

Bikes Not Cars!

MaxZine Weinstein

2002

a review of

Critical Mass: Bicycling's Defiant Celebration Edited by Chris Carlsson. AK Press, 2002, 256 pp. \$18.95

Hop on a bike. Head downtown. Reclaim the streets. It is a critical mass of bicyclists boldly pedaling through public space with a festive challenge to car culture.

Critical Mass: Bicycling's Defiant Celebration, is a collection of articles, photos and graphics published on the occasion of the ten year anniversary of Critical Mass. CM started as a monthly group bicycle outing in San Francisco and has spread around the world. The breadth of writings show many reasons people participate in Critical Mass rides: adventure, community, to protest pollution, to challenge authority, and to demonstrate against wars for oil.

Critical Mass paints a feel for a ride. First-hand accounts of rides transport the reader to the pulse of the pavement. As co-founder Carlsson explains: "People arrive, excited to join a temporary, mobile occupying army of noisy rolling revelers, relishing the sounds of people laughing and talking, hooting and whistling, tinkling bells and spinning gears. You are invited to talk to strangers and they usually answer with sincere enthusiasm."

The book makes clear that CM is first and foremost a celebration of cycling, but delivers a political message. "Bicitckas in Mexico City" explores a movement in 1989 to demand bicycle parking and bike lanes. "The Great Bicycle Protest of 1896" surveys a massive San Francisco bike protest for Good Roads, which ironically helped facilitate the building of the infrastructure for car culture. "Ride a Bike, Go to Jail!" shows how the police can react violently to bike protesters, as was the case at the 2000 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles.

CM rides charm some and alienate others. *Critical Mass* contains numerous how-to pieces which include ways to safely guide rides and creative ways people have pursued their freedom to utilize our public spaces.

Although the repetition of many similar accounts of rides and viewpoints has a tendency to put the brakes on my reading enthusiasm, you can always turn the page and be delighted with a fabulous photo or funny flier. At its best, the book should inspire readers to start their car engines less frequently and put their legs in motion.

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