



by RACHEL LEIBROCK

## POPSMART

### Facebook minus

It's only been a few weeks since Google launched **Google+**, but the new social-networking platform already boasts more than **10 million users**—and quite a bit of buzz.

In this case, luckily for the search-engine behemoth, “buzz” means positive word-of-mouth feedback—not privacy-challenged epic fail.

In fact, even though membership in the site is still invite-only (although it's relatively easy to wrangle one), last week Google **CEO Larry Page** announced that the

company had seen “over 1 billion items shared and received in a single day.”

Pretty impressive.

Still, one can't help but wonder: Do we really need yet another social-networking site? Especially one that just feels like Facebook minus?

Of course, that's why some users like it. So far fewer people (at least compared to Facebook's estimated 750 million active users) means fewer posts, which, in a sense, means fewer **rants**, fewer **meal updates** and fewer photo albums devoted to your best frenemy's total **jealousy-inducing vacation**.

Structurally, Google+ isn't really inventing the social-networking hub. In fact, it looks a lot like Facebook. There's a “wall” for posts as well as the corresponding ability to comment on said posts. Instead of “liking” someone's post, however, users “+1” it.

As with Facebook and **Twitter** you can also share comments, posts, links and videos. Google+ also offers chat and video chat “hangouts” as well as something called “**spark**” which, apparently, is a way to browse other people's public updates.

Like Facebook, Google+ is built upon an ever-expanding network of friends; here, however, friends can be split off into “circles” (friends, family, acquaintances, following)—handy if you want to post an update that's visible to one group of people but not another.

(Which makes me wonder why there's not a “work” circle—the easier to filter out those “**I'm too hung over to function**” posts. I'll bet **Mark Zuckerberg** would've totally been all over that. But, you know, whatever.)

So far the Google+ reviews have been largely positive.

**The New York Times** raved about those circles, calling them a “brilliant” way to skirt Facebook's high-profile privacy flaws.

**One can't help but wonder: Do we really need yet another social-networking site?**

Likewise, **Wired magazine** declared it a “Twitter/Facebook hybrid that allows more control and looks great.”

Still, another **Wired** writer observed that the service is, essentially, “the new **GeoCities**”—not because it's already hopelessly outdated and passé, but because it feeds into our collective “herding instinct.”

In other words, we'll use Google+ for the same reasons we signed up for Facebook—all our friends are doing it.

“We move from **GeoCities** to **LiveJournal** to **MySpace** to Facebook, looking for the perfect experiment in mass intimacy,” the reviewer wrote. “We want to be part of the in-crowd without having to be part of the crowd.”

In that sense, perhaps, Google+ is a little more inclusive when it comes to the Internet as a whole. Here, your social network isn't limited to the people you know (or kind of sort of know); it's open to just about anyone. As on Twitter, you can follow (or be followed by) people you don't know.

That's both the fun and the problem. In a year or two, we'll all be complaining about how Google+ is too crowded, inundated with meaningless status updates, stupid food photos and endless links to **cute kitten videos**.

But in the meantime, we enjoy the peace, cruising through a social hub that is still relatively quiet—almost too quiet—as users tentatively migrate between it and Facebook.

“Here's another site I'll join and forget about,” one user commented shortly after signing up.

When it comes to the social-networking universe, it seems, even a plus just might not be enough. □



Stuart Gherini goes vroom in his custom Waw velomobile.

## The ride of his life

Two rare genetic diseases take a doctor and bicycle enthusiast on a new journey

It was late July 2005, and Stuart Gherini struggled with his failing body.

story and photos by Jonathan Mendick

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The cycling enthusiast had just spent weeks riding more than 2,000 miles, following the mountainous Tour de France route from start to finish.

Now, standing on a street corner in Amsterdam with his wife and cousins, he told his family he'd decided to quit the sport.

Gherini was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2003, and in the time since, the disease had attacked his nervous system, making it hard to balance and giving him a jerky pedaling rhythm on the bike.

Just then, a velomobile zoomed down the street. The rare European tricycle, Gherini observed, didn't require much balancing, and the superior aerodynamics seemed ideal for a flat country like Amsterdam, or even a city like Sacramento.

Perhaps his cycling days weren't over, Gherini told himself.

He'd already said goodbye to so many things. Gherini's career as an ear doctor would eventually end in 2006. A decade earlier, he'd already closed his private practice as an ear surgeon. He'd spent

much of his life studying and training, and a decade building a solid reputation as a surgeon before Fuchs' corneal dystrophy forced him out of surgery in 1996 when he underwent two corneal transplants to treat the disorder; the surgery affected his ability to see the intricate microsurgeries his hands were performing.

**“His velocars are awesome. You got to have some fun in life if you do that kind of stuff. You can't take yourself too seriously.”**

Steve Rex  
Sacramento bike maker, on Stuart Gherini

Now, Gherini admits he feels robbed, inheriting a genetic disease that afflicts less than 1 percent of the population.

“I had the No. 1 score in the country on the ear, nose and throat board [exams],” Gherini said. “I had a big thriving practice,

and then the eye problem hit. Where I landed was doing industrial exams, yet I discovered the more you know about anything, the more enjoyable it becomes.”

Nervous, but trying to keep a positive outlook, Gherini transitioned into a different job in otology for which he cleaned out ears, did workers’ compensation exams, and read and wrote reports for personal-injury lawyers.

But then the Parkinson’s diagnosis came in 2003, and the doctor retired for good in 2006 after realizing that, eventually, he wouldn’t even be able to clean out an ear.

So began several more transitional years for Gherini, trying to figure out his aging body. His old pastimes of surfing and helicopter skiing were no longer possible either.

“I kept skiing for two years after I was diagnosed with Parkinson’s,” he said. “I did OK. But when the mantra going through [my] head was ‘Don’t get hurt, don’t get hurt,’ it was time to turn in [my] skis.”

So it was back to the bike, a childhood love. Just months after seeing that fateful velomobile cyclist in Amsterdam, he purchased his first one. His custom-built velomobile, called a Waw (pronounced “wow”), was imported from Belgium and now resides in his East Sacramento garage with nearly a dozen other bicycles, tricycles and velomobiles.

Gherini’s favorite bike is a traditional two-wheeled road bike built by Sacramento bike maker and friend Steve Rex. He can’t ride it all the time, however, because of his Parkinson’s flare-ups. He often loses his balance and falls over during one of his daily 15- to 30-mile rides on the American River

Parkway. Sometimes, either due to Parkinson’s or the dopamine he’s taking to treat symptoms of the disease—it’s hard to tell anymore—Gherini takes breaks on the side of the bike trail to throw up.

Most Parkinson’s medications have bad side effects, he says. There’s really only one Parkinson’s treatment he enjoys in high dosage: cycling.

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He says he’s particularly interested in new research on Parkinson’s patients co-authored by Jay Alberts, a Cleveland biomedical engineer with a specialty in kinesiology.

In 2009, Alberts conducted a study showing that people with Parkinson’s who regularly pedal on a bicycle at a rate between 80 and 90 revolutions per minute show a 35 percent improvement in motor function.

“Our results suggest that exercise intervention programs for Parkinson’s

disease patients ... could alter the course of Parkinson’s disease,” Alberts wrote in his study.

Gherini’s daily treatment involves sitting on a tandem cycle with someone else pedaling, or strapped to a stationary tricycle hooked up to an electric motor in his garage. These devices allow his arm and leg muscles to be exercised, spinning around in circles at a fast rate. It’s called passive exercise.

When his core and stabilizing muscles aren’t feeling great, Gherini rides one of his two velomobiles. One is the Waw, which is decorated as a P-51 Mustang plane from World War II, complete with a faux instrument panel, an iPod with machine-gun sound effects, and two on-board speakers.

“It’s a great project for him,” said Rex, of Gherini’s Waw. “You got to have some fun in life if you do that kind of stuff. You can’t take yourself too seriously.”

The Waw is also a head turner. One time, when Gherini was riding, another cycling enthusiast chased him down just to ask if the bike was indeed a Waw. It turned out to be a 38-year-old nurse from Carmichael and serious velomobile tinkerer, Daniel Runyan. The two became quick friends, and Runyan taught Gherini the art of creating lightweight, more affordable velomobiles out of a corrugated plastic material called Coroplast. Now, they are two of just a handful of known velomobile riders in Sacramento.

“This is like a UFO to most people, yet not only is he open to it, he takes it and runs with it,” said Runyan of his friend.

“He’s [invested] serious time in it [and wrote] a tutorial because he felt that more people can be empowered by it.”

But it’s clearly the Waw that fits Gherini’s family-first personality: The 59-year-old says that his main goal is to be good to his wife and three daughters.

“When you ride through the neighborhood, little kids jump up and down they’re so excited,” he said. “Then if you steer toward them and give them the machine-gun sounds, they practically fall all over themselves. Little kids appreciate the humor in it.”

Despite his health troubles, Gherini says he’s happy to have lived the life he’s had, and is open with his own mortality. Doctors aren’t sure how long Gherini will live and, accordingly, he takes spending time with his family seriously.

“If you write on my tombstone,” he said, “I’d like it to [say], ‘He was a good husband and a good father,’ and, ‘Along the way he was a decent ear doctor, and he always tried to do his best.’” □



## SCENE&HEARD

### Beer headphones never work

Confession: I only know two **Blue Öyster Cult** songs.

But, I reasoned, that wasn’t enough of an excuse to not see the band live when my husband told me, enthusiastically, that it was playing.

After all, he took me to see **Duran Duran** a few years ago, standing by patiently as I acted like a **love-struck teen**.

Besides, **BOC** wasn’t just playing Sacramento; it was playing the **California State Fair**.

Most of the seats were still empty when we arrived an hour early on Friday night. The show definitely started early, however, as a 50-something woman behind us—already in **boozy party mode**—danced in her seat as her husband sat, nonplussed by her wildly waving arms and glassy eyes.

She wasn’t the only one waving her arms. As the sound system pumped up the growing crowd with a bevy of classic-rock tracks—the Who, Led Zeppelin, Joan Jett, et al.—one of our friends pumped his fist in the air, energized with nostalgia.

My husband turned to his friend’s wife with an apologetic grin.

“You probably shouldn’t see this,” he said.

But by the time **Blue Öyster Cult** took the stage at 8 p.m., we were all stange, ready to rock out already.

The band, formed in 1967, has been billed as “the thinking man’s heavy metal group.”



Translation: Plenty of epic **Dungeons & Dragons**-worthy lyrics and lots of prog-rock jams.

Which is cool, if you’re into that sort of thing. Me? Not so much. So it made me particularly happy when band launched into “Burnin’ for You.” The track has an undeniable pop hook—like a slightly **more stoned version of a Cheap Trick song**—and helped buffer the boredom that set in when the band launched into a string of rambling songs with lyrics about blades and blood and, if I heard correctly, dragons and fire.

Total D&D territory here, and, sadly, there is just not enough beer in the world that would make it better.

**Beer headphones** just aren’t as effective as beer goggles.

Midway through a jam, I turned around to check on the dancing lady. Asleep, head on her husband’s chest, possibly drooling.

Correction: I actually know three **Blue Öyster Cult** songs. The band’s “Godzilla” is a fun, kitschy anthem, but, unfortunately, the band decided to split the song into two epic parts bridged by a cheesy bass solo meant to highlight bassist Rudy Sarzo’s stints in Quiet Riot, Whitesnake and Ozzy Osbourne’s band.

That’s right, we had to sit through a five-minute bass medley featuring “**Cum on Feel the Noize**.”

My friend turned to me, annoyed.

“Since when is this **Blue Öyster Cult** featuring Rudy Sarzo?”

All was forgiven, however, when the band finally launched into “(Don’t Fear) The Reaper.”

Confession: As a mopey, **Romeo & Juliet**-obsessed preteen, I totally loved this song. I still kinda do. The song manages to be epic and emotional, yet never tedious.

Update: Even the drunk, drooling lady behind us was awake again, arms waving wildly in the air.

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