

Building a business of no-frills bikes

By Andrew Zaleski, Grist

Two days before New Year's Eve, Jimmy Standley was in Lake Tahoe getting ready for the inaugural SnowGlobe Music Festival, three days of tunes, parties, afterparties – oh, and he had to sell some bikes, too.

As head of business development for Solé Bicycles, Standley is one part of a five-man team bent on bringing fixed-gear bicycles to the masses. Fixies, as they're affectionately known, are bicycles at their most basic: frame, wheels, pedals, seat, and handlebars. Whereas most bikes have a "freewheel" system that allows the wheels to spin independently of the pedals, on a fixie, if the bike is moving, your feet are too. This makes for bikes that are simple, lightweight, and low maintenance, although they're not well suited for tackling hilly terrain Tour de France-style.

"Fixies were big in the '80s and kind of died out. Now it's sort of this trendy thing that's starting to come back," Standley says.

Indeed. In Seattle, there's a dude who peddles pies from one. Credit bike messengers in New York City for the resurgence. A fixie's ideal for shuttling a parcel through traffic-clogged city streets or jetting across campus.

It was the appearance of fixies around the University of Southern California alongside skateboards and beach cruisers that inspired Jake Medwell and Jonathan Shriftman to found Solé Bicycles two years ago, when they were still students. At that time, it was more common to either purchase a custom fixed-gear bike – which could be costly – or rig together your own fixie by stripping down a standard road bike. Over lunch

one afternoon, Medwell and Shriftman decided they wanted to build fixies and sell them at prices the typical college student could afford.

A \$15,000 grant won through a competition sponsored by Inc. magazine allowed the duo to get the company up and running. They traveled to China to meet with a manufacturer and design the Solé fixie prototype, and placed an initial order for 200 bikes. The first bikes, which they sold for \$80 apiece, quickly evaporated.

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