

**DRAFT****February 25, 2002**

# **New Rider?**

A beginner's Guide to Berkeley Critical Mass

(Every Second Friday, gathering at Downtown Berkeley BART to leave after 6 PM)



This guide has been produced by a group of fellow riders in hopes of helping new Critical Mass riders know what they're getting into -- both the good and the possible bad -- to help them have lots of fun, avoid problems, and get the most out of the ride.

## **Topics:**

- 1. Frequently Asked Questions**
- 2. History**
- 3. Moving as a group**
- 4. You and the police**
- 5. Anarchism and Critical Mass**
- 6. Further action**
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## 1. Frequently Asked Questions

Will I get arrested? Highly unlikely. Except for the two times the group has gone over the University overpass, there have been almost no arrests.

Will I get ticketed? Highly unlikely. Stay with the group and don't do anything crazy, and you're pretty safe. On most rides, no one gets a ticket.

Is this legal? That's debatable...there are good arguments for why it is legal. See below.

Who's in charge? Believe it or not, you are! Critical Mass has intentionally evolved to operate without leaders, so everyone has a say in what we do.

Who pays for all this? Individuals pay for flyers, food, and other things they bring on the ride. The City pays for police overtime, despite many requests for the police to scale back their presence here.

Is it right to block traffic? We aren't blocking traffic, *we are traffic!* How many times have you had to wait forever to cross a busy, dangerous street? For once, bikes are the majority. Cars are designed for congestion, they can handle a little more.

What about pedestrians? We need to respect pedestrians. Be alert for kamikaze crossers and please call out to warn other riders to stop for them. Pedestrians can also join us (e.g., the *Running Mass*).

What if a car is trying to force its way in? Except in rare circumstances, it's a very bad idea to let a car into the group. Cars

tend to run into a rear wheel in a tight group of bikes, causing much bigger hold-ups. The car will get there just as fast so please *keep them out!*

Will anyone care if something happens to me? Yes, if we know about it! Use your voice. Try to stick with the group and have a buddy. On a small ride we often stop to help someone fix a flat or other problem.

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Doesn't Critical Mass set bicycle activism back? Some people try to claim this but just look at all the amazing progress since Critical Mass came to be.

How do I ride? Pretend you're a bird in a big flock! Just go with the flow. Don't worry about traffic lights and signs (except at the front); we are a **super vehicle** that sticks together, like a parade. If you stop, someone behind might run into you so look back, use your voice!

Is someone going to squirt me? In the summer of 1999 we had 100 waterpistols on each ride. But riders were told they could use them on the condition that they *only* squirted other people who had waterpistols.



## 2. HISTORY

First born in San Francisco in September 1992, Critical Mass has spread like wildfire across the globe, and now occurs in hundreds of cities in dozens of countries each month. Originally termed the "Commuter Clot", an "organized coincidence" to ride home together, the term "Critical Mass" was inspired by a line in Ted White's classic film, *Return of the Scorchers*, where the term is used to describe traffic patterns in Beijing. There are no traffic lights there -- so the large numbers of bicyclists pool together at intersections until there are enough of them ("kind of a...a critical mass thing") to stop truck and car traffic and make their way across.

One of the reasons that Critical Mass was such a success is that it kept things simple and open. It's just a bike ride! There are no leaders -- so it can't be coopted or controlled. There is no designated ideology -- so anyone is welcome and indeed, Critical Mass is a free space for ideas, for play, for meeting all kinds of people, and for adventure!

This new invention was so elating and wonderful that it was hard to wait a whole month just to do it again. The Berkeley ride began soon after San Francisco's, on International Women's Day, March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1993 (the bicycle has played a tremendous role in women's liberation). Some eighty people came to the first ride, which was an exceptional success. We have not missed a ride since, and have even had some bonus rides, making this the longest-running street demonstration in the East Bay!

A complete history of the Berkeley Mass would fill whole books -- just to summarize would require many pages. So many wonderful things have happened, from the "Terrible Two's Toddler-Rama Ride" where we made huge diapers to wear, to the many times we've swung by striking workers (always a jubilant event for those doing long hours on the picket lines). See the section on "You and the Police" for a bit more history.

### **Moving as a Group**

Critical Mass is different from everyday riding, or even group riding in many other contexts such as racing or touring. Here for once, the bicycle rules supreme. Bicycles fill the street if there are enough of us, or at least a full lane. WE travel together even if we stretch for ten blocks, as a parade would, not stopping for stop lights or stop signs once the front of the ride is through.

This is not only what feels right to do -- for once, to turn the tables on the everyday harsh reality of our auto-dominated cities -- but it is the safest and least intrusive. To split Critical Mass up by "obeying the law" (laws which were really made for cars, not bikes) is more dangerous and causes more traffic problems. To make us ride single file would create a snaking silliness. We also need to make an effort to keep the ride tight.

One special phenomenon that has developed is known as **corking**. Corking is done to "cork" an intersection and the rear of the ride like a bottle, so no cars, trucks or motorcycles try to drive through the group. Ideally, corkers have signs saying something like, "Thanks for waiting". Although we sometimes allow mass transit or people who have a credible emergency through the ride (and we are **very** good at getting out of the way for fire trucks and ambulances), it is extremely important to keep drivers out of the ride. Even if the driver is not overtly hostile, na will be surrounded by bicycles and cannot be trusted to safely operate ahz "stinky beast". Letting a driver in often results in rear wheels being bent and big delays for the ride. The driver isn't getting there any faster (and shouldn't expect to, after all, na's driving a molasses-mobile) so just say NO to cars in the mass.



The fact that we take the entire roadway is not illegal. The California Vehicle Code only requires bicyclists to ride "as close as **practicable** to the right-hand side" (NOT to be confused with "as close as **possible**") and then only under certain circumstances. Even when you are alone you can take a full lane for safety, for making turns, or if you're going the normal traffic speed (and on a one-way road with two or more lanes, you can be on the left side, which is great for avoiding buses).

It would also be possible for the Berkeley City Council to declare such rides a special form of procession, or "Super Vehicle", which is actually the de facto arrangement with police. In this sense, the group acts as a flock of birds does. It's as if we're all connected and cannot be separated. Does a truck carrying a trailer cut the tie to the trailer if it enters the intersection on yellow and the trailer would run a red light? No. Neither should we!

You may ask, how *do* things work, if there are no leaders and no stated

political ideology? How do we know where to go, for instance?

If you have an idea for a route, an event, a criticism of how the ride is going, or a suggestion, you can spread that idea in many ways. Talking one-on-one, taking initiative to demonstrate your idea, and printing up a flyer of your own creation (known as **Xerocracy**) are all wonderful ways to enrich the ride. When there are multiple routes brought to the table, we have voted for which one (or combination of the routes) we'd like to go. For some years, there have been few route maps, and the ride is generally directed by those who go to the front and talk about where they'd like to go. Most people just enjoy the fact that they're riding in a group and don't worry too much about where we're going. So if you see the ride going in a direction you don't like, or wish it would go somewhere, *go to the front and talk it up!*

Sometimes we encounter an irate driver. The best thing to do is to try to defuse the situation, rather than escalate it. **PLEASE DO NOT SHOUT AT THE MOTORIST.** Go to the driver's window and politely explain the situation. Something like "This is a parade, the police are here, it will be gone in less time than it takes to wait for a traffic light, please just be patient. Sorry for the inconvenience". You may not feel like being polite with that hostile someone driving a death monster at your friends, but it's generally the safest way to deal.

## **You and the Police**

Please don't be scared of the police, no matter how hard they try (at times) to intimidate. On most rides, no one gets a ticket. Arrests are actually very rare -- there have been whole years when no one was arrested. In general, you will not be cited unless you are being very reckless and drawing a lot of attention to yourself (like playing chicken with oncoming cars). But just as in everyday life, there is never any assurance that police will respect your rights.

There are several situations which we do know risk police action. Historically, there have been two times that police have arrested and cited large numbers of us -- both times, we went over the University overpass. While many believe it is legal for us to do so, they believe it is not and have a special fear that we will get on the freeway (which about 100 of us did do, more than 6.5 years ago, for a good cause). The police have hinted that they want to do the same thing if we go through the Solano Tunnel, even though we have been going through the tunnel almost every month for the past seven years. However, no one has yet been cited for going through this tunnel.

If you are cited for something, there is a good chance that it is a false citation -- the police have not yet taken action to learn bike rights, despite all our requests, meetings, and complaints. There are people (including attorneys) who will try to help you for free if you are for some reason cited or arrested. You are also encouraged to file complaints with the third-party Police Review Commission for anything the police may do to you, from disparaging or discourteous statements on up.

The history of the Berkeley Mass, like most such rides in the U.S., has been a rocky road thanks entirely to intolerance by local Police Departments. Police defend the status quo, which is a Critical Mass of cars every day. Although on our very the first ride we cheered the police, at the second ride they came out in hostile droves. The early rides were very jubilant, with lots of street theatre and protest elements (in good fun) such as biking through stores that have discriminatory drive-through windows. Drivers were more likely to be confrontational then, as they hadn't learned what Critical Mass was yet and were more likely to overreact.

At that time, the I-80 "free"way was being widened illegally in violation of two major environmental laws, and there had been one protest on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1993, where bicyclists attempted to ride on the freeway. Although the protests were over before Critical Mass began, on the 5<sup>th</sup> ride bicyclists spontaneously took over and rode two exits on Westbound I-80 and then waited on the University Overpass. Police surrounded us and eventually executed an illegal mass arrest and illegally confiscated the bicycles of at least 61 riders and one skateboarder.

Since that time, over six years ago, many attempts have been made to make peace with the police, and by and large they treat this ride as a First Amendment event. They follow, they order us to "go faster" and don't like us to stop, but by and large they allow us to ride.

Some people feel especially vulnerable around police. This is one of the main reasons there isn't more diversity on the ride at present. If you feel at risk from police, notify the videographers present and ask around to find an experienced "buddy" to stick with you.

Speaking of video...you may notice that there are up to five people with video cameras at any given ride. This practice began to help protect us from police, but has since resulted in many wonderful short films and images as well. If you don't wish to be videotaped, tell the people with the cameras and they should respect your request.

One final note...every ride has had to deal with the "testosterone brigade" phenomenon, generally associated with rambunctious young men who get very excited at the liberation they feel. Please recognize that whatever

action you take can have a long-term effect on everyone else. The police are still acting like the sky is falling because in 1993, on one of the first rides, a woman allegedly broke a car antenna off the car of a hostile BMW driver during an intense argument. Likewise, no matter how many times people tell the police we aren't going on the freeway, they refuse to believe us and act like it's an emergency when we get near an entrance. And from City Council meetings to letters to the editor, you'll always hear someone claiming that Critical Mass kicked his car -- even though such incidents are very rare to say the least. So be free, but consider the group.

## **Anarchism and Critical Mass**

You certainly don't have to be an anarchist to participate in Critical Mass, but like so many other things in life (from going on a picnic to making love), anarchist principles are in effect.

Anarchism is the belief that people are fundamentally good, and fully capable of organizing themselves to allow maximum freedom without oppression and exploitation. Critical Mass is considered an anarchistic event in that there are no designated leaders or hierarchy, and because people spontaneously self-organize to protect and facilitate the ride.

Bicycling already appeals to the anarchistic sense in that it is more free and natural (like hang gliding or sailing) than driving a motor vehicle, and because each individual does his own work for travel in a way that essentially does not oppress others or the environment. Motor vehicles are fundamentally oppressive in numerous ways: from the noise, pollution, and danger that they inflict upon the commons, to the intense exploitation of labor and environmental resources that they require, to the anger and violence they engender.

Because Anarchism is the most credible and natural way to ethically organize a society, those who choose to be oppressors (who profit from exploiting workers and the environment) have always used their worst repression for Anarchists, and subsequently use predictable public relations strategies to demonize anything that liberates people via demonstrating anarchism in action.

This manifests itself with relation to Critical Mass in a number of ways. For one, there is no end to the frustrated reactionaries who claim that Critical Mass causes traffic havoc by disobeying traffic laws. This is most ironic as a critical mass of motorcars causes traffic havoc and indeed, mayhem and murder, everyday, and those participants routinely disobey



traffic laws. Further, the traffic laws and traffic infrastructure (lights, lanes, parking, bridges, etc) are set up almost exclusively for the benefit of motorcars over bicyclists, pedestrians, and transit users. The idea that streets are solely for maximizing motorcar traffic is rooted in fascism. Why can't the commons be used for the many wonderful ways of people, as well? Even as Anarchists are falsely characterized as terrorists, more people are run down by cars than are killed by firearms, and the number one reason people say they aren't walking and biking more is fear of cars. And let's not even discuss foreign policy.

## **Further Action and Resources**

Okay, so Critical Mass is fun and important, it's community building, it gets a message out despite having no stated positions, but what else is there? And how can you help keep the ride vital and alive?

1. Keeping the ride alive. Try to put some energy into telling friends about it, and consider making a flyer or sticker to put on bikes. Maybe paint a big sign at your house or co-op. Send an email. Write a letter to the editor. Get the gospel and preach the prayers! ✍
2. Finding out more about Critical Mass. There are tons of resources on the internet. A good place to start is <http://www.critical-mass.org/> and for local web pages check <http://bikethebridge.org/aug13squirt/>

There is an email list for SF Critical Mass with members from around the world, so Berkeley gets discussed at times. To join, send a blank message to [sf-critical-mass-subscribe@topica.com](mailto:sf-critical-mass-subscribe@topica.com) and reply to the follow-up message you receive.

4) Getting a bicycle. The Ba@tT Cave is a resource to re-use old bicycles and learn bike repair. Call (510) 595-1803. There are many bike stores in Berkeley. Note that the Missing Link is a worker-owned collective.

3. BICYCLE ACTIVISM needs you! Right here in Berkeley a tremendous amount has occurred thanks to hard-working activists. The bike

plan has finally passed and it's time to start fighting to get it implemented. It includes a network of "Bicycle Boulevards", or bicycle priority streets, where free flow of bikes is facilitated and cars are discouraged. There is also the *Bikestation* right below our starting point, in the Berkeley BART, where bikes finally have a safe place to park at BART. If it's a success, it will be copied around the Bay Area. Most of this success is directly thanks to activists working with the *Bicycle-Friendly Berkeley Coalition*. Call them at (510) 549-RIDE to find out how to participate. Or visit their web site at <http://www.bfbc.org/>. Although many BFBC members enjoy Critical Mass (and some think it is negative), BFBC does not organize the ride.

There are many more resources and types of activity that could be included in this document. If you have suggestions don't hesitate to contact Jason Meggs (who is coordinating this pamphlet at present) at (510) 273-9288 or by email, at [jmeggs@lmi.net](mailto:jmeggs@lmi.net).



Happy riding!

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