City of Cyclists? The emerging Los Angeles bike culture

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Related Categories: Cyclists' Bill of Rights, Bicycle activism, Bicycle licenses, Bicycle counter-culture, Bicycle advocacy, Mass rides

In our December 24th **Legally Speaking** column, we discussed **A Cyclists' Bill of Rights**, an inspirational example of cycling activism by the **Bike Writers Collective**, a group of Los Angeles cycling activists, who drafted a **Cyclists' Bill of Rights** and brought it before the Los Angeles City Council, where it was adopted with preliminary approval on December 9, 2008.

Then, on December 31st, I reported on **The L.A. Bicycle License Controversy**, in which an Angeleno cyclist with the *nom de velo* Roadblock was targeted for harassment by an LAPD that apparently has nothing better to do, for—get this—not having a bicycle license.

Now, those two story lines come together in **Bike Culture: Spokes People**, an outstanding Los Angeles Magazine piece on an unlikely underground bike culture emerging in the capital of American car culture. Some highlights:

> • Mass rides—parties on wheels, really, replete with sound systems, video, alcohol, illicit substances, and "hot girls"—that paradoxically claim to be "traffic" while studiously violating the rules applicable to traffic.
> • Dozens of **VeganBananaPenis** riders run a red light; the LAPD inexplicably singles one out for arrest. As one of his fellow riders ask, "What, they arrest the one black guy"?
> • Rush hour rides on gridlocked Los Angeles freeways, equal parts bike activism, stunt, performance, and "jackassness." The goal? Getting the gridlocked drivers "to go 'Oh wait, why did that bicycle just go by?'"
> • The culture-clash between the more-established advocacy-based organizations and the more confrontational bicycle counter-culture. One group stages a crosswalk-based protest that brings automobile traffic to a halt, with apparently no other purpose. More established advocates focus on working within the system to improve bicycle infrastructure, but with mixed results—bike lanes in the door zone, disconnected bike lanes, bike lanes that don't go anywhere. The problem? Business interests have expropriated the public space—the roadway—for automobile parking, leaving no roadway space for cyclists. The advocates working within the system have neither the political strength nor the political will to challenge this expropriation of public space for private gain, and so they continue to work for infrastructure gains that place cyclists in harm's way. Activist Stephen Box, the impetus behind the Cyclists' Bill of Rights, who straddles both worlds with a no-compromise attitude, argues convincingly that the number of traffic lanes on roadways should be reduced instead, in order to make room for bicycle infrastructure.

It's a fascinating glimpse into a daring—and increasingly popular—Angeleno bicycle culture that few would have predicted, and well worth the read.