

"FIRST THEY'D TRY AND BUY YOU OUT. THEN THEY'D TRY AND KNOCK YOU OUT WITH ANOTHER VAN. AND THEN THEY'D TRY THE SHOTGUN-THREATENING TECHNIQUE"





# SUNDAE BLOODY SUNDAE



Life on the road in an ice-cream van isn't all frozen treats and perky jingles. **Anne Fullerton** reports on a murky world full of blackmail, violence and double-scoop cones with extra sprinkles.

Photography by **Amber Bignell**

**I**ce-cream vans are one of childhood's sure-fire highlights. Growing up in suburbia, few things are as satisfying as watching a big, metallic dispenser spool its icy bowels into a waffle cone, drowning the contents in syrup and walking off \$1.50 poorer with a milk moustache. For most of us the music-box tinkle of *Greensleeves* means school fetes, beach holidays or hot summers punctuated by the odd choc top. But for ice-cream van drivers, it can mean death threats, violence and 12-gauge shotguns.

Behind Mr Whippy's rosy cheeks and manic smile is a pavement splattered with strawberry syrup and blood. Just this year a Frosty Boy became a deadly assault vehicle at the hands of an enraged Gold Coast lady. She slammed her van into a Mr Yummy for "taking her spot", the collision severing her victim's finger so badly that it had to be surgically removed. Overseas, in Connecticut, an ice-cream van driver risked more than a mere digit when a resident became so incensed by the volume of his chimes that he threatened to castrate him with a pair of hedge-clippers. Meanwhile in Hungary, a van's mindless jingle tipped a 33-year-old man over the edge. He assaulted the driver, hijacked the van and took police on an hour-and-a-half long chase, stopping to pick up three hitchhikers along the way.

But the most extreme case of ice-cream rage happened in Melbourne. In 2002, Laura Giunta woke up to find her husband Dennis struggling with a masked intruder wielding a homemade sword. Dennis was pleading with the man to let them go, "But he didn't listen," she told the court. "It was like blood going everywhere, it was like bottles exploding!" While Laura managed to escape by jumping off the balcony, her husband tragically died after being stabbed more than 55-times. The killer was his cousin, Francesco Mangione. His motive: Dennis had apparently trespassed on his ice-cream "territory".



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**M**ark Foreman is no stranger to violence committed in the name of the humble cone. He is a genial Scotsman who's been operating a fleet of Mr Super Soft vans in Queensland for the last 15-years. I catch him as he's wandering the aisles of his local Woolworths supermarket. He cheerfully chats away about bashings, stabbings and murders - all done for ice-cream.

"It's extremely territorial," he says of the ice-cream trade. "Someone could be in the same area for 10-years, so when a new person comes along stealing business, it gives the locals the shits. This is people's livelihoods. They aren't going to give up lightly."

Mark knows better than most how high the stakes can be having grown up in 1980s Glasgow, where ramming other vans was regarded as a bit of healthy competition. "It was quite a scary, violent place," he admits. As the city's ship-building industry collapsed and many of the docks closed-down, thousands of people lost their jobs. But not every industry was dying. The housing estates exploded in a frenzy of crime, heroin and (somewhat bizarrely) ice-cream vans. Even now, Glasgow has three times more serious assaults than the rest of Scotland and holds the dubious honour of being the heart disease capital of the world. Hardly surprising considering that 30-years ago you could have ice-cream, smokes and whatever drug you liked delivered direct to your door.

"The local hard men took over ice-cream vans because it was good money," says Mark. "And then they started selling drugs and made even better money." Ice-cream vans gave Glaswegian crime syndicates the perfect front, allowing them to distribute drugs easily and sell everything from chocolate bars to heroin and stolen goods. The vans also presented the ideal cover for money laundering. "They were selling what they'd call 'the special'," Mark recalls. It'd be a five-pound cone with

a tablet in the bottom of it. Es and temazepam, that kind of thing. You knew there were certain areas you couldn't go, in that the heavies were doing [them]." This was the start of one of the bloodiest, most brutal chapters in the city's history - The Glasgow Ice-Cream Wars.

Mark had started working in an ice-cream van from the age of 11, after being seduced by the bright lights of his local "softee". After six months pestering the driver he finally got a job. "But that was when the Italians had it sorted," he says. "Once they sold up and moved on, the face of it changed."

As new vans started up, so did the trouble. Gangs quickly took over the big firms and tried to muscle out the smaller competitors. John McCourt, an ice-cream van driver in Melbourne who used to work one of Glasgow's rough estates, recalls regular confrontations with the local gangsters. "First they'd try and buy you out. Then they'd try and knock you out with another van. And then they'd try the shotgun-threatening technique," he says. "Everyone wanted a piece of the pie, and the sad part was, the pie wasn't even that big."

Sometimes there wasn't even money involved. John's run was mainly done on credit, so customers only paid when their Dole cheques came through. Despite these meagre pickings, John was held up twice by men who wanted his run. The first time he was threatened with a baseball bat. "I just told them, 'I'll shove it up your arse and make you into a lollipop' - unfortunately that's the way it happened. You just react. Like fucking Lleyton Hewitt in an ice-cream van, 'Come on! Bring it on! You had to stand your ground.'" The next time, the heavies returned with a shotgun. "I told them I'd been there for 15-years and I wasn't budging. 'You wanna take me out, take me out. I ain't giving up.'"

Many of the clashes were between rival ice-cream companies, while others flared up between the hard-scoop vans that had regular nightly runs, and the soft



“THE SINGLE WORST THING THAT’S EVER HAPPENED TO THIS INDUSTRY IS THE MCDONALD’S 30 CENT CONE”



serve vans encroaching on their territory. Mark Foreman was one of the roaming “softies,” who went where the profits were, a practice which earned him the nickname “the poacher” and his fair share of trouble. “A couple of guys drove up on motorbikes with baseball bats and smashed in my windows. Another night some men came by and gave me a mouthful. When he was done I said I have two words for you, and told him he could ‘Fuck off’. He said ‘You’re going to get it. I’m going to come back and stab you’.”

Some drivers would turn their vans into battering rams, replacing their bumper bars with thick steel I-beams generally used for building houses. Others filled doors with six-inch nails, placed them on the road and covered them in snow waiting for the competition to drive over them. The violence got so bad that police began escorting vans on their runs and spent so much time investigating van-related violence that they were renamed “the serious chimes squad”.

“Then that whole family got bumped out,” says John, referring to the infamous incident involving the unfortunate Doyle family. Andrew Doyle had already been shot once, allegedly for refusing to distribute drugs on his run. But things got even worse when someone doused his flat door in petrol and set it on fire. Doyle died alongside five members of his family.

The “Glasgow Two”, career criminals Thomas “TC” Campbell and Joseph Steele, were convicted for the crime but spent the next 20-years protesting their innocence in a string of hunger strikes and high profile demonstrations. In one, Steele escaped from prison and superglued himself to the railings of Buckingham Palace. After protesting their innocence for 20-years, Campbell and Steele finally got their sentences overturned in 2004.

**D**espite all the violence and crime, a life on the road flogging ice-cream to the din of melodies (invariably *O Sole Mio*, *Greensleeves* or *Boys And Girls Come Out To Play*) remains a curious addiction for some.

“I loved it. I miss it,” says John reminiscing his ice-cream days in Glasgow. “But I can’t go back to it. I only do ice-cream here ‘cause there is no war.” Mark also admits that the job has its benefits. “I eat ice-cream all the time. This weekend I borrowed my friend’s van and they do gelato so I tried nearly everything in the fridge.” Indeed ice-cream vans have played a significant role in Mark’s life. Back in Glasgow he met Frances, a former van girl, when she was selling single cigarettes for 10 pence opposite the local high school. The night I speak to him the couple are celebrating their 26th wedding anniversary.

Sadly, today, soft serve vans are an increasingly endangered species. And this looming ice-cream meltdown has nothing to do with the thugs or drugs of the past. “The single worst thing that’s ever happened to this industry is the McDonald’s 30 cent cone,” says Mark. “I used to do every street twice a night and it gave a good living. Now in that same area one van does the two runs and finds it difficult to survive. People don’t come out anymore. It’s just dying.” In Britain there are half as many ice-cream vans as there were 30 years ago and the rest of the world is rapidly following suit. Already at the mercy of supermarkets and fast-food chains, they’ve been banned from operating outside schools, busy trading areas and excluded from some councils altogether. After its past battles, it seems the ice-cream van is finally succumbing to a far more brutal power, and this time, its grip is global.