

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Billy Al

“There is no Saturday!” chorused the Friday-night flyers of Ascot Park in Los Angeles.

The closed-oval was so ill-lit that the whites of the eyes of the Friday-night flyers blazed like headlights in the gloom, and the fastest of them were Sammy Tanner, Al Gunter, Neil Keen, Stu Morley, and Jack O’Brian, the celebrated five who comprised the Birmingham Small Arms “Wrecking Crew,” all their Gold Stars emitting an honest, aesthetic. THUMPH-THUMP-THUMP. They were named the “There is no Saturday” clan, because they raced like it, and the term was coined by C.R. Axtell , tuner for Tanner, who hung it on Elliot Schultz, whose



antique, but rocketing, Royal Enfield too often psyched out Tanner. Gradually and inevitably, though, “There is no Saturday,” evolved to embrace an intensity of feeling that was Ascot’s alone. Ascot Friday nights were stimulating, satisfying adrenalin-charged highs, everybody getting zonked out by the fiery duels and sensational speeds.

A sixth member of the BSA Gold Star Wrecking Crew, and perhaps one of the hardest-trying Friday-night flyers, was Billy Al Bengston, who, when not risking life and limb around Ascot, was a famous artist: using watercolors, acrylics and other media, he transferred from his hands to canvas the sensual quality of the burning skies of Mexico, Hawaiian Islands, and other special, sunny haunts.

Friday nights at Ascot offered little commercial reward, and no approbation whatsoever except to members of the immediate group. After working with fellow artists, Billy Al was perfectly accustomed to co-existence with fellow zealots speaking the same language, facing the same problems, with no help or understanding from the outside world. During the week, clay and paint presented their own challenges to his hands. His problem at Ascot on Friday nights was the same one faced by Tanner, Gunter, Keen, Morley. O’Brian and everyone else: how to cram the intensity of effort into a main event’s 15-laps – roughly seven searing minutes and survive.



Photo: Courtesy Billy Al Bengston

It was Keen, who used to have a shrink doctor hypnotize him into going fast, who started calling Bengston “Rembrandt” – an ironic old school nickname for a truly modern artist. “Creative things demand a unique personal vision and integrity that are beyond criticism. Bengston once said, speaking as usual about Ascot and art. He remained a member of the BSA Wrecking Crew long enough to get buzzed by another Friday night flier and put into the wall before Ascot’s walls were cushioned by straw. Administered to by an ambulance crew of cretins, he watched helpless as one of the cretins snipped away the gored palm of his irreplaceable hand with a set of nail clippers.



Bengston’s broken back made him hate the cold; and five days of paralysis from compressed discs left him hooked temporarily on pain killers, newly respectful of his body, plus suddenly wise to his own infallibility. And of course, no longer an Ascot Friday night flyer.