then he sent a \$75,000 deposit.

McIntyre, who once made a living flying helicopters to offshore oil rigs, works out of an unassuming gray steel building surrounded by sugar cane fields at the Port of West St. Mary on the Intracoastal Waterway. He said that the market for jetpowered, stunningly expensive motorcycles is small, but he adds, "As fast as we're building them, they're being sold."

Frenchman Christian Travert, a custom bike builder and former bike racer, oversaw the design of the bikes, which take three to four months to build. Under the handmade aluminum chassis of each is a modified Rolls Royce Allison gas turbine engine mounted upside down in the frame. The 460-pound bike runs on diesel fuel, although McIntyre said the engine will run on anything that burns, from kerosene to alcohol.

It gets at best seven or eight miles per gallon. Even with an 8.5-gallon gas tank, that adds up to a lot of refueling stops. "It's not exactly for cross country cruising," McIntyre said.

The bike is equipped with carbon-fiber wheels designed to withstand intense speed. Instead of a rear-view mirror, there is a concealed camera in the tail that sends color video to a small dashboard monitor.

When Leno turns his on, a smiley face appears with the words “Hello, Jay.”

“The nice thing about this bike is that it is not a makeshift thing,” Leno said in a telephone interview. “It’s built from the ground up.”

The comedian has been buying and tinkering with classic cars and motorcycles for years and has what’s generally considered one of the finest private collections in the country. He keeps his Duesenbergs, Bentleys, muscle cars, old race cars, vintage motorcycles and other rare and unusual vehicles in a 43,000-square-foot warehouse near the Burbank Airport.

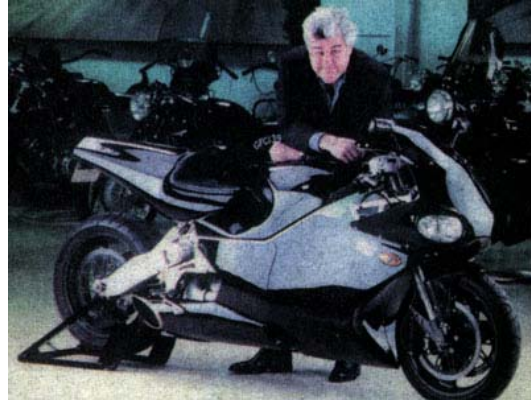
But like all of his other pricey toys, his Y2K is no museum piece. Leno said he rides it often, sometimes to work. He tells people that riding it feels like “God pushing you in the back.”

Leno said he was moved by more than the bike’s speed and novelty when he decided to buy.

“I sort of like made-in-America stuff and I like small businesses,” Leno said. “I enjoy reading about the history of people like Thomas Edison, Henry Ford and all the ones who managed to come up with something interesting or exciting.”

Asked if he ever cut loose with it on the road, he was coy.

“Well,” he said, “it would be foolish to exceed the speed limit because that would be breaking the law.”



Even cruising, it’s hard to be inconspicuous on the Y2K, as McIntyre found out one day as he rode the first one built, a silver prototype, down a lonely stretch of Louisiana road.

“I passed this law enforcement officer, and when I came back the other way, he flagged me down and was all excited,” he recalled. “He said, ‘Man, this is the bike.’ He told me he’d seen a photograph in a magazine, and he said, ‘Hold on a second, let me get my camera.’”

The officer snapped some pictures, then glanced down the road.

“I won’t say where it was, but it was a little two-lane road with no traffic. He asked, ‘How fast do you think you can get it going?’ And I said, ‘Oh, probably about 170.’ So I made a couple of passes for him.”

McIntyre, who grew up in Franklin and now lives near Lafayette, began experimenting with putting high-powered turbine engines into boats 17 years ago after buying a boat company in Florida.

He returned to Louisiana and founded MTT in 1990. Although the Superbike has recently put the company on the motorcycle map, MTT specializes in putting powerful aircraft engines into speed boats, yachts, and other playthings of clients who could best be described as high-end.

MTT buys used turbine engines that can't be used in aircraft anymore because of the strict time limits imposed on turbines in aircraft applications. The engines have to be changed when the maximum flying hours are reached, whether they're working perfectly or not.

MTT sells turbine packages, including refurbished engines, hardware and installation, that begin at \$60,000 for a 650-horsepower engine and up, depending on the size and power of the engine. Its costliest job was a \$4 million turbine package for a 92-foot yacht.

The company recently worked with the marine engine builder Mercury to develop a turbine outboard that, according to McIntyre, is being considered as a replacement for conventional outboards on some U.S. military vessels.

McIntyre said he was looking for an interesting project when he thought about putting one of the jet-like engines into a motorcycle for the road.

"Honda, or any of the other major manufacturers, would have spent \$10 million figuring out reasons not to do it. I thought it would be neat to do, so our attitude was 'Why not?'"

Others have put gas turbines into drag racing bikes, but no one had built one for everyday driving, he said.

"We had a customer who, when we mentioned the project, said that if we built it, he'd want it. So we started with that encouragement."

It is, said the affable McIntyre, a bike for the "ultimate connoisseur," someone who knows what he wants, and wants everyone else to know, too.

"In my mind this motorcycle is to impress people," he said.

"We've taken it on tour to a lot of events, and I don't care where we take

it, the minute we pull up, everyone else gets their thunder stolen."