

THE LAST OUTLAW

WORDS
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EVER WANTED TO HIT THE HIGHWAY
WITH THE REAL **SONS OF ANARCHY**?
STAR OF THE SHOW **DAVID LABRAVA**
TAKES US OUT FOR A **RIDE** ON THE
MEAN STREETS OF OAKLAND





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Five years ago, the *Sons of Anarchy* TV show officially ended, but some people still have difficulty separating David Labrava from his alter ego, Happy Lowman. His Instagram and Twitter accounts are frothing seas of fans questioning his motivations and demanding real answers to questions about his character's fictional actions.

"People think they know you," says Labrava. "Others say that they're going to unfollow me because of something that Happy has done. But really, it's a television show. You wouldn't go and beat someone up because you watch *The Sopranos* and they're wearing a 'Bada Bing' T-shirt."



When we rendezvous in Oakland, California, confusing Labrava and Happy seems impossible, not least because on the show his murderous character was monosyllabic, whereas in real life the 56-year-old is about as animated and garrulous as anyone I've ever met. Also unlike his character, Labrava wears glasses and smiles – and tends not to reach for a gun the moment things don't go his way.

Yet, as soon as the camera is on him, things change. As Labrava dips his chin and removes his glasses, his eyes gnarl into a vicious scowl. A very real tattoo of a snake slithering across his skull suddenly becomes more visible. Almost immediately

he is, as a Harley-Davidson dealer will later describe him, the real deal.

We're just outside Lucky 13, the Alameda tattoo parlour at which Labrava – or DL, as colleagues call him – works as an artist. This island-city adjacent to Oakland was once a military hub but is now rapidly gentrifying and Lucky 13, equal parts bar and tattoo shop, seems a natural fit.

I'm not sure that the same can be said of Labrava, who arrives here on his customised Harley Dyna as though he's ridden through a time portal from another America altogether. This natural badassery is the sort of thing that led Charlie Hunnam, *Sons of Anarchy's* breakout star, to say of Labrava: "His energy and knowledge of this world brought such an authenticity to the process. If I was ever unsure of what this world was... just one question to him clarified it all. His contribution was massive."

Initially brought on as a consultant, DL was soon asked by showrunner Kurt Sutter to play Happy. He stayed until the end of the seven-season run, which, considering he was attached to the project before the first scene was even shot, made him just about the longest-serving player on the Golden Globe-winning hit.

As he machine-guns out words over two days, certain patterns appear in Labrava's speech. One is: "I really just want to rescue dogs." Another is: "This became pop culture, bro." This is undoubtedly true. Every time we're out on the street – and especially when Labrava dons his *Sons of Anarchy* >



Left David Labrava (far right) and the *Sons of Anarchy*



patched leather jacket – he is recognised by passers-by and takes time with each of them. Watching the frequency, it's easy to see how *Sons of Anarchy* became the FX network's most popular show to date.

"I'd ride my bike down to LA at four in the morning, listening to Pearl Jam, having the time of my life," he says, smiling at the memories. "I'd get there and ask what I was doing. They'd say: 'Here's a machine gun, you're gonna smoke all these dudes, then we'll make you anything you want for lunch – and don't worry, no one is getting arrested.' It was the best job I ever had."

Still, Labrava is quick to correct anyone who thinks he's just a local fixer who got lucky. An author and director in his own right, he now spends much of his time writing scripts for the follow-up to his 2015 movie *Street Level*, as well as inking tattoos and helping the canine cause.

He's also a member of a prominent biker club, and when we sit down to talk, he urgently takes a call from his president to get permission to discuss it. He doesn't go into details and we agree not to mention the club's name. "The show is the show," he says, that serious look back in his eyes, "but this is real life, bro. Y'know, they're proud of me, but it's a separate thing."



By the time I leave Oakland, I, like many *Sons of Anarchy* fans, am a bit unsure where the line between fiction and reality lies. After doing a bit more reading, I realise



privileged to be inked by the man Labrava describes as "Rembrandt".

As it's a band that will stretch all the way around my underarm, the pain is exquisite. Yet through the white noise of my own profanity I manage to whimper a question about the clientele.

"Everything depends on what the customer is used to," says Oliver while the needle stains my skin. "I mean I've had MMA fighters come in and fall asleep mid-tattoo because they're so used to pain."

And what about bikers?

"Well they can be really mixed," he says.

An hour east of Oakland, Keith Vargem, the manager of the Eagle's Nest Harley-Davidson dealership, confirms this, not in terms of pain threshold, but personality. "There are so many clubs with different agendas that exist for different reasons," he explains. "You have fun clubs, you have serious clubs; you have outlaw

I'm not the first to feel this way. Writing in his seminal 1967 book *Hell's Angels*, gonzo journalist Hunter S Thompson said of one biker: "It was obvious that he was a man who marched through life to the rhythms of some drum I would never hear."

Over a week in and around Oakland, I can't hear those particular beats, either, but find myself inclined to pretend. Back at Lucky 13, the obvious place to start is by getting a tattoo. Owing to a last-minute cancellation, owner Oliver Ocampo can squeeze me into his afternoon schedule. The ink is largely a corrective measure, righting an idiotic teenage wrong on my left arm, but I can't help but feel



“I’D RIDE MY BIKE DOWN TO LA AT FOUR IN THE MORNING, LISTENING TO PEARL JAM, HAVING THE TIME OF MY LIFE”

clubs, you have Christian clubs. There really are all kinds out there.”

The Harley customisations for the first seasons of *Sons of Anarchy* happened here, and for several years afterwards, locals would ask to have their bikes modified to match what they’d seen on TV. That particular niche has slowed a little since the show wrapped in 2014, but there’s still enough business for them to run a new rider course. I’m curious about that, but don’t have time to see the two-day assessment through while I’m here.

Instead, Vargem takes me around the showroom, advises me on which kind of bike might suit my frame (slim) and experience >

(negligible) before letting me straddle a Dyna Super Glide Sport, much like those ridden by the cast in the show. Even without starting it, the weight of the bike, the height of the bars and the stretching of my groin across its wide body all seem unnatural.

For the better-initiated, this dealership is a motorbike Mecca. Back in *Sons of Anarchy*'s heyday, the enormous facility hosted an auction of the stars' bikes with some of the actors in attendance. It was so inundated with fans that they had to park almost a mile away. "It was crazy," says Vargem. "I wasn't working here then, but I knew a guy and he snuck me in through the back door." Pop culture, bro.

"THE SHOW IS THE SHOW, BUT THIS IS REAL LIFE, BRO"



Charming, the hometown of the *Sons of Anarchy*, is fictional but that hasn't stopped fans speculating where the real-life inspiration came from. On the online forums, Farmington, some 90 minutes east of San Francisco, had been suggested as the most likely candidate.

David Labrava doesn't know it and didn't recommend it to the showrunners, but nonetheless, enough fanboys seemed convinced that I decided to drive out there.

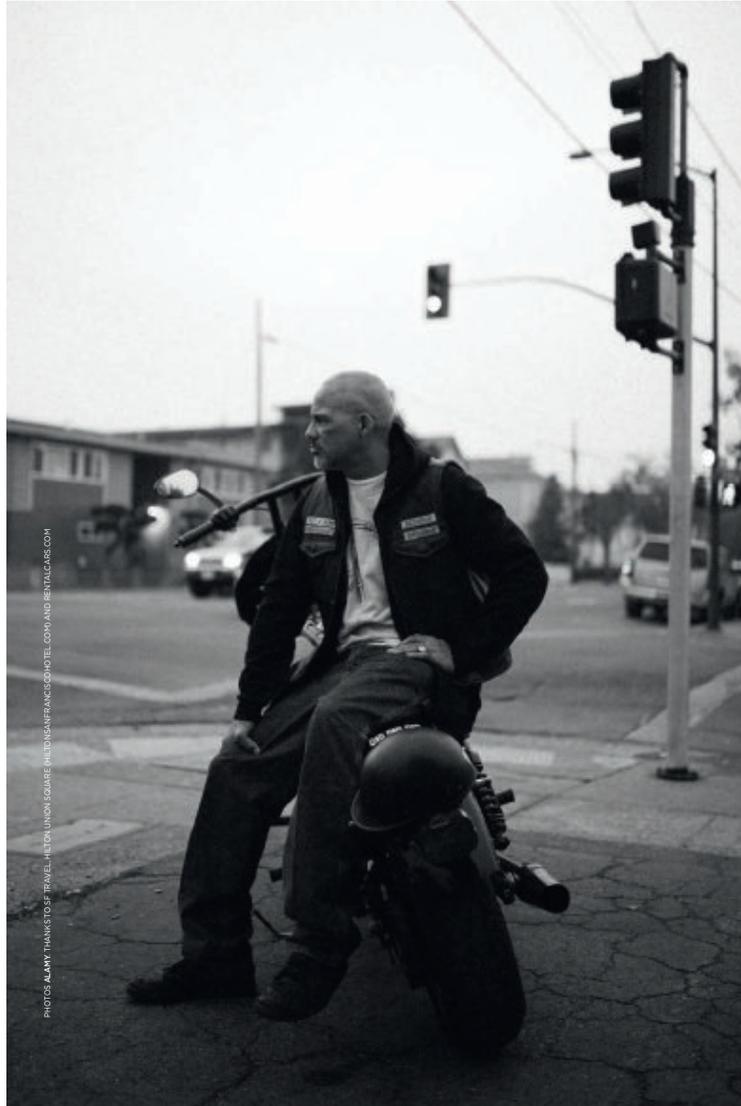
As I pull up in my fuel-efficient Ford Fiesta (*rentalcars.com*), no one could mistake me for an outlaw road warrior, but I'm made to feel welcome at Lagorio's Grill all the same. It's not exactly the kind of place you'd plan bloody vengeance in, but it's the only bar in town, and it welcomes bikers from far and wide. The windows are almost blacked-out with stickers from various groups imploring non-bikers to support their local clubs: the Condemned Reapers; the Vengeful Saints; the boldly named Alky Haulers.

Unsurprisingly, there's no mention of the Hell's Angels, but within moments of sitting at the bar, two very merry sisters are keen to make sure I know that they're around, and that they kill people and feed their bodies to pigs on a nearby farm.

It's hard to hear this as anything other than village gossip, and as I look away to avoid laughing, I notice that on the ceiling, there are dozens of bank notes signed and stuck up there by various biker clubs who have passed through. Once a year the bar takes them down and gives them to charity.

Again, reality and fiction diverge and as I leave to return to San Francisco, I think back to something Labrava had said, a little exasperated. "Some people go to jail and cite the *Sons of Anarchy*, like they could do the things they did without the cops rolling in. Give me a break. Our show was meant to entertain – and that's exactly what it did." ■

 Watch **Sons of Anarchy** onboard now



PHOTOS: ALAMY; THANKS TO: TRAVEL, HILTON UNION SQUARE (HILTONSANFRANCISCOHOTEL.COM) AND RENTALCARS.COM