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All That's Good in Time

The Future Issue

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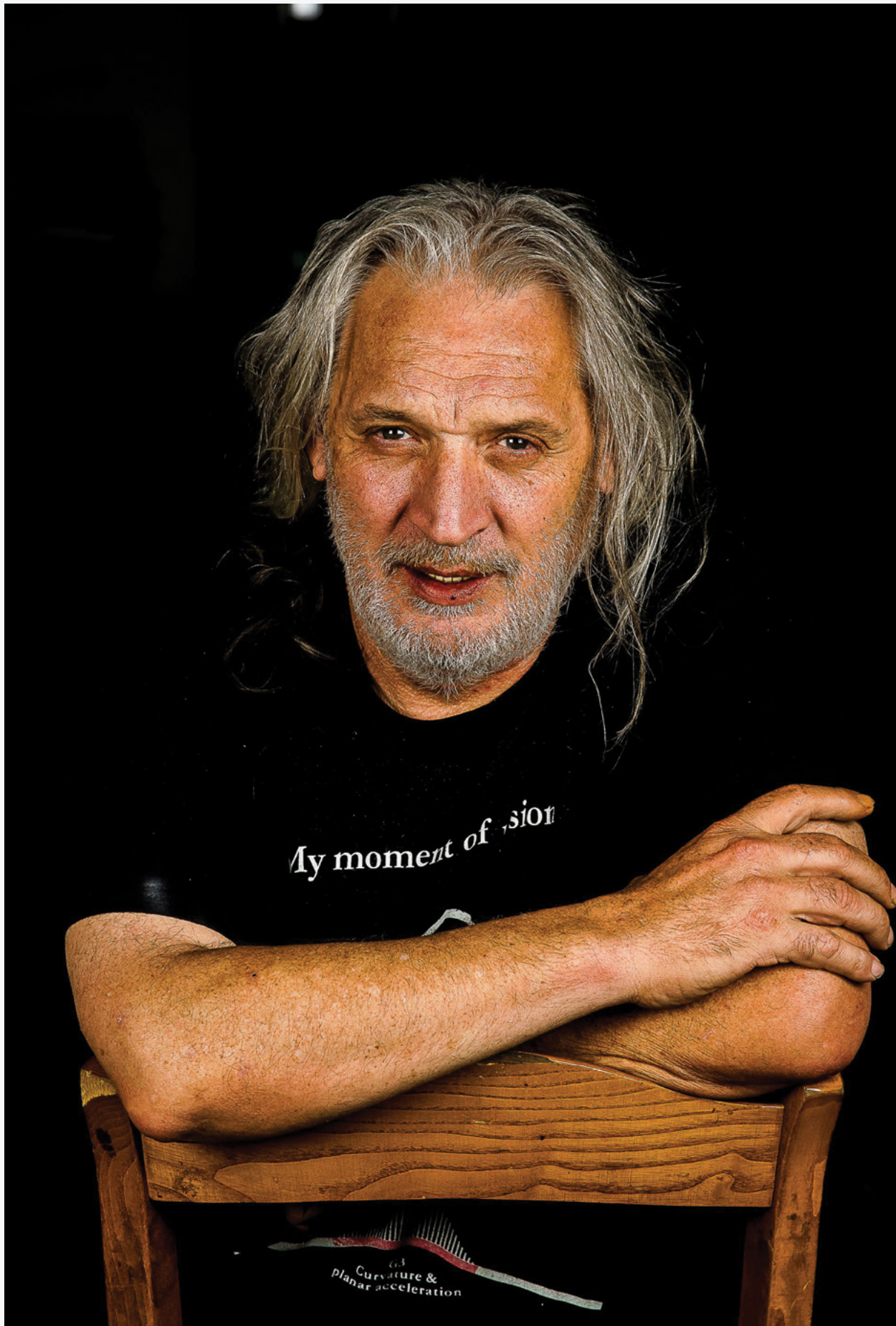
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PHOTOS: DARIO PEGORETTI.



OPPOSITE: The man himself. ABOVE: Pegoretti road bikes represent a singular kind of craftsmanship.

THE LAST GREAT ITALIAN BIKE BUILDER

Dario Pegoretti's super-custom, highly collectible steel bikes look (and ride) like works of art.

By James Jung

Here's a little-known fact the cycling industry would prefer you ignore: the bulk of today's carbon-fiber racing bikes are made in Taiwan, spit out in the same automated factory. Yes, even those beautiful Italian models steeped in all that history.

Pegorettis, on the other hand, are bikes of a different breed. Forged in steel, splashed in an array of colors befitting a Basquiat canvas, tailored to fit like a classic Neapolitan suit, every handmade Peg is—to those who still believe in the simple poetry of a bicycle—a timeless entity. So is the man who makes them.

"The first thing a bike should do is give the rider a sense of familiarity, second a sense of security, and third a sense of trust," says 62-year-old Dario Pegoretti from his small workshop in Verona. When he speaks, his raspy Italian voice rises and falls like a sonata. "Then we can start talking about performance. Already the first three things are difficult to achieve."

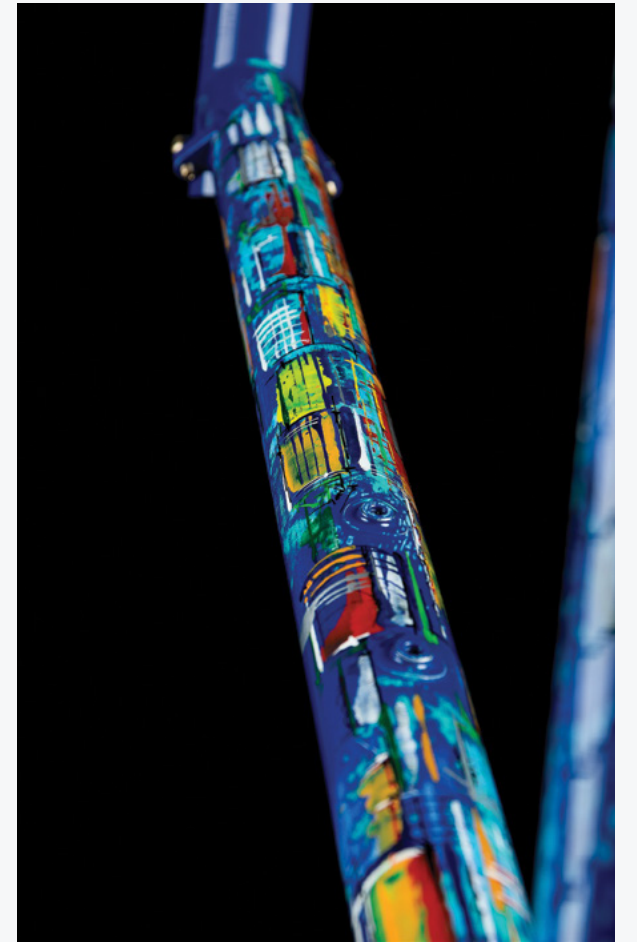
Dario should know. For over four decades, he's been crafting the world's finest bespoke bicycles. It's something he likens to a love affair, one that began in 1975, when he apprenticed for legendary Italian frame builder Luigino Milani. Dario—then a university student—initially took the job because he needed money to go out on Saturday nights. It quickly evolved into his life's calling. By the 1990s, Dario was secretly building custom bikes for that decade's best racers, men such as five-time Tour de France champ Miguel Induráin and Italian climbing ace Marco Pantani,

who both slapped their own sponsors' decals over Dario's hand-welded frame sets.

Today, in a sport dominated by carbon-fiber construction, electronic gearing, and data-spewing fitness apps, Dario remains a throwback figure, a silver-haired savant who works in steel. Every day, he shuffles around his concrete studio, which is housed in a former train depot, wearing a pair of loose-fitting jeans and floppy Birkenstocks, listening to jazz and blues records, sipping espresso as he builds a few hundred bikes a year along with his small staff. His clientele has shifted from racers to cultish enthusiasts (the world's largest Pegoretti collection purportedly belonged to the late Robin Williams), who flock to Verona from all over the globe to get their hands on one of the man's coveted custom rigs. The process can take as little as a month, from measurement to delivery. Most customers fiendishly ride



PHOTOS: DARIO PEGORETTI.



their bikes, marveling at its just-right fit, swearing that Dario's steel can somehow read the road's subtle textures and rhythmic turns. Others just mount their Pegs on walls as works of art. Either way, these bikes are extensions of both builder and rider; a singular bond stems from the former's dedication to the latter, and vice versa. One particularly besotted client even asked to have a few strands of Dario's hair sealed into the bike's clear-coat finish.

"In recent years, I've finally learned to say no," Dario says. You can almost hear him shaking his head, not only at the off-the-wall customization ideas, but at the sheer fanaticism of his devotees. "Now, when a customer's request doesn't match what I think I am able to do, I say no. This happens a dozen times each year."

And yet, despite his reticence to

bend to buyers' whims, despite his propensity to only work with those who trust his old-school methodology, despite the cancer that nearly killed him in 2007—a form of lymphoma that triggered a collective freak-out among his many fans—Dario is anything but standoffish. Rather, his process, much like his persona, is laid-back, *tranquillo*.

"He's literally smoking a cigarette and has a tape measure and is jotting your measurements down with a pencil," recalls Ian Harris, a 29-year-old former bike racer. Four years ago, Harris made a pilgrimage from his native New York to get fitted for his first Pegoretti. Ian's father, who'd ridden a Peg for years, sold his son on the idea of owning a bike that would last forever, rather than some trendy technology piece.

"I was a little worried," the younger

Harris admits. For him, the Dario Experience included a dog yapping at his feet and a bottle of single-malt whiskey. "Here I am about to drop the most money I've ever spent on any single item and this guy seems to be eyeballing it."

Any of Harris's misgivings over Dario's process faded as the venerated craftsman went to work. It's a process that has charmed even the most skeptical of skeptics, one that begins with a conversation, which invariably goes well beyond bike geometry and into food, art, and music. Or, to an Italian: Life. In the end, Harris even opted for Dario's "Ciavete" paint job, one that gives the legendary builder carte blanche to cast your brand-new, one-of-a-kind machine in whatever color scheme he feels like on that given day.

"The paint scheme reflects my

mood," Dario says. He can be influenced by anything, from recent photography exhibits to a "lady's magazine" he flipped through at the hairdresser. "If it's not a perfect day, the black color will flow a lot along the tubes. In contrast, the white and yellow will flow if the day is okay. Sometimes, I think that a rainy or sunny day affects what I do."

"The paint job, I told him, 'You take care of that,'" says Aldo Sohm, chef sommelier at New York's three-Michelin-starred Le Bernardin. "I'm not going to tell Michelangelo how to paint the Sistine Chapel."

Sohm, an Austrian native, caught the cycling bug four years ago, and quickly began amassing a trove of high-end Italian racing bikes.

"It's like buying watches," he says. "You buy the first one, then you buy the second one, and you're hooked."

His burgeoning obsession eventually led to Pegoretti; he was fitted for a bike when Dario was visiting New York. The two met outside a barbecue joint in Brooklyn (Sohm suggested this, having heard about Dario's love for meat and American cuisine, a habit that—along with his smoking—must confound his oncologist), and Dario measured him right there on the street. The finished product soon became Sohm's favorite ride, outperforming all the modern bikes in his collection.

"When you descend on a Pegoretti, it's like you're sitting on a razor blade," Sohm says. "It's just so precise. And if you go over cobblestones, you just glide over them."

Next on Sohm's agenda is organizing a ride for local Pegoretti owners in New York City. Unsurprisingly, they're a rare breed, which is prob-

ably what engenders such a feeling of clubbiness among them.

"What's the expression?" Harris says with a laugh. "Game recognizes game?"

He says he'll always get waves from fellow Peg Heads, the requisite nod and a "Nice bike!" Once, he was chased down the west side of Manhattan by a guy in a car, who rolled down his window to say that he, too, owned a Pegoretti.

"It's like having a very obscure, vintage Tag Monaco," says Harris. "If you see someone wearing it, you think, 'This guy must know a lot about watches.'"

ABOVE (FROM LEFT): The workshop in Verona where Pegorettis are born. Beauty in the details.