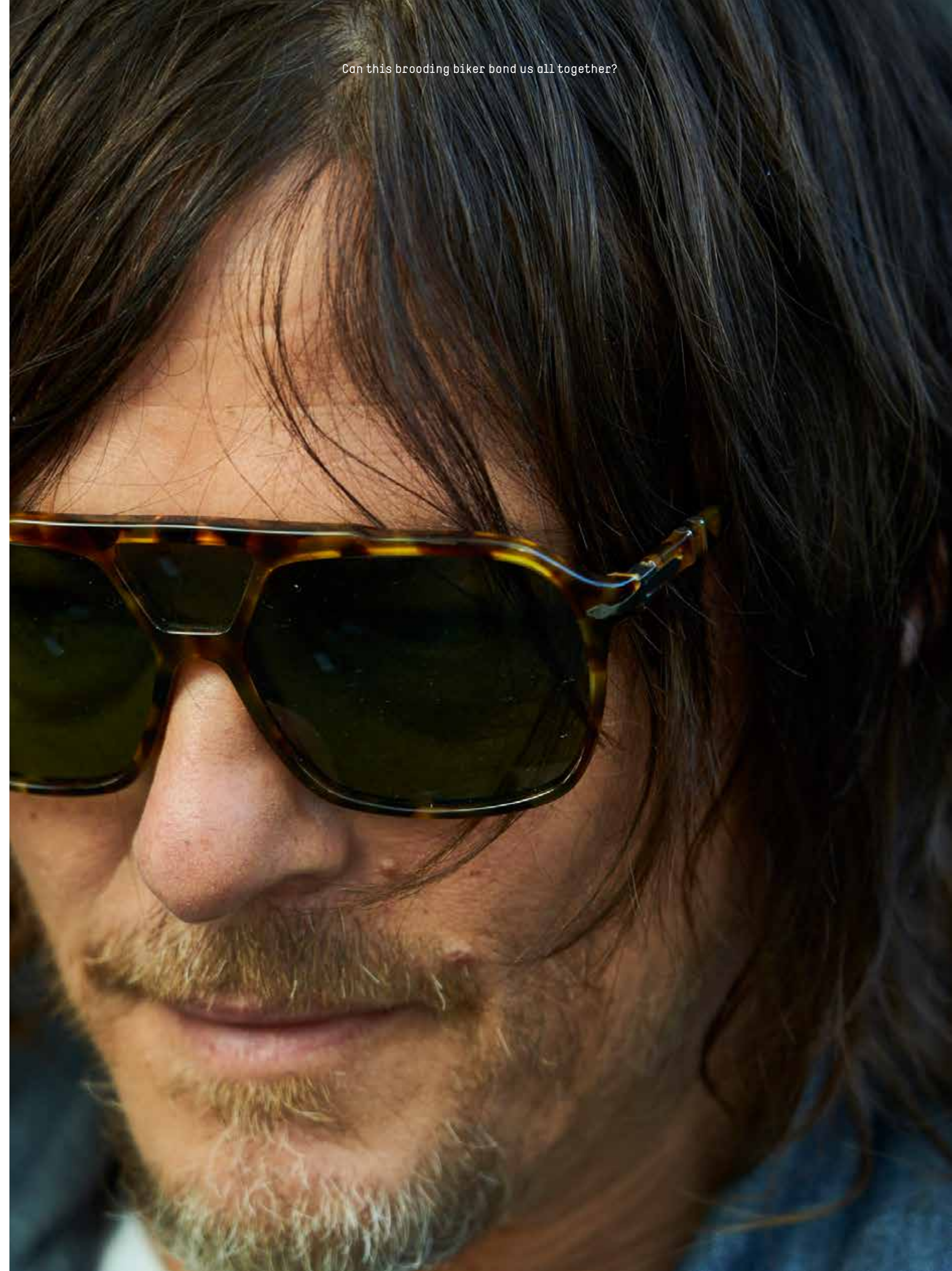


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Can this brooding biker bond us all together?



This page: Savas "The Denham" jacket, Rag & Bone henley, and RRL trousers. Opposite: Wearing his own clothing, Reedus heads out on his favorite bike, a 1982 Harley-Davidson FXR custom built by Yaniv Evan at Powerplant Motorcycles in Los Angeles. "It kind of fits like a glove, this one," Reedus says fondly. Page 125: Barton Perreira sunglasses and Mr P shirt.

- - - Norman Reedus is out for a Sunday afternoon ride in Northwest Georgia, caressing crisp October air with his gloveless hand, when the road quickly goes dark. Warm sun vanishes overhead as he darts beneath a canopy of murky, fall-colored trees on his blacked-out 2017 Triumph Tiger 800 XCA. The temperature drops and so does his speed as he scans the dense woods on either side of the road. He hesitates before creeping into a blind corner, and just when he rounds the bend, his tires dash through a large patch of blood splattered across the asphalt.

"Watch out for deer," he warned earlier. "They're everywhere out here."

At least it's not zombies.

As a de facto star of *The Walking Dead*, an AMC apocalypse drama that just finished filming its 10th season, Reedus is used to seeing blood ... everywhere. His gruff, laconic character on the show, Daryl Dixon, rides a chopper with a crossbow mounted on the back and stabs zombies in the brain as he bands together with other living humans to save what's left of mankind from the depths of seemingly insurmountable despair.

But right now, he's cruising with ease across a rural landscape of rolling hills and country roads that weave through cow pastures and churches surrounded by acres of manicured grass.



He calls this the Silo Ride on account of the two old, ivy-wrapped grain silos that he passes right before his turnaround point about 45 minutes from home. "There's always one old man at the last house on the right sitting on his porch, waving at motorcycles, but I didn't see him today," Reedus says from a gravel pull-off, sounding disappointed. "I always wave to him."

It's pretty rare for someone around here to wave at the actor without knowing who he is. *The Walking Dead* has been filming in the Atlanta suburbs for 10 years and has topped the list of most-watched shows in cable-television history. Reedus emerged in Season 1 as a Byronic antihero riding a 1971 Triumph Bonneville 650 with a '69 motor on a Yamaha XS650 frame before Season 5 saw him salvage parts to resurrect a 1992 Honda CB750 Nighthawk. In the course of one five-minute roadside cigarette break, three carloads of people drive by and recognize him.

Devotees of the 1999 cult classic film *Boondock Saints* (in which Reedus co-stars as hot-headed vigilante Murphy MacManus) absorbed into the fray of his *Walking Dead* fandom; they tune in for an extra hour each week to watch *Ride With Norman Reedus*, a motorcycle travel show with celebrity guests, now filming its fourth season. Much like the waves of rabid zombies and adoring fans in constant pursuit Reedus, work projects persist in seeking him out.

"I've got a photography exhibit at the Paris Contemporary Art Show; the video game I worked on, *Death Stranded*, just launched in New York; Nic & Norman's [the gastropub he co-owns near Atlanta with special effects makeup savant and *Walking Dead* producer/director Greg Nicotero]

is expanding to Chattanooga and Savannah; then I have another art book, and I'm going to Art Basel." He takes a pull on his cigarette. "Once the *Death Stranding* press is over, I go to New Zealand to shoot more *Ride* episodes, then I start filming *The Walking Dead* again. I have a production company that just signed a deal, so we're looking for office space ... and I'm reading a million projects ... I've got a lot going on, and it's pretty overwhelming."

To pull it all off, Reedus credits his success to surrounding himself with talented people like his restaurant managers; his agents; his book publisher and art curator, Laurie Dolphin; and his confidante, filmmaker Guillermo del Toro. But even without a support crew in tow, he's always at risk of being surrounded, particularly by middle-aged women who love his greasy mop of mud-colored hair and smooth voice that pours out like smoke.

"Norman girls are really delusional," says Sharon Harold, who works at a gift shop in Senoia, not far from Nic & Norman's. It's a red-bricked, one-horse town where five seasons of *The Walking Dead* were filmed. Any of the store's memorabilia with Daryl or his signature wings sells like crazy, especially the bobblehead dolls, life-size posters, and "Mrs. Daryl Dixon" phone cases. Sharon is a *Walking Dead* encyclopedia and an administrator on several popular fan sites.

"The first question people ask about Norman is what he smells like," says Cindy Sumner, a former corrections officer and paranormal consultant turned guide with Atlanta Movie Tours. Her loud Southern accent fills the foyer at Nic & Norman's during one of the weekly *Walking Dead* viewing parties. "I usually tell them, 'Cologne and unicorn tears with a little bit of cigarettes.'"

Others push the boundaries of fandom even further. A woman once threw Reedus' bike keys into the woods so he couldn't leave. Another woman paid \$300 to take three photos with him at a convention and got so excited after the first shot that she turned and bit him on the shoulder. "Just leave your fucking helmet on!" his co-star and riding buddy Jeffrey Dean Morgan pleads anytime they stop for gas on the Silo Ride.

"I'm very exposed all the time," Reedus shares, now settling in at a café near his home, where he keeps eight motorcycles in the garage next to a Porsche 911 he never drives (there are more bikes at his property in upstate New York). "I have to be on all day." He almost never says no to a selfie with a fan and used to lick the faces of some of the ones he liked. Even when rushing to pick up lunch at his own restaurant, unable to sign autographs, he has felt the need to make it up to the patrons by declaring the whole bar's tab on the house.

Sure, every now and then it might get to Reedus that he can't pull into a random gas station and run in to buy a lighter without three strangers asking for a snapshot. But the idea that he can use this power for good is not lost on him.



Reedus catches the light on his 1946 Harley-Davidson Knucklehead, another Powerplant creation.
RRL trench coat, Mr P denim jacket, RRL trousers, and Frye boots.



Mr P overcoat, Savas "The Denham" jacket, RRL trousers, and Frye boots.

GROOMING: SCOTT EDDO; PRODUCTION: CAROLINA TAKAGI; SET COORDINATION: KIM FULTON; PHOTO ASSISTANCE: BRANDON SMITH, PAULA HARDING, KEITH TAYLOR

In the opening scene of *Death Stranding*, developed and directed by video game demigod Hideo Kojima, Reedus' character, Sam Peter Bridges, is riding a futuristic motorcycle across another postapocalyptic world in which age-accelerating raindrops kill birds in flight and invisible reptiles slink through the mud below. The premise is a world destroyed by a Big Bang-like catastrophe, rapidly deteriorating until Bridges can bring it back into some kind of harmony. "It's my job to connect us," the character prophesizes in Reedus' unmistakable low, dark voice; Bridges is modeled after Reedus and even has the same skull tattoo on his right hand.

Early game reviews let out a sigh of relief. "If anybody out there in the world was going to connect us again, I would want it to be Norman Reedus," reported Seán McLoughlin (aka Jacksepticeye), an Irish YouTuber with 21 million subscribers. "I think that he is the glue that's going to hold humanity together in the future."

"My character in *The Walking Dead* has a lot of similarities to the character in the video game," Reedus continues. "There's a huge chip on his shoulder, and he just assumes everyone hates him. He's isolated. He's somebody who does stuff by himself in the middle of nowhere. Then, just as people slowly gained faith in Daryl and relied on him when he opened his heart, Sam slowly squares up and says what he means. As you play the game and get to certain obstacles, the point is to connect all these different people who are also isolated playing this game. So they leave things for one another, like a ladder or a tool, to help each other get from Point A to Point B."

Reedus contrasts the cooperative nature of the game with what he says social media was intended to be – a platform for people to enrich each other's lives that devolved into a place where "everyone just shreds each other." There's no opportunity in *Death Stranding* to shred another player, only to uplift the central character for the greater good of this dystopian world.

This isn't the first glimpse of compassionate development in Reedus' work. Both Sam and Daryl find themselves interacting with personalities they never would have otherwise known thanks to their respective apocalypses, and they become better men for it. Watching these characters open up and cry and fight and scream causes you, the viewer or gamer, to begin to feel that you're changing, too. At least that's the hope. "Society is fractured," Reedus laments. "Politics are fracturing it worse, and so it's a really bold move for [Hideo] to take on a message like that and not just try to make a *Fortnite*, where you kill everybody over and over again."

To that effect, *Ride With Norman Reedus* was supposed to be a gearhead's motorcycle show, visiting custom bike shops. But everywhere they went, people recognized Reedus and wanted to connect with him and show him their hometown. The series morphed to incorporate those people they meet along the way, welcoming the unexpected turns. In Barcelona with guest star Morgan, the whole film crew ends up following some kids down an alleyway to buy fireworks from an old man. In the Florida Keys with Peter Fonda, they switch their itinerary last-minute to visit the legendary fine art photographer Lucky Cole's compound after dark. "If you have a little notoriety, people open up to you a bit more," Reedus says. He loves being on camera with helmet hair and no makeup and having real-life conversations. His greatest fear has always been dying alone.

"So that's the theme I have going on," he says, finishing the last few bites of a Beyond Burger while contemplating his trajectory thus far. "This connection with the people, you know, to me."

Can watching a television show or playing a video game really connect us all and correct our course away from impending doom? What about art books or riding a motorcycle alone on a country road? For Reedus, that connection begins with a simple, friendly wave. So next time you're on a solo ride, shut off from the world and hidden beneath your helmet, be sure to wave to the old man on his porch, and be sure to wave to the other unrecognizable lone rider in black – you just might be saluting the glue that's holding together the future of humanity.