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Riding with the Oldest All-Gay, All-Male, All-Riding Motorcycle Club

May 19, 2015

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A crew of burly, bearded men wearing **[black leather pants \(http://www.vice.com/read/leather-granddaddies-0000408-v21n8\)](http://www.vice.com/read/leather-granddaddies-0000408-v21n8)**, hats, vests, and jackets appeared in the doorway of Rockbar, a dive at the very edge of the West Village in **[Manhattan \(http://www.vice.com/tag/Manhattan\)](http://www.vice.com/tag/Manhattan)**. They looked around, confused, at the the sight of long-haired guys in broken glasses wearing comic-book T-shirts. I realized this bar must normally be the group's haunt of choice and the nerdy comedy show I was there to see was perhaps not first on their list of amusements. They turned and walked out, not before I saw the back of one leather

vest—a yellow circle enclosed by a blue and red male symbol and the words *Empire City MC*.

A few months later, I'm waiting in a coffee shop for "Evil" Ed Caraballo and Chaz Antonelli, the current president and secretary, respectively, of what I have learned is the **Empire City Motorcycle Club** (<http://www.empirecitymc.com/>), or ECMC. The club is one of the oldest all-riding, all-gay, all-male motorcycle organizations in the world. Founded in 1964 by a group of 12 bikers from the New York metropolitan area, the club celebrated its 50th anniversary in October 2014. While other **motorcycle** (<http://www.vice.com/tag/Motorcycles>) clubs have perhaps been active for longer periods of time (at least one group disputes that they are the *oldest* all-male, all-gay group), Empire City is the only one that requires, and has always required, all of its members to ride a motorcycle.



Motorcycle organizations (<https://www.vice.com/video/australias-biker-club-crisis>) popped up all over the country in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, following the burst of soldiers coming home from the World War II who were hungry for the same sense of danger and excitement they experienced in combat overseas. The popularity of bike clubs was bolstered by the romanticization of the "bad boy biker" image that exploded across America in the 50s thanks to the iconic film *The Wild One*. In the movie, Marlon Brando stars as Johnny Strabler, a tough character outfitted with a leather motorcycle jacket and cap, tight jeans, and—of

course—a trusty bike. Brando's Strabler character and Tom of Finland's illustrations of burly, leather-bound tough guys on bikes became images to aspire to, a representation of freedom and danger at the same time. Motorcycles have had that same reputation ever since.

Admittedly, I too associate motorcycling with general badassery and my visions of it are always soundtracked by Steppenwolf's "**Born to Be Wild** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xm5DPINCmtk>). When Ed and Chaz stride into the coffee shop, they uphold my expectations. They're both cloaked in well-worn leather jackets and denim jeans held up by black leather belts with big silver buckles. They wear thick black boots and walk with strength and purpose. They are friendly, gracious, knowledgeable—and they are not to be fucked with.



Chaz, 48, has a thick, bristly horseshoe of a mustache peppered with brown and gray, and a tattoo of a leather-bound heart on his neck. Over his leather rider he wears a frayed denim cutoff jacket. On the vest are sewn all manner of patches, from flags of different countries that he's visited to pride flags to patches bearing statements like "It's only kinky the first time"—all surrounding the ECMC logo at the center. Ed, 46, is sleek in jeans that end perfectly above his boots, and a crisp black turtleneck sweater under his black leather Empire City vest. His beard is shaped into clean lines around his face. Ed has been a member of Empire City since 2010; Chaz officially since 2008, though he has been spending time with the club since 1989.

"Personally, I feel when you're in a group of guys who are into motorcycles, you all have the most common bond in that you're into motorcycles, but you like a little danger," Ed says. "Being a gay biker, being in a group, you find yourself with people who have the same interests, the same comfort level," he goes on. "Not just to be talking about it, but to experience it together."



Empire City currently has a total of 16 members, associate members, and pledges. Full members range in age from early 30s through mid-60s, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. About 95 percent are professionals, in fields as diverse as landscaping, chemical engineering, teaching, law, psychology, and hairdressing. Some are retired. They're all required to be responsible, especially in regard to maintenance of their motorcycles—they're not raging on the road or in the bars where they hang out, though they definitely do love to have a

good time. In Ed's words, the club is made of mature men who come together over a love of riding motorcycles and are comfortable enough with themselves to feel they can contribute to the group dynamic, no matter their stage in life.

Part of that group dynamic involves participating in a variety of riding and social events throughout the year. Some of these events include their annual Memorial Day Biker Weekend, where they have a catered picnic and a traditional bike blessing—you choose a name for your bike and the club's chaplain blesses it—and the annual Holiday Party and Toy Drive, benefitting the Leake & Watts foster care organization. The club also goes on many rides for charity like Hogs for Hope benefitting the Ronald McDonald House, volunteers at benefits like the Imperial Court of New York's annual Night of 1,000 Gowns, and participates in the annual New York Pride Parade.

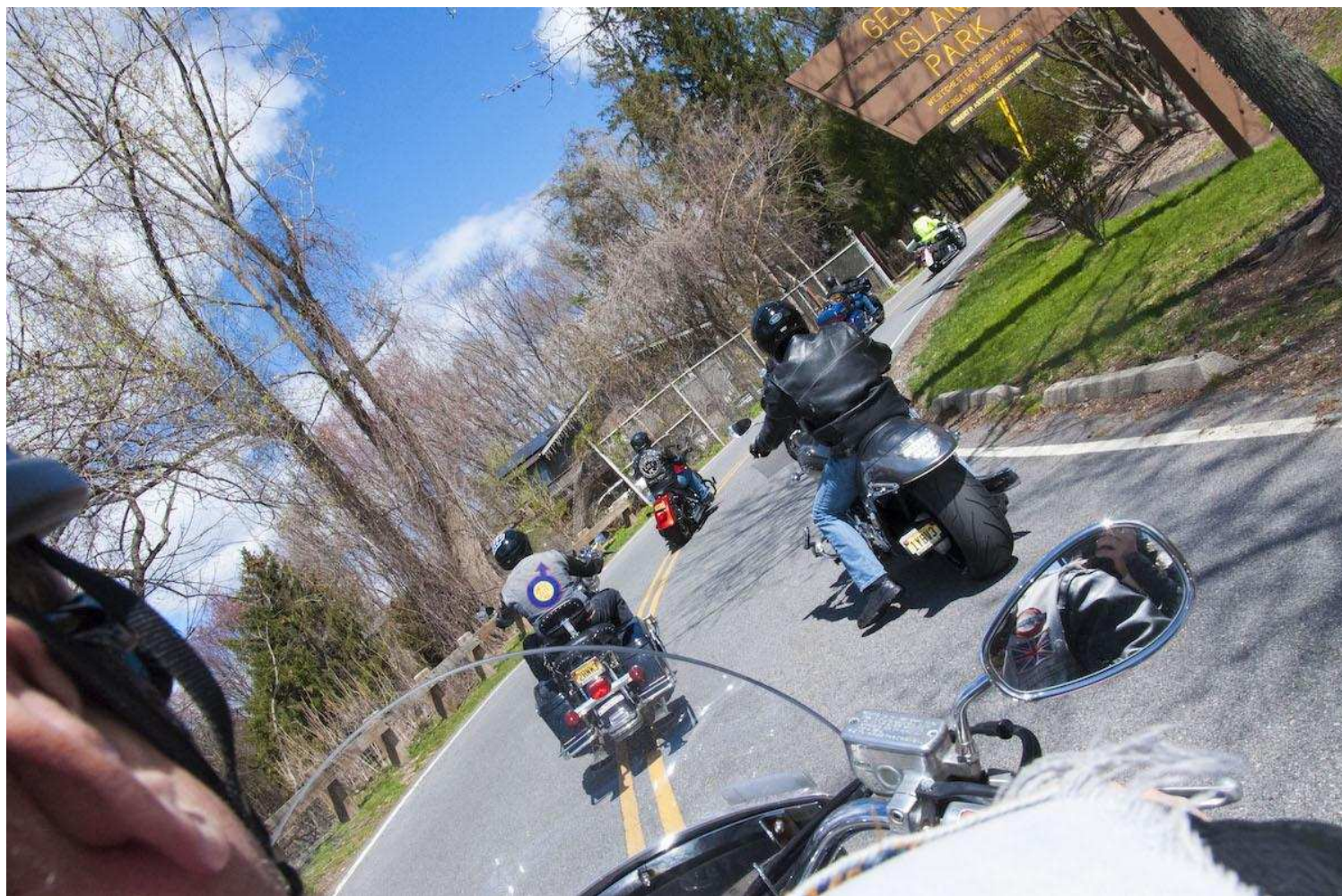
Related: VICE visits Black Bike Week, an annual bike rally in Myrtle Beach.

In our digitized culture, ECMC is still around because it offers its members something they can't find online. "The club community has survived because different needs have existed that the clubs have filled in," Chaz says. "With a motorcycle club, the bonds are even stronger than that of your generalized leather club or MC [men's club] because we have a lot more in common with each other," he says. The Men's Clubs, which often have a fetish focus like leather, might have a few members who ride motorcycles, but they're not all 100 percent all-riding motorcycle clubs like Empire City. "We ride together, we protect each other. When we ride in formation, we are a well-oiled machine. We watch out for people on the road; when we change lanes, we make our presence known."

Chaz himself came to the club through the leather community, in which both he and Ed are active. Many of

the ECMC members are—though it's not mandatory to join. For some in Empire City, a motorcycle is the ultimate leather accessory, but others just like to ride.

Ultimately, though, Empire City is all about riding and brotherhood. Members join and stay for long periods of time—20, 40, even 50 years—and they bond over the freedom, experience, and trust created when riding a motorcycle in a group.



Emil Solis, 81, has missed only two ECMC Christmas parties in his 50-year membership with the club. And one was the very first party, in December 1964, before he became a member. Though Emil stopped riding in 1996, he is currently an ECMC Emeritus member, meaning he doesn't have to own a bike or license designation, or pay dues.

In the 1960s, when Emil joined, "gay" was not something you discussed and "out" was not something you were. ECMC began as a secret organization because it had to. Being openly gay put you at risk for losing your job, your apartment, your family, and friends.

"When I came with my late [partner] Bill into the club in June of '65, they had no name of the club yet," he says. "They were called some fancy name or something more traditional than Empire City. Empire City, that

sued everybody well. It doesn't mean that you're gay, it doesn't mean this, it doesn't mean that. We're just New York City, Empire City. That's how it stuck."

Emil lowers his voice when he says the word "gay," even though we are chatting in the lobby of **The Center** (<https://gaycenter.org/>), as New York's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center is known. Even in the age of Lady Gaga's "Born This Way," the oppression Emil experienced throughout his lifetime is hard to shake.



Following ECMC's history is a bit of a Forrest Gump-like experience of gay history post-1950: Emil himself was a member of the Mattachine Society which, established in 1950, was one of the earliest gay rights organizations in the country. ECMC also predates the influential Stonewall Riots in 1969; Emil actually participated in Christopher Street Liberation Day, which is now considered the first ever gay pride parade, in 1970. ECMC survived the AIDS crisis of the 80s and 90s; and today some members have married their partners with the passage of gay marriage in New York State.

(<http://munchies.vice.com/articles/life-advice-from-californias-best-biker-bartender>)MUNCHIES: Life Advice From California's Best Biker Bartender (<http://munchies.vice.com/articles/life-advice-from-californias-best-biker-bartender>)

"In the 70s, you lived Monday through Friday a regular, closeted life," Chaz says. "A life that was not really you. When the weekend came, you hooked up with your friends, you went out to the bars, you went to club runs, and you hung out with people that were just like you. It was the only time you could let your hair down and be yourself. And because those were so important, people were joining clubs in droves because that was our only social outlet. That was Facebook at the time."

Today, ECMC is vocal about its existence—members wear those aforementioned leather jackets and vests without fear of repercussion; they recruit members at fairs like Folsom Street East, the largest outdoor fetish festival on the East Coast; and they hold meetings the first Wednesday of every month at The Center, which all interested men and prospective members are welcome to attend.



To be a member of the ECMC, you must be a gay man over the age of 21, you must own a motorcycle, you must be insured for said motorcycle, and you must be licensed to ride a motorcycle. To be a full member (as opposed to an associate member, which has fewer event attendance requirements to uphold) you must live within a 50-mile radius of Columbus Circle. If you meet those qualifications, you can apply.

After applying, you must attend one general meeting and one official club ride and obtain sponsorship from two full members who will vouch for you before you are either accepted or rejected as a pledge. There's a mandatory pledge period of three to six months, and during that time you'll be asked to get to know other ECMC members, attend club events, rides, and meetings, and fully acquaint yourself with all 22 pages of the ECMC Constitution and Bylaws. After that time, your membership will be voted on. And the gentlemen don't bend the rules.

The strict adherence to this structure is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the club has lasted so long. Everyone has always been held to the same very high standards of responsibility and brotherhood. "We're not fair-weather friends. That's what our vetting process does, it makes sure you're a person of good character," Chaz says. "We don't just want to be there for them, we want to make sure they're there for us, too. It's a two-way street—we're a family."



The best way to see the brotherhood in action, though, is to be on a ride with them.


On a Sunday morning in April, ECMC members begin rolling into the Lexington Candy Shop, a regular meeting spot before rides. The waitress behind the counter knows them by name and calls them honey and sweetheart and knows their orders by heart. Today I will be riding with Chaz on the back of his bike, a 2004 Yamaha Road Star. We head outside and shortly there's a symphony of carburetors purring awake. Helmets are strapped to heads, leather jackets are zipped closed.

[Watch: Motherboard reports on the electric superbike of the future \(http://www.vice.com/video/the-electric-superbike-of-the-future\)](http://www.vice.com/video/the-electric-superbike-of-the-future)

Today it's a smaller gathering of gentlemen—Chaz, Eddie, Mark, Joe, Geno, and an ECMC pledge, Aaron (who has since become a full member). For some of the men, this is their first ride of the season: Bikes have been hauled out of garages, hands must reacquaint themselves with clutches, and faces must adapt to the cold wind. Geno, the Road Captain, will be leading the ride, and Chaz is the safety, or the tail. He will guard the other ECMC cyclists from oncoming cars, making sure there's enough room for the bikes to change lanes, make turns, and enter traffic throughout the trip. The ultimate goal is always to stick together, on or off the bike.

As we move north on the West Side Highway, I get it. Motorcycling is incredibly dangerous and when you invest your trust in people to watch out for you, to ride safely, to essentially take your life in their hands, having them so closely and carefully uphold it makes you feel closer to them. I feel the wind in my face and the corners of my mouth naturally upturn and they just stay there, involuntarily. The freedom and the openness of riding a bike are so powerful that it makes dealing with the danger of it worth the trouble. When you get to experience that along with a group of people even for a day, like me, you begin to develop a sense of camaraderie and community, so I can only imagine what it's like when you've been riding with these people for years. The motorcycle may be the foundation of Empire City, but the people are what gave, and continue to give, the club the soul that has been making it a home and a family for over 50 years.

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