



**WHY I HAND OUT  
FREE ICE CREAM**

**MATT ALLEN'S  
HAPPY JOURNEY ACROSS AMERICA,  
NOW INCLUDING LINDSAY LOHAN & ELVIS COSTELLO**

**A CITY HALL INSIDER OUT**

**DJ SCOTTY** COATS ON DISCO, TACOS

**ONE BAND AT COACHELLA**

**ICE  
CREAM  
MAN  
COMETH**

BEYOND  
ICE CREAM  
WITH  
MATT ALLEN

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BY CHRIS ZIEGLER

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**M**ATT ALLEN IS HIS NAME, BUT YOU DON'T need to know it—about 135,000 people know him as Ice Cream Man, and that's the important thing, he says. ("People ask, 'Are you Ice Cream Man?' And I point to the logo on the truck!") They remember him as the clean-shaven guy with the collared shirt (uniform prerequisites Allen is careful to maintain) with answers to all the technical questions—"UFO—that's unidentified FROZEN object!" And they know he's going to give out free ice cream from his 1969 Chevy step-truck at almost every music festival on the continent—and anywhere he feels like stopping on the way—to fans and artists and service personnel and security and anyone who ever asks, as long as there's something left in the freezer.

Little kids at children's hospitals and Lindsay Lohan (he's been told) and Elvis Costello and those thousands more have all walked away happy from Ice Cream Man's truck, and tonight he's at the Fidotrunk record release show at the Prospector, where a girl has just dropped her Drumstick on the sidewalk, and which Allen replaces immediately. That one's free, too: "You can't go wrong with a Drumstick!" he says.

He hopes to give away half-a-million free ice creams, and to enjoy the way he gets there, and you can watch the numbers grow as you read his interviews, from about 15,000 in 2005 to that 135,000 just last week as Allen and his crew get ready to start their summer touring schedule with this low-key stop at Prospector (and Alex's the night before) and this weekend's trip to Coachella. Since 2004, when Allen bought his first ice cream truck and found that he did much better—and felt much better—giving away treats for free, the Ice Cream Man organization has expanded to include a substantial Long Beach base (of personnel including key Ice Cream Auxiliaries like Fast Dragon's Mike Garcia, David Thornton, Dave Gooch, *District* writer Alex Roman and Starr Sink and of mini ice cream delivery units, too) and a national network of supporters, some so active that they might eclipse Allen as the face of Ice Cream Man in their own home territory. Which he doesn't seem to mind much—in fact, he's just bought another ice cream truck, so the next 135,000 will go out twice as fast, which—if the math holds—will make him twice as happy.

"The crew helps out so much that I'm just the mascot!" he says, "And that's all I wanna be! Someone else can run it as I drive around the country. The way I get joy is always from the smaller moments—something completely random. I don't know—at Austin City Limits, an older couple had walked into the backstage area and I said, 'Hey, free ice cream,' and the way they looked over—it was such a pure instance. Their first pure gut reaction—with nothing artificial or made-up—is just bliss! I'm exaggerating, but it's like—I've been waiting for this my whole life!"

**BEFORE ALLEN WAS ICE CREAM MAN, HE WAS JUST A** man, and before that he was a boy born and raised in Long Beach and growing up at Broadway and Belmont—"The ice cream truck came by sometimes, but not all the time," he says, "but I remember being extremely happy when it did!" He went to Fremont, Jefferson and Wilson, he says, and the first thing he might call a job was sorting Garbage Pail Kid cards at the now-shuttered Vanguard Sports cards. That was age 10, and by 14 he was working in his parents' Hallmark on Second Street—"I just kind of grew up around—I don't think 'entrepreneurs' exist; I think that's a Stanford business college word. They were just small-business people. My grandfather was a successful business man in Long Beach. He was part of a

company that sold heavy equipment—he built it up, sold it off, cashed out and traveled the world with his wife."

In college in Colorado, Allen was a business major (and financial specialization and accounting minor) who did purchase and push an ice cream cart (that looked nicer with a sign saying ICE CREAM MAN than MATT'S ICE CREAM, he found) around Durango but was planning to open a record store sometime in the near future. That changed in the kind of revelatory instant Allen says he now considers a constant in his life.

"It's a classic Ice Cream Man quote about why I started," he says, "but when I hiked the Appalachian Trail in 1999, it was a total spur-of-the-moment thing. My friend Aaron had asked me to go, and I realized I didn't want to open a record store—'No way, I don't want to be in this industry!' Good moments in life are similar to that—people think there are gonna be major visible turning points in your life, and they're gonna put all this thought into those decisions, and the reality is that every decision comes down to a split-second, no matter how much you think of it."

"I live my life on a project basis," he adds—hiking the trail, where he fell in love (and had his heart broken, he says) and earned the trail name Caboose; and a cross-country roller-coaster trip; and a cross-country bike ride from Long Beach to Maine raising money for cancer research; and when he needed to rest his legs, he worked at a thrift store (where he says he was fired for spending too much off-time shopping at the store); and worked production at an organic chocolate factory in Ashland, Oregon; and at a bar in Austin, Texas.

"I'm glad of the adventures I got to do," he says, "but I figured if I thought enough, what I was supposed to do would come to me. And for six-seven-eight years it never did. So after a lot of adventures and getting fired from two jobs, you know what? I said, 'I can't figure it out—I'm buying a truck!'"

That would be the now-famous "Bessie," a 1969 Chevy Step Van bought from an Oregon ice cream man leaving the business behind, christened with inspiration from a girl he was dating who liked to sketch cows. ("Ice cream and milk and cows—perfect!") He paid \$1,200 (and put about \$10,000 into care and repair, he thinks) and coaxed it home to Long Beach, and he secured a website to match the name on his Durango pushcart. ("You're Ice Cream Man!" a friend had declared then—like a superhero, I ask? "Exactly," grins Allen.) And the logo came from Long Beach artist Matt Petersen, who had to make a few little tweaks before Allen had what he wanted: "The first one did not have the hair on the side, but I said, 'Look, I need the afro puffs!'" Allen says. "So I put the hat on, took a picture of myself in the mirror and sent it to him—there we go, that's Ice Cream Man!"

**THAT WAS 2004, WHEN THE TRADITIONAL ICE CREAM** business model—buy cold, sell cheap—came and went in probably a matter of hours: nice-guy Allen found he had a line winding down the street when he started giving away backstock just to clear out the truck before the merchandise melted, and business-major Allen wondered if he could make a living by giving something away. Long Beach's second All Tomorrow's Parties festival—with Lou Reed, the Cramps and Allen's much-loved Flaming Lips at the Queen Mary—was one of the very first Ice Cream Man appearances, when Allen and a tiny crew of



PHOTO BY JENNIE WARREN



(L-R) DANIELLE KELLY, MIKE GARCIA, MATT ALLEN, JEREMIAH GARCIA AND DAVE GOOCH

helpers (including Roman and later Blank Blue singer Niki Randa) pointed Bessie at the stage and started reassuring the suspicious—yes, the ice cream is free, and no, there is no catch.

“Everybody doesn’t believe you!” says Starr Sink, who met Allen when he came by Fingerprints with a DVD of his first Ice Cream Social show in Ashland (“He just came in the way you come in,” she adds) and who would later become a key member of the ice cream team, taking one of the mini-trucks on a solo east coast tour. There she found some of the same wary reactions Allen found when he first started giving away ice cream—“They think it’s some sort of gimmick,” she says, “and once you get through to them that you’re just giving away ice cream for the joy of giving away ice cream—it’s like a little light goes on in their eyes. Everyone’s skeptical at first—I guess it’s the way we’re taught to be. But once they realize it’s nothing but free ice cream, they’re really excited!”

The way Ice Cream Man works is still as simple as when it started—Allen secures sponsorships (currently including Jakprints and Blue Bunny ice cream) that fund truck and treat expenses, and from there it’s just a question of scale. Now he tours summer music festivals probably harder than some of the bands, departing this weekend for Coachella—where he was much more excited about once serving Daft Punk than Lindsay Lohan—and then about a date a week until late fall. Ice Cream Man director of operations Dave Gooch—another vital Allen crew member who jokes that a better title might be “Ice Cream Lad”—says that the summer season warms up at SXSW, and for the next six months, Ice Cream Man and his crew are everywhere a music fan with an unlimited budget might hope to go—Sasquatch, Bonnaroo, Pitchfork, Bumbershoot, Austin City Limits.

And for the six chilly months after that, invitations for next year’s events snow out his e-mail. (On the morning of this interview, a casual miscommunication with Neko Case has turned into her volunteering to play his next Ice Cream Social in Ashland; happily overwhelmed, he’s hoping to do another event that better fits her schedule.)

A project with Toyota produced a fleet of Bessitas—little Yarises wrapped with Ice Cream Man banners, spotted often around Long Beach when Allen hasn’t sent them out on tour—and further ice cream success led to a very recent purchase of an as-yet-unnamed Dodge Sprinter, currently undergoing ice cream retrofit on the other side of the 710. Now his Ice Cream Crew spans the country—including delegates on the east coast as recognizable there as Allen is elsewhere—and his icecreamman.com includes as many writers and photographers as a small-press magazine. (In fact, Ice Cream publishes its *Off The Wookie* zine once a year.) For an organization, that’s very respectable growth—Allen is even planning his first real international expedition, though he’s had to abandon a plan to ship Bessie across the Atlantic and do a little sunbathing atop an eastbound container ship—but Allen says the Ice Cream Man plan includes a little more ambition.

“Whatever business model we have is not very obvious,” he says—although the idea of businesses giving away something for free is welcome on the web, it’s rarer in the real world and nonexistent when it comes to ice cream, he explains. “Okay, you’re gonna build this up and sell it! Well, no. ‘You’re gonna get more trucks?’ No. ‘You’re gonna make your own ice cream?’ And it goes on and on. People think the goal is to have trucks all around—it’s not that.”

Instead, the long-term Ice Cream Man model seems to twin Allen’s own personality—half the trail hiker nicknamed Caboose, half the business major/finance minor. (“Half business, half adventure!” he says.) The Ice Cream Man project has a built-in end date, Allen says—it was 2010 originally, but that could be flexible now, he adds. The practical goal is to grow a self-sufficient structure that can serve as a micro-size venture capital group—something that can fund new projects that Allen and his crew members—and inspired others to be discovered later—may devise. (He’s already got the website registered.) But there’s a philosophical aspect, too, evolved from the experience of putting an ice cream in someone’s hand and



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watching that unexpected smile—which has happened about 135,000 times by now.

“I created this business to be the happiest person on the face of the earth,” Allen says, something he often explains during interviews, if he’s given the chance. “I had the thought for six months—shouldn’t it be everybody’s goal to be the happiest person on earth? Once you truly feel and understand that you only have one chance here—once you realize that, that makes you start thinking about your purpose on this planet. It seems hard to believe for me that being happy isn’t at the top of the list. I used to tell kids all the time when I was selling ice cream in Ashland—‘Hey, you’re

six or eight now, and you’re gonna grow up . . . ’ and the gist of it was don’t forget what makes you happy—don’t forget your dreams! We wanna give away ice cream and we wanna make people happy, but the bigger purpose—beyond the ice cream—is hopefully to inspire and motivate and empower people to get out and do stuff. Anything. We wanna lead by example. I wish I could tell people—‘Damn, be happy!’ But that doesn’t work. So you put an ice cream in their hand and let them see.”

**ICE CREAM MAN HAS MADE THREE OF THE** four Fidotrusted nights, Allen says Saturday, drooping slightly from the commitment

and worrying that he probably won’t make Sunday’s die-hard finale. He doesn’t get to do as much as he’d like when he’s in Long Beach, since any time home is spent sorting out the sponsorships and schedules for the road. When he’s home, he puts Bessie to rest and gets out his bike and visits with the friends he’s had since elementary school, who knew him when he was Matt Allen and who know they’ll hear the stories sometime: “I’ll be on the road for six months and I’ve got a million stories, and my friends are just like, ‘Hey, how was your summer? Cool—so I was saying—did you hear the Clippers trade . . . ’ I’m like, ‘No! No! I went to the MOON! Hello? Me! I

gave away ice cream on the moon!”

And on Friday, he’ll head east to Coachella after filling the truck with treats on a sunrise trip to the ice cream plant, and then he’ll go looking for number 135,001—unless number 135,001 is already looking for him. Now he finds he doesn’t always have to explain what he’s doing anymore, he says: “I was in Whittier and I pulled up to get gas and this guy walked out and was looking at the car while I was filling up, and another guy walked up and I had my back to both. The one mumbled something and the other says, ‘Oh, no, it’s free.’ And I’d never seen either guy before in my life.” ■