

Houston Press

Houston Chopper

Meet Roman Blum, the next TV biker star
By **Steven Devadanam** Thursday, Dec 7 2006

The blaring [Nickelback](#) tune on the radio is barely audible over the clangs, bangs and whirrs. Under a big graffiti wall mural and posters of grinning porn stars, [Roman Blum](#) attaches hoses and fits transmission pieces to a slowly evolving chopper with the skill of a brain surgeon. As he ducks under the assembly of the bike, two TV cameramen creep up on him, tracking his every move. He's under the gun: This bike has to be built and delivered tomorrow -- to Florida. That's a far drive from Roman's 6,000-square-foot shop here in Northeast Houston. The long, sleek chopper is only 75 percent complete; it's missing wheels, lights and a gas tank. And before it's placed in the cargo trailer, it has to be fired up to make sure it starts.



Steven Devadanam

Roman and Charles build a badass bike as the camera rolls.

It's the perfect dramatic scenario for *American Biker Series* -- an upcoming reality TV series starring Roman and his crew that's slated to premiere on [ESPN](#), [TNN](#) and [Spike TV](#) in January. The show's setup: Roman, a dead ringer for [Kid Rock](#) (without the drugs and hep) and owner of RB Custom Choppers, has 30 days to create a bike -- from sketch to reveal. That's tough enough without having a TV crew following his every move, every second. ("They don't follow me into the bathroom," Roman quips.) The bike, a silver, slender beauty-to-be, is being unveiled tomorrow at a big bash in Ft. Lauderdale. There'll be fans, a party and

plenty of media. It promises to be the perfect showcase for an up-and-coming bike maker. That is, if the bike is finished on time -- and works.

Randy, who paints bike pieces for Roman, walks into the shop bearing a silver gas tank. "He's been working on this bad boy for 40 hours straight," says Roman proudly. He and his crew gather around as the meticulously painted tank is fitted onto the chopper's "backbone." Suddenly, the skeleton is a real bike. It's a great reality TV moment, and for a second, the tension is gone.

But then Roman looks at his watch. "Damn, it's time," he says to his guys. The cameras stop rolling. It's Halloween night, and Roman promised his daughters Yasmina and Zoie that he'd take them trick-or-treating. Given his insane deadline, he'd be justified in passing the task off to his wife [Silvia](#), who also runs his retail shop. But that would be neglecting his kids.

And that's not the way he rolls.

It's the perfect time for a reality biker show. Every week, [Discovery Channel](#) audiences tune in to watch the dysfunctional Teutul family on [American Chopper](#), with muscle-bound dad Paul cussing out sons Paul Jr. and Michael. Motorcycles are hot, and so are the people who make them. Take [Jesse James](#), who started out building bikes and later became the star of the reality show [Monster Garage](#), a restaurateur and [Sandra Bullock's](#) bed buddy.

When the bigwigs at Platinum Television Group, a production company based in Florida, decided to create the next big cable chopper series, they scoured the country, whittling down thousands of candidates before choosing Roman as their star. "I got a call, and they wanted to know a little about me," he says. One call became two, then three, and soon, an executive producer and a camera crew were in his shop off of 1960, following him around.

Once the deal was signed, life got "really crazy," says Silvia, a slender firecracker of a wife/ mom/office manager who Roman says "keeps his ass in line." Two TV cameramen followed the Blum family around and tracked the RB staff all day. Yet Silvia and the family have managed so far. "When Roman first started out making bikes years ago, he'd have parts in our living room, the hallway, even the bathroom. But I knew he loved it -- it was his passion, and a little sacrifice of my living room back then is what's gotten him here today." Roman started RB Custom Choppers in 2002. Before that, he'd worked in car stereo outfits, car customizing and parts shops, and even an upholstery store. It's second nature for him to create a bike from scratch, right down to making the leather seat and embroidering it. (The upholstery shop experience has definitely come in handy.)

"I kinda come from what you could call the urban underground," says the former hardcore skater and BMXer. His shop is a playground. He and his crew throw firecrackers at each other (and even at unsuspecting members of the media). They ogle the nudie pics on the walls, chill at the sports bar next door and hang at the neighboring pizza place, owned by Silvia's dad Burki. When they get stressed, Roman and Charles go pop ollies on their skateboards. They toss a tire at Roman's pit bull Dre and watch him prance around with it like it's a dead bird. Roman regresses 20 years as he taps the glass box that holds two mammoth black scorpions -- his "other pets" -- "just to piss 'em off." (You probably won't see Jesse James doing that.)

There's only one thing that sets Roman off: racial intolerance. He knows the prevailing image of biking is white and male. "The old-school biker society is *all* about white supremacy," says Roman, who grew up seeing Confederate flags on the backs of T-shirts at bike meets.

"Yeah, I've got a black guy and a Mexican guy in my shop, and a woman running the store," says Roman. "If you don't like it, you can get the fuck out of here, because that's not what I'm about." There's Charles -- a wide-bodied African-American guy who sports rectangular glasses and a hybrid Mohawk -- Roman's best friend and right-hand man. Then there's John, a goateed, burly Mexican man who looks like a roadie for Slayer and is a key player in the shop. And then there's his wife and office manager Silvia. Not exactly the stereotypical white, Dixie-flag-shirt biker set. Only Roman and Jim, a white-haired, bearded gent who could pass for [Kenny Rogers's](#) stunt double, look like your typical bikers.

Charles, who's known Roman since the seventh grade when they'd skateboard together, knows the scene and gets it. "I've been to hundreds of bike shops," he says, "and I've never seen a black guy working in one." The bike craft is a trade, one that's protected, he says, and a black guy is an outsider. "People don't want to give the trade away. But man, you do what you do, and you do it well, and color never comes up."

"There are two types of bikers who come in here," says Roman, "the RUB [rich urban biker] who comes in who's naïve to the situation and just wants to buy a bike from anybody, and then the guys who come in who say, 'Y'all got a black guy working in a bike shop?'"

Roman can tell hatin' customers to eff-off because he can afford it. RB Choppers is in high demand: One of RB's bikes, a sexy, baby-blue number, just won first place in the Houston Autorama Vintage Custom Class division. Roman says it gives him "more cred. You win some awards, you get a TV show, it all shows that you're for real and know what you're doing." He can fetch a minimum of \$40,000 per bike, and he's got several in production -- on top of his reality show pieces.

With success, Roman has earned the luxury of picking and choosing his jobs; he and Charles figure they decline 30 percent of their walk-in business. They've turned down offers for Pepsi-bottle-shaped bikes, three-wheeled goofy numbers and even a motorcycle shaped like a "weird Pegasus thing," he says. "You want to spend \$75,000 on a mid-range Harley and look like everyone else, cool. You want something that'll start up and last forever, and is like nothing else on the road because it was built from ground up just for you? I'm your guy. But I'm not everybody's guy."

He vows he'll never build "trailer queens," essentially, big, crazy, over-the-top machines that are all the rage these days and make for good pictures and video, but for practical purposes, are unridable. To Roman, who loves to pop wheelies and ride them for about half a mile on his own bike, trailer queens are pointless.

It's after 11 p.m. at the Ft. Lauderdale hotspot Automatic Slim's. Hundreds of people have shown up for the "big reveal" of Roman's bike. The chopper was made specifically for [Platinum Productions'](#) head honcho, [Doug Scott](#). Roman's a little tense: His wife and crew are here. The media is here, and cameras are rolling. He's already had to adjust the carburetor and make sure it "lopes" (creating that familiar idling chug) just right, since Florida's barometric pressure is different than Houston's. This is the moment that could make him a star or make him that reality series staple, the Tragic Figure. This thing had better start.

There's a countdown. Dancing girls standing on the bar hype up the crowd. Roman snatches back the shroud, and the glorious silver chopper gleams in front of a wowed audience. Scott is agape, then in glee. He nearly blows his wad as Roman turns the key. *Ba-boom!* The engine roars and rattles everything around it. The crowd shrieks, and Roman and his buddies high-five each other. Suddenly Roman, who has held Jesse James in contempt for "selling out and becoming a star," is starting to relate to the man. Maybe this TV celeb thing could work. "Yeah, maybe I could become the next big reality star and go [Hollywood](#)," he says later. "But then I'd become a sellout."

And that's not the way he rolls.