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## A Folklorist Looks at Ice Cream Vans

Owen Davies 

### Abstract

Of all the commercial road vehicles that have toured the streets and tourist spots of Britain, Ireland, America, and Australia over nearly a century, none elicit more popular reminiscence and sentiment than ice cream vans. This is not only due to their distinctive appearance, but also to the brief blasts of music they played, the ice cream cones they dispensed, and the people who sold them. Yet, despite its status as a twentieth-century cultural icon, the ice cream van has not seriously attracted the gaze of the folklorist. Drawing upon newspapers and social media as primary sources, an inspection of the ice cream van reveals a wealth of legends, memorates, and rumours with deep roots in broader cultural developments

### Introduction

Other than the car, the ice cream van has probably attracted a more diverse and rich folklore than any other type of motorized road vehicle, yet practically nothing has been written about it. The UK industry's Ice Cream Alliance estimated in 2019 that there were between 2,500 and 5,000 vans left operational in the UK. In April 2021, the Alliance reported that a further eight hundred mobile vendors had ceased trading over the previous year as a consequence of the pandemic ('BDSI and UK's Ice Cream Alliance Report' 2021). This was down from around thirty thousand in the 1960s and twenty thousand in the 1970s and 1980s. It may not seem like it from the familiar chimes still heard on our streets, but the ice cream van is under threat. Numerous journalistic articles have been written over the years about this decline and its cultural significance. In 2009, cultural historian Joe Moran, writing for *The Guardian*, observed, 'the jingle-jangle of O Sole Mio will be soon as extinct a street sound as "rag 'n' bone" and "milko". For anyone of my age, for whom ice-cream chimes will always announce the glorious arrival of summer as surely as screeching swifts returning from Africa, this is a shame' (Moran 2009). 'Turning ice-cream vans into a novelty for corporate dos and wedding receptions is a social loss', observed another journalist of *The Guardian* ten years later, after spending a day with a struggling

veteran ice cream van man in Eastbourne (Kale 2019). So, what can folklore tell us about their past, present, and future? And what does it say about us?

The ice cream van is more than just a commercial road vehicle. It has a distinctive look, of course, but what makes it special, what has generated a body of folklore around it, is that it plays a unique form of music in public spaces and serves a distinctive form of food, both of which evoke childhood memories in a manner reminiscent of Proust's madeleine. Hence, this article is as much an exploration of folk music and foodways as it is about the vehicle itself. And then there is the denizen of the van, the dispenser of sugary delights who has developed a slightly sinister persona in the popular imagination. In the introduction to his article 'The Folklore of the Motor-car', published in *Folklore* in 1969, Stewart Sanderson wrote of his surprise and frustration at the paucity of material he had to work with, describing the published references as 'glancing and incidental' (Sanderson 1969, 241). Instead, he resorted to a few of his friends and students at Leeds University for oral source material. Over fifty years on, exploring the folklore of the ice cream van has proved similarly challenging, but instead of students and acquaintances I have drawn upon social media as a contemporary source of legends, beliefs, and FOAF tales in currency. Sanderson hoped other scholars would build upon his initial survey of 'the high-ways and the byways of motoring folklore' (Sanderson 1969, 241). So, let us start the engine, pull away from the kerb, put the chime box on, and take a folklorist's tour round the legends, stories, and soundscapes that surround the ice cream van.

### ***And the Van Played on: The Creation of a New Folk Music Tradition***

Ice cream vending has long had a noisy reputation. Back in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the product had to be sold sharpish, so the vendors had to attract their clients quickly, shouting above the urban hubbub (on the history of ice cream see Weiss 2011). Pushcart and three-wheel bicycle vendors used bells to announce their arrival in the neighbourhood. It is no surprise, then, that not long after the first American ice cream 'trucks' with refrigerators took to the roads, sonic innovation followed quickly. In the 1930s one company fitted mechanical music boxes with a loudspeaker that could be cranked to play a single tune once stationary, but the origins of the modern electric chimes lie in the late 1940s when dedicated battery-run chime boxes for ice cream vans began to be produced that played metal music discs. By the early 1950s, ice cream trucks were increasingly blaring out chime versions of popular tunes of the day, such as 'Little Brown Jug' and 'Strawberry Blonde' (Neely 2014, 152–53). But the most iconic American ice cream truck chime was the simple Mister Softee tune, originally written as a radio commercial for the company in 1960 and then played in the truck from a barrel chime box. Bars from two old American folk songs also had an enduring presence. 'Yankee Doodle Dandy', the lyrics for which date back to the eighteenth century, continues to be played by ice cream vans today in America and the UK. The nineteenth-century folk song 'Turkey in the Straw' was the other popular tune, also played by some UK vans as

well, although it has recently fallen out of use due to industry recognition of its racist lyrics and the tune's association with blackface performance (Morrison 2019). In 2020, the Good Humor ice cream brand (now owned by Unilever), which was an American pioneer of ice cream trucks, renounced the playing of 'Turkey in the Straw', as did Nichols Electronics, which has been making music boxes for ice cream trucks since 1957. Nichols put out a statement that it 'will no longer sell music boxes nor program music boxes with the song: Turkey in the Straw'.<sup>1</sup> The two companies then joined forces with RZA, a founding member of the hip-hop collective Wu-Tang Clan, to produce a new modern jingle to spread 'positive energy in neighborhoods everywhere'.<sup>2</sup>

Rosie Manfredi, whose family, the Truffellis, were ice cream makers in Sheffield, was an early adopter of van music in the UK, and she was prosecuted for it by the police in 1952. She had previously been fined several times for sounding the horn on her ice cream van wherever she stopped. Then she bought a 'music box' and amplifier to attach to her van to provide something more mellifluous to attract customers. It only played 'Auld Lang Syne' and when the van stopped so did the music. The arresting officer, Police Constable Gordon Fox, described it in classic official fashion as 'tintinnabulation from some electrical device'. Manfredi appealed her conviction stating that her music box 'was pleasurable to the ear', and, besides, the irritable constable was known in the neighbourhood to also get annoyed by the ringing of church bells in the morning ('Rose Wins Right' 1952). Sometime after this, Rosie purchased a locally made music box with four tunes on one barrel that was much coveted by other ice cream vendors in Sheffield.<sup>3</sup>

What we know of early ice cream music derives from such prosecutions. In the late 1950s and 1960s, ice cream van chimes were caught up in local and national debates about noise abatement, with fist fights on the streets and debates in the House of Commons. There was a regular mix of complaints from nightshift workers, road safety campaigners, and irritable councillors 'driven mad' by their disturbed suburban Sundays. In July 1960, the owner and the driver of an ice cream van in Ware, Hertfordshire, were fined several pounds under a by-law for public noise annoyance after the chimes caused a young boy to start screaming when he heard them around 7:40 pm ('Ice Cream Chimes Made Child Scream' 1960). The chairman of the Nuneaton and District Trades Council denounced ice cream van jingles as 'death chimes' because of the number of children apparently killed when running behind the vans. He had also received the usual complaints from nightshift workers ('Call for Ice Cream "Death Chimes" Ban' 1971).

The issue was addressed in the 1960 Noise Abatement Act, which restricted the use of loudspeakers attached to certain vehicles, including ice cream vans, to between noon and 7:00 pm, as long as:

- a. it is fixed to a vehicle which is being used for the conveyance of a perishable commodity for human consumption; and
- b. is operated solely for informing members of the public (otherwise than by means of words) that the commodity is on sale from the vehicle; and
- c. is so operated as not to give reasonable cause for annoyance to persons in the vicinity.

With the country in the midst of the Cold War, the editor of the *Hampstead News* responded to the new law sarcastically: 'While the whole world boils in trouble, this great country of ours still finds the time and inclination to outlaw the chimes used on ice-cream vans' ('Silencing Noise' 1960).

Through the 1960s and early 1970s, Hansard recorded periodic requests from MPs to further restrict or outlaw ice cream van chimes. In the House of Commons in December 1961, for instance, the Conservative MP for Hartlepool, Commander John Kerans, asked the Minister of Housing and Local Government and Minister for Welsh Affairs:

In my constituency, where the inhabitants are mainly shift workers, these ice-cream vans travel about during the day and night. In spite of instructions issued by the Ice Cream Federation in which ice-cream vendors were asked not to sound these chimes in areas where shift workers were asleep, it is still going on. Will my right hon. Friend review the working of the Act?<sup>4</sup>

The campaign against ice cream van chimes refused to be silenced. The Ice Cream Federation's own code of conduct, formulated in the 1960s, tried to stem the criticisms. It advised members that music should not be played for more than four seconds and that there should be a three-minute interval between plays. But in 1973 there was a national campaign for vans to play only road safety jingles. The Control of Pollution Act 1974 reinforced the 1960 legislation, as did the Tory government's 1982 'The Control of Noise (Code of Practice on Noise from Ice-Cream Van Chimes Etc)'. This incorporated the Ice Cream Federation's own code of conduct on the duration of and intervals between chimes. When the government Code of Practice was updated again in 2013, the playing time was increased to twelve seconds with at least two-minute intervals, which still stands today.

Monfredi's 'Auld Lang Syne' blaring on the streets of Sheffield is the earliest tune I have come across in the UK, but there soon developed a diverse cultural repertoire. In 1958, Scunthorpe ice cream van man Lawrence Clark was prosecuted for a lack of record-keeping and using a 'noisy instrument'. His chime consisted simply of the first few notes of the signature tune of the popular comedy radio show 'Take it From Here', written by Frank Muir and Denis Norden. It lasted no more than four seconds, but much annoyed a nightshift policeman who claimed he could hear it from a quarter of a mile away ('Radio Theme Tune Woke a Works P.C.' 1958). Snatches of classical music also appear among the early chimes. When, in 1959, Havant magistrates investigated complaints against a local ice cream van, they went to inspect the offending vehicle and hear its tunes. It played several bars of 'The Blue Danube' and 'The Anvil Chorus' from Verdi's *Il Trovatore* ('Ice-cream Van's Verdi Concert Woke Shift Man' 1959). The same year, Leicester ice cream van man Lawrence Fowler was prosecuted by a retired colonel for playing 'Brahms' Lullaby'. The colonel said dramatically that hearing it was 'rather like someone exploding a cap behind me' ('Van's Music Box Annoyed the Colonel' 1959). Less explosive were a growing arsenal of tunes from nursery rhymes such as 'Three Blind Mice', 'Hickory Dickory Dock', 'Boys and Girls go Out to Play', 'Oranges and Lemons', and 'Teddy Bears' Picnic'.

From the 1960s we start hearing the influence of film and television. In 1960, the Performing Rights Society demanded Wolverhampton ice cream van man Vince

Milano pay a guinea to play 'The Harry Lime Theme' from *The Third Man* (1949) ('Why the Ice-Cream Man Turned to Mozart' 1960). This was the zither instrumental written and performed by Anton Karas, who was still alive at the time. Despite this, it was an early van favourite and is still common enough today. The use of the marching tune 'Men of Harlech' was likely inspired by the popularity of the film *Zulu* (1964), and likewise 'Colonel Bogey' due to the whistling scene from *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). The themes from the James Bond films and the Benny Hill television series are still quite popular, as is John Philip Sousa's 'The Liberty Bell' (1893), thanks to its use as the theme tune to the BBC *Monty Python* series. Another evergreen from the 1970s is the BBC *Match of the Day* theme composed for the programme by Barry Stoller in 1970. Scott Joplin's ragtime tune 'The Entertainer', made popular with modern audiences by its use in the film *The Sting* (1973), came to challenge Mr Softee for the title of most ubiquitous chime in America, and became popular in Britain as well. Vicar and broadcaster Richard Coles recalled how it got on his nerves when training for ordination at the monastic College of the Resurrection in Mirfield, Yorkshire:

In the summer months, my meditative state was disrupted by the arrival of an ice-cream van just beyond the monastery wall, which played 'The Entertainer' so jauntily and with so much distortion it was like being shaken awake by the Swingle Singers. I resented it at first, and rained silent imprecations down on Mr Whippy, but eventually began to look at it another way, as a call from the world beyond the cloister, where people eat 99s and sing along and live life in its fullness. (Coles 2019, 23)

The old operatic Italian song 'O Sole Mio' became a hugely popular ice cream van chime after the song was adapted in 1982 for a television advertisement for Wall's Cornetto. With its catchy lyrics, 'Just one Cornetto, give it to me, delicious ice cream, of Italy ...', the advert became one of the most successful of all time (I hear the chime through my study window as I write this).

The producers of electronic chimes for ice cream vans were obviously fundamental in the creation of this canon of traditional van music. In Britain one of the pioneers was Harvin Chimes Ltd, who began producing chime boxes for ice cream vans in the 1960s. What was chosen for their boxes has shaped the childhood memories of millions. As well as picking already familiar tunes, they also introduced the occasional lesser-known one—at least unknown to most children, if not their grandparents. A good example is Harvin's box that reproduced the tune from the popular musical hall song 'Oh, Oh, Antonio', originally sung by Florrie Forde (1875–1940), which appropriately enough tells the story of an Italian girl who is jilted by an ice cream cart man.<sup>5</sup> Like quite a few chimes, I am sure many have heard it over the years without knowing where it came from originally.

It is thanks to Mr Whippy that 'Greensleeves' is surely the tune most associated with ice cream vans in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. Mr Whippy was set up in 1958 by Anglo-Italian Dominic Facchino, whose family had been in the British ice cream business for decades (Tillyer 2013). In the early 1930s there was even a Facchino Challenge Cup for the best ice cream in the country. Dominic had seen the Mr Softee ice cream truck operation in America, which had been founded in Philadelphia in 1956, and tried unsuccessfully to obtain the UK franchise, so he set up

Mr Whippy instead. He started off with six vans in Birmingham, where the Facchino firm was based, and by 1961 there were 150 Mr Whippy vans on the road around the country. He was also quick to set up Mr Whippy franchises in Australia and New Zealand, and shipped out dozens of Whippy vans from Southampton. But in 1962 Facchino sold the business to the catering and hotel millionaire Charles Forte along with the fleet of, by now, nine hundred vans. The business still struggled to make a profit and in 1963 Forte merged Mr Whippy with Wall's ice cream, creating Wall's-Whippy Ltd. The following year proved loss-making, however, due to poor weather, purchase tax, and van maintenance. In an eighteen-month period during 1964–65 the company spent £850,000 maintaining its now 1,326-vehicle fleet of Mr Whippy vans ('350 Mr. Whippy Vans Suspended' 1965). The company was sold to its now long-standing owner Unilever in 1966, while the overseas franchises in Australia and New Zealand passed through various hands over the decades.

According to industry legend, it was Facchino who chose 'Greensleeves' as the universal Mr Whippy van chime because he was fascinated by Henry VIII and had heard the bogus legend that the king had written the song to woo Anne Boleyn. This story goes back at least a century and was included in school history books. The popular television Series *The Tudors* has, more recently, perpetuated the legend, showing Henry sitting with a lute composing the tune as 'Greensleeves' plays in the background (*The Tudors* season 1, episode 9). The song was actually first published in 1580 and its style is influenced by late sixteenth-century Italian musical forms (Pet'ko 2022, 104–105). Facchino's fascination with Henry is also evident from the original Mr Whippy logo, which depicts a smiling scoop of ice cream in a cone wearing a hat or bonnet in the style of those worn by Henry VIII in paintings. Not everyone shared Facchino's apparent passion for 'Greensleeves', though. In 1962, Coventry ice cream van man Debrivoje Milic was fined ten shillings for playing it following several complaints to the police ('Ice Cream Van Driver Fined for Sounding Chimes' 1962). Nine years later, a Chesham Councillor complained: 'The other day I was subjected to Greensleeves for 1 minute 40 seconds—and in the end I had to call the police' ('Greensleeves and Popeye are OK with Them' 1971).

Because of Mr Whippy's near total dominance of the Australian market, the country has a particularly strong cultural relationship with their vans. A healthcare ethnography of one aboriginal reserve in Western Australia included an interviewee remembering the problematic influence of a Whippy van: 'The old people called him "Mr Trouble Maker". I remember my father doing a deal with Mr Whippy "the trouble maker"'. This was because of their poverty and the inevitable demands of children for an ice cream whenever he arrived on the reservation. So, the deal was that he would only be allowed to come once a month on a Sunday (Kickett 2011, 14). But it was the 'Greensleeves' chime that wormed its way into the psyche. In 1966, a folk band from Perth called The Twiliters recorded a satirical Vietnam protest song called 'Creamsleeves' to the tune of 'Greensleeves', which centred on the power of the ice cream van:

Now the army's made tanks out of every van  
To send to the jungles of Vietnam

Australia's the envy of Uncle Sam  
 'Cause Yanks don't have tanks that play Greensleeves.<sup>6</sup>

In her study of her practice of the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music (BMGIM), which uses music to unlock emotions, memories, and associations, the Australian therapist Alison Short recalled playing Vaughan Williams's 'Fantasia on Greensleeves' to one of her patients:

'No, now you're turning him into "Mr. Whippy" with that music (joint laughter) [So would you like an ice cream?] No, but I'll never, ever hear Greensleeves without thinking of "Mr. Whippy".'

'The garden's gone. And there's the "Mr. Whippy" van. And there are still children running up to "Mr. Whippy."' [change to B section of music] 'He's on the corner, outside a school. He's gone now.' (deep breath) [How does that make you feel?] 'I wasn't real happy about "Mr. Whippy."' [You weren't?] 'No, I've always heard lots of funny stories about how the local "Mr. Whippy" used to deal in drugs as well'. (Short 2006, 84-85)

I will come back to the 'funny stories' about drugs shortly.

A journalist's account of a day with an ice cream van driver in Leicester in 1975 stated that his playlist consisted of four-second bursts of 'Lara's Theme' from *Dr Zhivago*, 'The Third Man', 'Popeye', and 'Hickory Dickory Dock'. But, innovatively, he also had a brief blast of 'Spinning Wheel', the 1969 pop hit by Blood, Sweat & Tears best known for its start, 'What goes up, must come down' (McLean 1975). This was a rare early tilt towards contemporary pop music in the ice cream van music canon. By the late 1990s, though, there were calls for recent chart hits to be included in the repertoire of ice cream van chimes. In 1999, Unilever (who owned seventy-five per cent of the UK ice cream market at the time) put out a press release announcing that they wanted to update their vans' music roster. It generated a lot of debate in the media about the undermining of British tradition. A company spokesman said: 'We are always looking at innovation and moving with the times. To a lot of young people these tunes may not mean as much as they do to the older generation, and perhaps more up-to-date music might be more appropriate' (Turnbull 1999). The Ice Cream Alliance, then representing 750 companies, put out a supportive statement: 'If you were going to Glastonbury for example it would probably be better to have something more up-to-date than Three Blind Mice' (Turnbull 1999). Ice cream van drivers were asked to consider chimes extracted from tracks by Oasis, Fatboy Slim, Robbie Williams, and the Spice Girls, which raised obvious concerns from the Performing Rights Society.

The *Bristol Evening Post* followed up with a vox pop on the issue: 'Should ice-cream vans scrap their traditional jingles?' Lucy Stallworthy, aged fifteen, said 'No, they are traditional and something kids recognise'. Charlotte Hughes, aged twenty-one, differed: 'I'd definitely like to hear something a bit more modern on the streets, anything other than Greensleeves' ('Vox Pop' 1999). Ben Jackson, aged fourteen, from Longridge, Lancashire, was not keen on pop music being played and suggested instead, 'Perhaps they could use Postman Pat or the music from the Milkybar advertisement' ('In Tune with Tradition?' 1999). As for the van drivers themselves, in a vox pop on the issue in Preston, ice cream van driver Susan Post said: 'It's traditional to have old chimes inside an ice cream van and I don't think the



customers would like the change' ('In Tune with Tradition?'1999). The *Daily Mirror* captured similar opinions from some ice cream van drivers. One from Gloucester thought it would spell 'cultural doom'. 'Traditional chimes are a rallying call to millions of kids', he said. 'If they were replaced the ice cream van would lose its magic'. Another Gloucester van man said he would never replace his Big Ben chimes, declaring 'they are a tradition'. A twenty-two-year-old London ice cream van driver was of a different opinion, though, suggesting that bursts of Fat Boy Slim and Chemical Brothers could attract the youngsters: 'The first day I went out I had to play Colonel Bogey. I cringed with embarrassment' (Atkinson 1999).

Bursts of modern pop are rarely heard blaring from ice cream vans on the streets today, but did the power of 'tradition' and the frosty public reception to updating van music really win out? There were also major practical and commercial barriers to the idea. As was pointed out at the time, how would you tell the difference between the arrival of a van and someone playing loud music through an open window or carrying a beatbox down the street? The music needed to be immediately identifiable as that of an ice cream van for it to be effective. Then there was the considerable cost of replacing the old chime boxes and, besides, the copyright issues would have been challenging. Yet, while recognizing all these pragmatic reasons, the van chimes do provoke a deep sonic resonance that taps into nostalgic emotions about tradition and memory. The mix of folk songs, classical music, marching music, nursery rhymes, and theme tunes frozen in time provide an anchor to personal and national identity.

At this point, I need to expose an international parental conspiracy. Children across the world have been told the tall tale that chimes only play to announce that the ice cream van has run out of ice cream. It is difficult to pinpoint when this wheeze by parents to avoid having to pay for regular ice creams first became established, but it does seem to have emerged only in the last couple of decades. The crowd-sourcing website I Used to Believe, which gathers notions 'that adults thought were true when they were children', has a section on 'Ice cream vans only play music when they've run out of ice cream', which has hundreds of entries from Britain, Australia, Denmark, and America. Some examples reveal a lot of childhood frustration:

When i was little, my dad told me that when the music from the icecream truck was playing, it meant that they had run out. So everytime the truck came by playing the music, i would get upset because they always seemed to run out when they got to our house.

My Dad told me that Ice Cream vans played music to say they'd run out of ice-cream. I didn't have an Icecream til I was twenty three cos of him.<sup>7</sup>

### ***The Liminobile***

In Bill Ellis's article on the early twentieth-century American legend that young white women were being abducted from ice cream parlours and forced into prostitution, he described the ethnic-owned ice cream parlour as a 'liminal interzone' (Ellis 2009, 53). In a similar vein, perhaps, the ice cream van can be seen as a mobile liminal zone. The van is not a space that customers can enter (as with the ice cream

parlour); so the engagement with its liminality is not in terms of a physical crossing. The van's liminality derives from the fact that one is excluded from its interior, the inside remains unknown, the realm of its guardian. Things happen partially out of sight, and all may not be what it seems.

In his 1974 essay 'Sundae Painters', influential architecture and design critic Reyner Banham described ice cream vans as 'the biggest invisible objects in residential Britain'. He was alluding to the way in which we do not really *see* the vans as aesthetic objects or physical designs, but mostly see them metaphorically as dangers to children, sources of noise, nostalgia, and the like (Banham 1974). His focus was on the Cummins family, who were pioneering ice cream van designers of Crewe, a town which was also home to their one-time collaborators Whitby Morrison, which is still a major manufacturer of vans for international markets. What I want to focus on here, though, is the van's liminality in terms of its sonic transience due to its mobility in the physical environment: you can hear the chimes but often you cannot see their source. The experience is fleeting and otherworldly despite the recognition of mundane, material reality. This comes across powerfully in a 2015 study of the soundscape of ice cream vans and their 'moving melodies' in segregated Belfast, with its peace walls. Each van and its music can be identified with a well-defined spatial and cultural community. 'We have our ice cream truck', said one resident, 'the others have their own'. But the music transcends the location of the van and so permeates physical divisions. As another resident observed, 'sometimes you can hear them before you see them; some other times you can just hear them, but there is no chance to catch one, because they are on the other side of the wall' (Croce 2017). The wafer-thin boundary between the mundane and the unsettling uncanny is permeated by the vans' projected soundscapes and the cultural references and emotions they trigger. Consider these responses to one of my tweets on people's experiences of ice cream van music:

[With regard to the *Good, The Bad and The Ugly* chime] This plays in Newry Co. Down. Always heard it in the distance, never knowing what it was. Quite ominous feeling like you could be challenged to a pistol duel at any moment.

Visiting Scotland in 1993 from Canada with a friend born Bellshill, heard the chimes and my friend got nostalgic. An hour later the same van drives by again but the chimes were playing triple speed, out of control, it was a weird *Twin Peaks* kind of experience for me.

In Hartlepool on a foggy autumn day I heard an ice cream van play the Harry Lime theme, it was really spooky. I expected a man in a raincoat and trilby hat to emerge from the fog.

While in the UK these uncanny aural experiences are an urban phenomenon, and discussion boards in America reveal similar urban accounts, the vastness of the American landscape has led to the development of a distinct genre of wilderness chime memorate. When an American paranormal discussion board on Reddit considered the question 'Has anyone experienced ice cream truck music playing?', one of the main themes to emerge was hearing eery ice cream truck music playing deep in the woods, where no truck could possibly be operating: plenty of pine cones but none of the wafer variety.

I live in the middle of the woods. There has never been an ice cream truck even close to where I live. Today, my mom stepped outside and she told me that she heard something. I stepped out and heard it as well. It was 'ice cream truck music' we were both creeped out. We had both had an eerie feeling all day today. Then to hear the music playing in the woods was just really creepy.

Oh wow never thought about it but once during a vacation, way out in the woods, I've heard this too. Husband and child heard it too but we didn't think much of it other than: wtf would an ice cream truck be doing here at this time of day. It was really eerie and weird.

I live in a neighborhood yes but deep in the woods. I have never ever seen an ice cream truck in all the years I've lived here. I heard it yesterday and I said to my husband do you hear an ice cream truck? It stopped playing we looked down the road and nothing but it sounded like it was coming from the meadow and creek behind our house.

I used to live in a rural town in Kentucky and the house I rented was right up against the woods. Sometimes at night I would swear I could hear an ice cream truck/carnival version of 'the entertainer.' It was so faint that i could barely hear it, like it almost wasn't playing at all. I called it creepy clown music. I don't think my boyfriend ever heard it, but I would talk about it all the time and I felt crazy!<sup>8</sup>

Cultural geographers have been exploring for a while the concept of 'sonic geographies' of memory, emotion, and the past (for example Matless 2005), and Sarah Mills has drawn upon oral history and folklore in her study of the 'Sonic Geographies of Childhood' (Mills 2017). The aforementioned memorates regarding transient ice cream chimes in rural and urban environments suggest a fruitful avenue for developing a similar 'sonic folklore' approach.

### ***The Creation of a Bogeyman***

Let us now turn to those who inhabit the ice cream van. Over the last forty years, the cultural representation of the ice cream *man* has developed a sinister aspect. The original Santaesque figure, the bringer of joy to children everywhere, now has a Hyde side. One main reason for the transformation of ice cream van man into bogeyman or folk devil concerns his fusion with the folkloric figure of the childcatcher. The seeds of this connection were there in the association with the Pied Piper of Hamelin, which were already sown in the early years of the motorized ice cream van. In 1949 an American article on the nascent industry was entitled 'The Pied Pipers of Ice Cream' (Neely 2014, 169), and the *Birmingham Daily Post* made the same observation in 1966: 'The lure of the ice-cream van's music holds as much magic for children on a summer day as the Pied Paper of Hamelin' ('Hazard of Ice-Cream Chimes' 1966). The association could be more tangible. The Harvin company made an amplifier for vans that was marketed as the 'Pied Piper', and the entire fleet of Whitby Morrison vans of central London firm Piccadilly Whip played what was described as the Pied Piper tune.<sup>9</sup>

These allusions to the Pied Piper were usually meant in a light-hearted, innocent way, of course, but the story of the Piper of Hamelin is a dark affair of child abduction. One newspaper alluded to this sinister side in 1963 in relation to road safety: 'Ice cream vans are 20th century Pied Pipers. Wherever the stop, they are almost certain to attract children ... and kiddies with their minds set on a cone,

wafer or choc ice do not always remember the lessons taught about road safety' ('Pied Pipers in Ice Cream Vans' 1963). Scholars have made the connection between the Pied Piper story and some modern horror films, particularly the hugely influential *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), which was released at a time of heightened cultural concerns about child molestation (Shimabukaro 2014). The film's macabre killer, Freddy Krueger, has been framed as one of a long line of folkloric bogey figures, which includes the Pied Piper. Indeed, in a later 2010 remake of *Nightmare on Elm Street* one of the characters references the Hamelin child abductor. Krueger was not an ice cream van man, but the idea of a single man enticing children from the streets with sweet treats was an obvious figure to conjure up for the horror genre. This was graphically represented in the cult horror film *Ice Cream Man* (1995), which, as with many other horror films, plays broadly with familiar fairy-tale motifs. Set in Los Angeles during the 1960s, the plot concerns a recently released psychiatric patient named Gregory Tudor who had been traumatized in childhood by seeing his local ice cream man murdered in a drive-by shooting. The psychotic Tudor sets about creating his own ice cream made with human body parts to distribute to the local children. Kids keep going missing and a trio of intrepid children set out to explore what the creepy ice cream man is up to. Tudor ultimately ends up dismembered in one of his own mixers. In 2010, the American horror film *Legion* also presented a uniformed ice cream truck vendor as possessed by a devil, depicting his shocking transformation into his demon form.

The second main factor in the rise of the bogey van man—the association with drug dealing—developed in the 1980s. On social media there are lots of references to drug dealing from ice cream vans as an 'urban legend', and false rumours have certainly blended inextricably with fact since the 1980s. The trials that ended the so-called 'Glasgow ice cream wars' in the early 1980s revealed how criminal gangs in the city used to distribute drugs and stolen goods through a network of ice cream vans, which led to turf wars. This resulted in murder and shots being fired at the vans in the open streets. The juxtaposition between innocent chimes and simple pleasures and bloody violence shocked the public's imagination. The ensuing criminal trials attracted national and international attention. The bungling of the Serious Crimes Squad led to the unit garnering the much-reported nickname the 'Serious Chimes Squad'. This was not the end of it in the area. In 1989, a Paisley ice cream van driver admitted to selling LSD from his van after giving some to an undercover policeman ('Ice Cream Van Sold Drugs to Police' 1989). Another outbreak of ice cream van violence and police raids broke out in Paisley two years later.

The image of drug-dealing ice cream vans and urban rivalries was subsequently amplified in fiction. The violence and intimidation of the Glasgow wars were updated in the film *The Hooligan Wars* (2012). The plot concerns a professional footballer forced to retire early through injury who buys an ice cream van to make some income, but soon finds himself confronted by foreign criminal gangs selling drugs from ice cream vans. Bill Forsyth's comedy *Comfort and Joy* (1984) involves rivalries between two Glasgow Italian ice cream firms but without the murder and bloodshed. Mathew Dooley's prize-winning comedy graphic novel *Flake* (2020) is another

humorous take on rivalry between ice cream van companies in a northern seaside resort.

Back to some facts, though, and successful prosecutions for drug dealing *from* ice cream vans were, and are, rare. Rumour and vengeful false allegations played their part. When, in 1991, police received an anonymous tip-off that an ice cream van driver in Bourtreehill was selling drugs, for example, they conducted an investigation and found no evidence he was trading drugs from the van, although he was prosecuted for personal possession of cannabis ('Ice Cream Van Driver Had Drugs' 1991). Four years earlier, *The Star* newspaper, then owned by Express Newspapers, had to pay substantial damages to ice cream van owner Giovanni Santangeli after a headline falsely accused him of selling drugs from his van and accused him of being a 'cold-blooded peddler of misery' ('Ice Cream Man Gets Star Damages' 1987). Trying to sift fact from rumour became a challenge for those services involved in dealing with the social consequences of drug-taking. In 1992, the West London area manager for the charity Druglink observed, for instance, 'We hear that drugs are being run by children, from ice cream vans—even through pizza delivery men. It is impossible to know what to believe' ('The Stakes are High in War on Crack Dealers' 1992).

Prosecutions have continued to occur sporadically in more recent years, although they have concerned ice cream van vendors dealing in or taking drugs, but *not* selling from their vans while doing rounds. In 2011, for instance, Bridgend police were tipped off by a rival ice cream man who 'had an axe to grind' that Mario D'Adamo was dealing drugs. He was found in possession of cannabis, but when the magistrate's clerk asked the prosecuting lawyer whether 'there was any chance D'Adamo had used his ice cream van to sell drugs to school children', the prosecution stated that there was no evidence ('Ice Cream Van Dealer Had Drugs Outside School' 2011). In a more recent case, a father and son who owned an ice cream van business in Crawley, Sussex, were found guilty of running a multi-million-pound cocaine and heroin business. But, to assuage public concerns, it was made very clear in media reports that 'they did not use their ice cream vans in any sale or distribution of drugs'.<sup>10</sup>

Going back to the discussion boards, the question of whether ice cream vans sell drugs has been a hot topic. An Irish Reddit discussion thread on 'Have you ever bought drugs from an Ice Cream van?' revealed, for example, some limited evidence for small-scale dealing, although there might obviously have been some reluctance to admit it. As one poster responded to another who stated that a van sold weed around his student residences in Galway, 'now that you've told the internet, you've ruined it for everyone'. As well as a little dealing in Class B drugs, the Reddit thread also showed some personal experience of purchasing 'extras' such as cigarettes, pornographic magazines, and fireworks.<sup>11</sup> Newspapers from the 1980s and early 1990s also reveal several prosecutions for selling bootleg VHS films from ice cream vans. Such evidence of illicit activity obviously concerns only a tiny percentage of the ice cream vans in business in the past.

The social media analysis reveals that the drug rumours are not only based on cultural representations and reportage, but also on personal environmental perception. People express their perplexity over and over again as to why ice cream

vans operate during the winter. Surely no one is buying ice creams in the cold? What are they doing? To give an example, one respondent to one of my tweets that suggested I might research the folklore of ice cream vans, requested: 'Please can you discuss what on earth they are selling while going round Newcastle on a chilly autumn evening. Ice cream does not seem appealing at this time'. The suspicion inevitably arises that they might be selling drugs. This is compounded by people seeing vans that never seem to have children around them or hearing chimes late at night. This sensory speculation is obviously ripe for FOAF lore and memorate formation. In fact, while ice cream sales do drop significantly during the winter, doing a round can still be worthwhile in tourist spots, seaside resorts in particular, and during school holidays at Christmas time and February half-term.

Apart from the Glasgow wars, then, there is little evidence of significant dealing from ice cream vans and certainly not to children, although there are occasional cases of ice cream van drivers dealing in drugs or taking drugs. We can liken this to other 'drug myths' of the period whipped up by the tabloids. In the 1990s there were widespread concerns about the adulteration of ecstasy, for instance, but laboratory analysis found that, despite one or two tragic high-profile cases, there was very little evidence of adulteration. Interviews with street dealers revealed that many prided themselves on the quality of their product and knew any adulteration would ruin their business in a competitive market (Coomber 1997). Likewise, dealing from an ice cream van would be rather foolish considering the ubiquity of the suspicions. The stories and concerns regarding the dealing of drugs to children from ice cream vans could be understood from the perspective of 'moral panics', as set out in Stanley Cohen's influential *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972). But while his observations on how press reportage amplifies perceived deviance or criminality are certainly relevant, ice cream van men have not been collectively demonized as a section of society and the media and public concerns could not be defined as a 'panic', but rather a vein of ongoing suspicion and concern, albeit largely wrong, that some vans are a cover for low-level deviant activity and youth corruption. The study of the drug aspect of the ice cream van fits more usefully amongst folklore rumour studies, such as Richard Jenkins's *Black Magic and Bogeymen: Fear, Rumour and Popular Belief in Northern Ireland 1972-74*, in which he observes that such politicized rumours cannot be 'understood without taking a multidisciplinary approach, taking in perspectives and comparative evidence from anthropology, sociology, folklore and media studies' (Jenkins 2014, summary).

### **Foodways**

Finally, after discussing drugs and bogeymen, let us end with a more positive focus on the ice creams they sold. Yet, even here, there is still more horror to overcome first. Ron Clarke's memoir of his student days driving an ice cream van around the Northeast of England during the heatwave of 1976 is drizzled with hatred for monkey blood. This was the regional term for the indeterminately flavoured, red, gooey syrup squeezed on to ice cream from a plastic bottle. Indeed, his book is called *Do You Want*

*Monkey Blood with That?* He cursed the stuff, which got everywhere, staining his hands and clothing red:

what gets me is, no one ever queries why it is called Monkey Blood ... You would think if someone offered you Monkey Blood at least you would have the decency to hesitate and question before sealing the deal. But no. It is always: 'Do you want Monkey Blood with that?' 'Oh Yes please'. (Clarke 2022, 239–40)

Clarke never did find out why it was called Monkey Blood in the Northeast. He is not the only one. In a 2006 discussion board post on the matter on the South Tyneside Web Forum, one poster commented: 'Having been in the ice cream business for about thirty years I can say with the greatest confidence that I don't have a clue where the name "Monkeys Blood" originated from. I have heard one or two ridiculous reasons given for it but none worthy of posting on here'.<sup>12</sup> He also remembered customers asking for 'bull's blood' and 'jungle juice'. The name dragon's blood for red sauce seems to have been used in other places, such as Burnley and its environs, where message board posters recalled asking for it in the 1950s when there were still horse-and-cart ice cream vendors.<sup>13</sup> In the Northeast, though, dragon's blood was usually the name for the lime-flavoured green sauce that paired with the red monkey blood.<sup>14</sup>

One of the more widespread ideas is that 'Monkey Blood' derives from the famous legend of the Hartlepool Monkey Hangers. This story of how, during the Napoleonic wars, the fisher folk of the north-eastern town tortured and hanged a monkey, believing it was a French spy, was first recorded in a surviving ballad sheet called 'Who Hung the Monkey' sung at Hartlepool by Ned Corvan in 1854 (Gregson 1983). Corvan was a popular Tyneside songwriter and performer who travelled the Northeast. Folklorists have suggested that he was inspired by two earlier songs from 1827 entitled 'The Sandhill Monkey' and 'The Baboon' in which monkeys are also mistaken for humans. In 'The Baboon', the eponymous monkey is also mistaken for 'a hairy French spy' (Hobbs and Cornwell 1994). What is the link, then, with twentieth-century monkey blood? Nothing obvious other than that they are concerned with the Northeast and both refer to monkeys. 'Who Hung the Monkey' does not describe the beating of the monkey in bloody terms and nor do later illustrations. The mystery remains.

In the 1990s and 2000s, with the anti-EU movement on the rise, fed by nonsense stories about bendy bananas and the like, and the Political Correctness culture wars dragging on in the right-wing press, it is no surprise that there might emerge around ice cream vans some fake news about 'PC gone mad' and 'euromyths' (on euromyths see Henkel 2021). On one twitter thread concerning monkey blood, for instance, a poster related how 'in the 90s the ice cream man in Hexham always said you couldn't call it that anymore cos of the EU'. In a 2009 blog on monkey blood, the blog poster wrote that a 'friend of mine was recently berated by an ice-cream man for requesting "monkey's blood" on his 99. "That's offensive now, mate", he was told, "you have to call it raspberry sauce"'.<sup>15</sup> But the fondness for monkey blood has endured in the Northeast despite such chimeric political challenges.

Rumours of food adulteration are as rife today as they were in centuries past, from the rumour that McDonald's milkshakes contain pig fat to the stories that the early popularity of Ben and Jerry was due to their lacing their ice cream with cannabis. Food adulteration has always been a historical fact as well. Unpicking one from the other when it comes to personal memories of supposed small-scale acts of adulteration is not easy (see Kalmre 2016). Reminiscences about life in Sheffield in the 1940s and 1950s posted on the Sheffield Forum message board included the anecdote that around 1947 it was spread around the neighbourhood that the Manfredis (not the same as the Monfredis) peed in their ice cream, for instance. The poster suggested a rival ice cream vendor put it about maliciously. Another poster remembered stories that rival ice cream van vendors would put sand in each other's ice cream containers.<sup>16</sup>

The reason why a Flake in an ice cream is called a '99' has attracted much press interest in recent years and the issue now has its own Wikipedia page. The Cadbury's Flake was first widely marketed as a '99' in newspaper advertisements in 1936, but there is no definitive explanation for why it was called a 99. Cadbury's PR department plays with the various legends that have emerged to explain the name, and teasingly claims on the company website that the real reason has been 'lost in the mists of time'. When the Ice Cream Alliance requested a definitive decision from the company, they were unable to get any confirmation.<sup>17</sup> The most widespread contemporary popular belief is that it was called a 99 because it cost 99 pence. This was never close. It would have made ice creams far too expensive. In 1936 the Flake originally sold for tuppence. There is also the notion that it is 99 millimetres long. Wrong once again, and takes no account of its pre-decimal origins. The Cadbury's website sets out a more elaborate explanation reported to the company newspaper by one of its early salesmen who worked a lot with Italian ice cream companies, particularly in the Northeast, from the 1920s onwards. He believed the new invention was born of Italian tradition, namely, 'In the days of the monarchy in Italy the King had a specially chosen guard consisting of 99 men, and subsequently anything really special or first class was known as "99"—and that his how "99" Flake came by its name'.<sup>18</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that this 'appears to be without foundation' and the origin remains unknown. Another dubious Italian origin explanation that does the rounds in the media and on the Internet concerns the last wave of northern Italian conscripts to the First World War, who were born in 1899 and apparently referred to as 'i Ragazzi del 99'—the Boys of '99. They were held in high honour, and their Alpine regiment hat, with its cocked dark feather, resembled the 99 ice cream.

In 2006, newspapers were full of a new challenge to all these explanations. As reported in *The Scotsman*, Tanya Arcari, whose Italian father migrated from Italy after World War I and set up a family ice cream business in Portobello High Street, claimed: 'My dad always said that my grandad broke a Flake in half—that was before the short, 99 Flakes were manufactured—and stuck it in an ice cream. People liked it, so he kept selling it. He called it a 99 because his shop was at 99 Portobello High Street'. Then, she suggested, a Cadbury's representative visited and borrowed the idea for Cadbury's. 'It has been a family legend for as long as I can remember that my



grandad invented the 99, but the problem is, we have no proof ('My Grandad Created the "99" Cone in Portobello' 2006). One final explanation, which has largely gone under the radar, was discovered by the historian Carl Chinn during his research on the history of Cadbury's. According to the company's *Bournville Recorder* in 1980, it was called a 99 after the Bingo shout out for the number '99'—namely 'top of the house', which does sound more likely than the other explanations (Chinn 1998, 62). But do we *really* want a definitive answer?

### Conclusion

The ice cream van has not yet disappeared from our streets and tourist spots, and its chimes continue to raise either a smile or a grimace on a warm summer's day or cold winter's evening. Perhaps it will eventually go the way of the rag-and-bone cart and the milk float, but the signs are that its folkloric associations may save it. National nostalgia is a powerful force for the preservation of 'tradition' and its role in commerce. I have not bought an ice cream from an ice cream van since I was a child and yet I would probably miss its fleeting presence on the streets. By contrast, I do not have a similar sentimental attachment to milk floats, which were as much a part of my childhood. The reasons for this are surely the soundscape of the ice cream van, vehicle design, and the offer of sugary delights. All three were developed to entice and excite unlike any other road vehicle, and, after all, is not the lure of enticement the basis of many an enduring fairy tale?

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20210115230641/http://nicholselectronicsco.com/>.
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2020/08/14/902664184/an-ice-cream-truck-jingles-racist-history-has-caught-up-to-it>; <https://www.facebook.com/NicholsElectronicsCo/>.
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.sheffieldforum.co.uk/topic/167646-fair-in-the-farm-grounds-1950s/page/6/#comments>. Posted 20 July 2015.
- <sup>4</sup> [https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1961/dec/12/ice-cream-vans-chimes#S5CV0651P0\\_19611212\\_HOC\\_9](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1961/dec/12/ice-cream-vans-chimes#S5CV0651P0_19611212_HOC_9).
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPQ4LunCcyQ>.
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvnjG7XEVsM>.
- <sup>7</sup> [https://www.iusedtobelieve.com/neighbourhood/ice\\_cream\\_vans/playing\\_music/](https://www.iusedtobelieve.com/neighbourhood/ice_cream_vans/playing_music/).
- <sup>8</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/Paranormal/comments/r8a9mt/has\\_anyone\\_experienced\\_ice\\_cream\\_truck\\_music/?rdt=55137](https://www.reddit.com/r/Paranormal/comments/r8a9mt/has_anyone_experienced_ice_cream_truck_music/?rdt=55137). Posts from 2021.
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/shortcuts/2013/jul/12/ice-cream-van-chimes-british-summer>; <https://londonist.com/london/features/meet-the-people-who-sell-ice-creams-in-london>.
- <sup>10</sup> <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/drug-dealing-gang-led-father-113809542.html>.
- <sup>11</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/ireland/comments/shtre/you\\_ever\\_bought\\_drugs\\_from\\_an\\_ice\\_cream\\_van/](https://www.reddit.com/r/ireland/comments/shtre/you_ever_bought_drugs_from_an_ice_cream_van/). Multiple posts from 2011. See also Mumsnet thread: [https://www.mumsnet.com/talk/am\\_i\\_being\\_unreasonable/1957640-Ice-Cream-Van](https://www.mumsnet.com/talk/am_i_being_unreasonable/1957640-Ice-Cream-Van).
- <sup>12</sup> <http://forum.southshields-sanddancers.co.uk/boards/viewtopic.php?p=97309>. Posted 19 July 2006.
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.uptheclarets.com/messageboard/viewtopic.php?t=14758>. Posted 26 March 2017.

- <sup>14</sup> [https://www.mumsnet.com/talk/am\\_i\\_being\\_unreasonable/4614659-monkeys-blood](https://www.mumsnet.com/talk/am_i_being_unreasonable/4614659-monkeys-blood). Posted 18 August 2022.
- <sup>15</sup> <http://madcowpatter.blogspot.com/2009/01/does-asking-for-monkeys-blood-on-my-ice.html>. Posted 19 January 2009.
- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.sheffieldforum.co.uk/topic/167646-fair-in-the-farm-grounds-1950s/page/6/#comments>. Posted 20 July 2015.
- <sup>17</sup> <https://ice-cream.org/about-the-ice-cream-alliance/facts-about-ice-cream/>.
- <sup>18</sup> <https://www.cadbury.co.uk/your-question-answered?q=where-do-product-names-come-from>.

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