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How to Stuff a Lettuce Bikini

To the Costa Mesa thugs who used to beat up Dan Mathews: The fat gay punk kid grew up to save lives and jet set with Pam Anderson. Howzabout you?

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Illustration by James McHugh '**GETTING ARRESTED IS FUN**'

This is a story about Dan Mathews of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, and since it involves PETA we're obligated to begin with a tale of animal abuse, so here is how the animal abused me:

I don't like walking in people's backyards, haven't since I was a paperboy, and when I talked to Mathews about getting together to talk about his job at PETA—the protests, the arrests, the celebrities, the getting naked in Japan—he asked me to meet him at the "palatial estate" of a friend he was staying with in Venice.

"It's in the back," he said.

I arrived, walked to the back and, of course, was soon met by a table full of people and one growling boxer, apparently very angry, though who can tell with that breed? At that moment I experienced society's worst kind of terror: not knowing how to appear—nonplussed, supremely plussed, what?—and I froze. That's when Mathews showed up, looking like a nine-foot blond St. Francis with muscles.

Now, I love my wife, but let me just say that Mathews is a good-looking man. Good looking with a bit of radiance, which is nice, because when he attended Costa Mesa High he wasn't so much radiant as a fat, gay punker kid who got whaled on all the time and when he wasn't getting whaled on he was reading the words someone had spray painted on the school's entrance—"Dan Mathews: We Will Kill You"—which explains why Mathews, now 38, fled Costa Mesa when he was 16. But we were talking about a dog.

Desperately not wanting to look like an idiot, I looked for help from Mathews, who, fortunately, I found out only later was comfortable dressing as a carrot and a chicken in the name of ethical treatment. He calmly said something, the dog retreated and Mathews said with a grin, "Come on up."

Protesting with PETA in Paris

That was that, and this is what he does: Mathews deals. He's been arrested more times than he can count, so many times that he wrote a piece for *Details* magazine rating the world's prisons (Hong Kong A-No. 1; Chicago the pits). He's been arrested for commandeering Calvin Klein's office—and then became Klein's friend and the reason the designer abandoned fur. He's been arrested with Chrissie Hynde, has been arrested nearly naked, has been arrested dressed as a rat, rabbit and, yes, a carrot and chicken.

"Getting arrested is fun," he says, the way someone mentions they like riding roller coasters.

Fun. Shouting and being shouted at, being chained up and dragged away. Fun.

"He can take any situation, bad as it gets, and make it fun. I don't think I've ever seen him in a bad mood," said his best friend, Connie Pearson, who shared punk and getting whaled on with Mathews, and says one of the best times of her life was breaking down in the middle of the desert with Mathews on their way to Vegas.

Another good friend, Pamela Anderson—*that* Pamela Anderson—says "one of the funniest times I've ever had" was the time the Austrians soiled their lederhosen at the thought of Mathews casting red paint about one of their formal balls.

"We always have fun," she said. "Dan's my hero. He's everybody's hero."

Doubtful. Certain fur-wearing, paint-splattered supermodels—*Giselle! Incoming!*—probably aren't terribly enamored, and the same goes for corporate fast-food and fashion types or *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour, whom PETA once sent a dead raccoon on a plate while she ate at the Four Seasons in Manhattan to protest fur advertisements in her magazine.

With his favorite animal

His ability to capture the public's attention has helped make PETA the most recognized animal rights groups in the world, with more than 750,000 members and nearly \$15 million in contributions last year, most of them in small amounts. Starting with founder Ingrid Newkirk, the organization has an innate ability to get under people's skins and onto their TV screens and into their newspapers—Newkirk recently stipulated that upon her death she wanted to be barbecued and asked that Mathews supervise the hoedown. Their ability to employ the badges of consumer culture—especially sex and celebrity—to fight its successes has become a model for other organizations, and Mathews has been at or near the center of the action for some time, dealing, always dealing with stuff. Perhaps, it's because he got whaled on as a kid in Costa Mesa.

More likely it's because he's Perry Lawrence's son—and for anyone who knows Lawrence, that statement needs no elaboration.

He beckoned me toward his friend's estate, which is a tiny, backyard guesthouse where he'd been sleeping on an air mattress wedged into the teeny demi-kitchenette petite.

"Most of our contributors are old ladies and young kids who can give only 20 bucks," he says. "I

just can't see spending \$100 of that on a hotel room."

So he prefers to stay with friends on the road, which he's on about two weeks out of every month. Sometimes he stays in a guest house, sometimes in a mansion. It doesn't matter he says: "It's more fun that way." Yes, sometimes he must rough it at Paul McCartney's pad or bum a ride on Pam Anderson's private jet to Vegas, as he'll do tonight. It's a living.

'CALL US WHEN YOU'RE NAKED'

Since this is a story about someone from PETA, we're obligated to talk about what we ate. We ate at McDonald's. Mathews had the veggie burger; I had a cheeseburger, lamely asking him if it was okay.

"Order what you want," he said. "Half of our members are vegetarian and half think it's a good idea. If people need guilt to motivate them, great. People are surprised to find out I do shots of Jaegermeister, that I like having a good time. Just because you're devoted to a cause doesn't mean you can't have a good time. I think that's one of the reasons I've never burned out."

He's been at PETA for 18 years, having shown up just a few days after graduating from American University, where he used to stand outside the cafeteria and show slaughterhouse footage. Back then, maybe 10 people worked out of Newkirk's suburban Maryland home—she'd founded the group in 1980—and Mathews was hired at \$10,400 to answer phones and reply to mail on a typewriter with a lazy *u*.

"I thought he was special since he had taken on American University regarding their treatment of pigeons," Newkirk said. "Anyone who can stand up for these poor little birds, completely gentle that just go around looking for your crumbs, I knew was special. Now, I didn't envision him on TV for us. His hair was some oddball color and he spoke a mile a minute."

From his punk days in California, he'd gotten to know Nina Hagen and now told her he was working for an animal rights organization that wasn't just a bunch of old women standing around with signs—these people intended to take *action*—and could she write a song? She wrote "Don't Kill the Animals," sang it with Lene Lovich and soon it was No. 1 at the Palladium in New York, No. 1 at the Star Club in Dallas, No. 1 at clubs on both coasts and even in Oklahoma City. Soon the guy who answered the phones and battled lazy *u*'s was going around the country, talking about the song but, more, talking about PETA and animal rights, reaching a whole new, untapped and, most importantly, *young* audience.

"At that point," he says, "Ingrid said, 'I think we'll get someone else to answer the phones.'"

And so started Mathews' life of heading PETA campaigns. He organized protests and sit-ins, educational this and throwing-stuff that. And he didn't forget the central theme of making it in America: get someone famous to be either with you or against you. Get Paul McCartney talking about vegetarianism. Better, get Pamela Anderson *wearing* vegetarianism. That's when you get more than 200 newspapers worldwide running incredibly clever headlines such as "Pam Anderson Wears Lettuce Bikini."

"Before Dan we had used celebrities like Loretta Swit or Steve Guttenberg, but it was always in very serious ads, or to sign letters, very serious things," Newkirk said. "When Dan came along, he really added a spice to the mix. He allowed the celebrities to have fun. Of course, Dan can have

fun in a brown paper bag."

He started the "I'd rather go naked than wear fur" campaign by stripping on a Tokyo street. That campaign has grown into one of PETA's best known and has included Anderson. It's been so big that Britney Spears' refusal to pose made big headlines.

"When I started at PETA our main focus was undercover projects designed to expose cruelty," Mathews said. "But as the years went by, fewer news shows were willing to show the footage because they found people turned the channel because they didn't want to see something upsetting. We live in escapist times. People want to be entertained, not informed. We'd have footage of animals on fur farms with eyes missing, mutilated, and try to get this out about the real story of what happens, why there is a problem with fur, and producers would say, 'This isn't the sort of thing people want to see at dinner time, but give us a call when you're going to take off your clothes again.'"

PETA doesn't make the rules, they just play by them very well, and there are plenty of celebrities who want to get into the game—so many that, Mathews says, "Somebody joked that we're the CAA of animals."

What civil rights were to the '60s, feminism was to the '70s and gay rights were after that, animals rights is now, he says, especially with young people—young people who watch Josh Hartnett and Orlando Bloom in movies and buy Pink and Shania Twain CDs and vote on PETA's online polls asking who's the sexiest vegetarian: Orlando Bloom? Josh Hartnett? Shania Twain? It works—one of PETA's most popular websites is PETA2.com, aimed at kids—but it's also a direction that bugs a lot of those in the animal rights movement.

"Resistance? Oh, all the time," Mathews said. "People take themselves very seriously, and you can't blame them. We've reduced the movement by and large to a sound bite so the masses can digest it and think its cool, boiling any of the brains out of it. But anyone who's interested, say by one of our campaigns, can go to PETA.com and get tons of information. There's a lot of competition for people's attention and it'd be very easy to become invisible if you weren't exciting. Basically, our country has become a giant high school where people want to gossip about the popular people, snicker about who lost weight and who got divorced. It's pathetic, but we're tapping into that.

"More than a political movement, animal rights is a consumer movement. It's about what we eat, what we wear, what we buy. That's why we are always pushing things in the public eye, because it helps shape consumer habits or discourage them. By using good-looking vegetarians like Orlando, Shania, Paul McCartney, Alec Baldwin, Kim Basinger, we're pretty much putting to rest the idea that vegetarians are weak and look anemic. We're trying to get people to do things out of self-interest. Wanna lose weight? Go veggie. There's no reason to think that a cause can't be marketed like any other product."

Phrases such as "boiling any of the brains out of it" are dead giveaways that Dan isn't always comfortable with the method himself. To be honest, he says, he "distrusts the masses" it's his job to reach. He's really not into celebrities—his all-time favorite is Lawrence Welk—and though he counts some very famous people as friends, he talks about them in terms of friendship, not fame, as in "Morrissey? Oh, he's a really nice guy."

He's currently reading a book called *The Twilight of American Culture* and is convinced the

country is going the way of Rome with its emphasis on fluff and entertainment at the expense of substance. Then again, his job at PETA doesn't charge him with saving the culture, just raising awareness about PETA and the plight of animals . . . which would raise the consciousness and nobility of the race. So maybe it is.

A NATURALLY OBNOXIOUS PERSON

This being a story about PETA, I thought it'd be cool to get arrested, but they use guys like me as mints in prison, so Mathews was kind enough to include me on a scouting mission to find the perfect Kentucky Fried Chicken where people can soon be arrested. As it turned out, with Ms. Anderson's plane beckoning, we only had time to case one store. Mathews got out, notebook in hand, walked around the store, then in, then out, then got back in the car. The whole process took maybe two minutes. He'd done this before.

"It's not a great one," he said. "The drive-thru is too wide to close down and the counter inside has Plexiglas, so it would be hard to get onto the counter. On the other hand, they've got these wonderful railings to chain yourself to and there is a lot of traffic going by, so you can make a mess."

"Mess" equals arrests and coverage, and PETA wants the world to know that it believes KFC's chicken-killing method is inhumane, that the blades they employ to kill the chickens sometimes fail and that the animals end up being dropped alive into scalding water. It's horrible, Mathews says. Then he laughs and tells the story of how Chrissie Hynde took part in a protest against a KFC in Seattle and had a store manager yell at her, "Hey, get a job."

This is Mathews' job, too: not just deploying celebrities, but fucking things up, making people uncomfortable. It seems when you meet him that it would wear on him, but it doesn't.

"I'm a naturally obnoxious person," he said. "There is so much wrong with the world. What we do to these animals is wrong and anything we can do to fuck things up royally, I'm for. Frankly, I don't think we go far enough. It must go back to my old punk sensibility."

But being a punk in Costa Mesa in the late 1970s was anything but sensible. He'd grown up acting in local theater, got straight A's, skipped seventh grade and was fat—"They called me Shamu in swim class." He was a beatin' just waiting to happen. By the time he got to Costa Mesa High, he discovered Connie and punk.

"The idea that in the tanned, blond 1970s a guy would want to take a razor blade to his hair and dye it black didn't go," Mathews said. "I mean, I got beat up before I became a punk, but punk allowed me to be a more stylish outcast."

Connie says she got beaten up too, though she admits Dan got the worst of it since "he was 90 feet tall and a drama geek." The beatings continued throughout high school—sprinkler heads were thrown at him, he was tied up—and happened so often that, he said, "If there had been a gun at home, I probably would have shot somebody."

Fortunately, there wasn't a gun at home. There was Perry.

HE WENT DOWN LIKE A FAT BAG OF GROCERIES

Perry Lawrence was born an orphan in Virginia. Raised in foster homes, she was marching in civil

rights demonstrations by 1960, though she didn't exactly buy into the whole movement. She once was turned away while trying to board a CORE bus, because officials were concerned she wouldn't so much turn the other cheek as make with the lefts and rights.

"And they were right, of course," Perry said. "If someone spit on me, I would do something about it."

She demonstrated against the KKK near the White House and marched with La Raza in honor of slain journalist Ruben Salazar. She took her kids to see *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and seemed more at home with Dan's punk friends than women her own age.

"I remember her as a very beautiful woman, but also as just a very shocking person," Connie said. "She behaved like no mother I had ever met. I think she forgot to go to mom etiquette class."

Above all things she taught her kids to resist bullies, that if they ever saw anyone picking on someone weaker—especially parents mistreating their children—they were to berate them, shout at them and make them stop. When kids in the family's Costa Mesa neighborhood thought it was fun to crush cats' skulls, she had her sons collect any strays they could find. Soon, their small apartment teemed with 22 felines.

"My only memory of social consciousness is reminding my children as well as anyone else's that it was of vital importance to look out for those with needs of any kind," Perry said. "Ethics. Ethics. Ethics. Fellow man and fellow animal."

At the time, of course, Mathews was the one beset by bullies. One day, as a high school senior, he got slugged in the stomach and went down like a fat bag of groceries.

"All these people stood around in a circle and they were laughing. It was an awful situation," he said.

A month later he was on a fishing trip with his father and brothers. He'd already started to feel uneasy about fishing—why did a fun activity have to include making some other living thing miserable? On this trip, he actually caught a fish, a flounder, and pulled it aboard the boat, where it flopped about to be laughed at and then beaten.

"All of these people were just standing around laughing at this poor, ugly fish and at that moment the flounder was the only living thing I could relate to on that boat. I suddenly realized that I'd become the bully. I instantly stopped eating fish.

Drinking with Morrissey

"To be honest, I really wouldn't describe myself as an animal lover. I love cats, I love raccoons and monkeys. Dogs are all right—they're a little needy. I'm at PETA out of basic respect. My mom raised me and my brothers to be very aware of what was going on in the world and that we had responsibility to help correct things. I ended up at PETA because if you look at the sheer numbers of those being abused, the most downtrodden segment of the world is animals. They're burned and blinded and mutilated, skinned alive, beaten and forced to perform. It seems like we're almost at war with the other animals. Animals were the place that was the emergency situation for the sheer numbers of atrocities. And no, I'm not saying they're more important than other things—than fighting for the homeless, let's say. Anyone who has the calling should do what they need to

do. It's the people who say, 'Well, what about people?' who are always the ones doing nothing."

WALTZING IS A WEAPON

I've been telling my friends I'm working on a story about a guy who works for PETA, and these generally liberal people—they might prefer "progressive"—have generally done the same thing, which is to cluck their tongues and say things like, "Oh, those guys go *way* too far. They chase away more people than they attract."

That PETA, scary PETA, seems like an entirely different organization right now as we sit in the offices of Klasky Csupo—the folks who produce *Rugrats*—to check out a commercial they're producing for PETA. It features Dolly Parton singing as a mugging Kathy Najimy rushes to get home (the song suggests) to her man. It's a really cute and funny commercial and, as it turns out, Kathy is not rushing home to her man but to her dog. It's a soft reminder, aimed at kids, that animals have feelings, that they're worthy of our love and respect and should be treated thus. It's a gentle message, but one to grow on.

Mathews would be loath to admit that PETA is looking to soften its image. There are plenty of people and corporations, he says, that need to be "bashed on." He can tick off incredibly inhumane tales of cows skinned alive, sheep dumped alive into the ocean, and one circuitous dance of cruelty that involved not only the slaughter of rabbits but the recording of their screams as they were being slaughtered, so that it could be sold to hunters to lure predators, which they shoot, kill and mount on their walls.

But it's hard to fight that culture with people who have been raised to see that as the culture. The key, as McDonald's and Quiksilver will tell you, is to get to your target audience early, bring them along, educate them as they grow. Brand them. And much of PETA's efforts have been aimed at Gen-X and younger, he says, "because they're just forming" their eating and spending habits.

So, who knows, in the years to come Mathews may become the avuncular "Unky Dan" that kids grew up listening to and learning from about our friends the animals. But for adults these days he's still an unholy terror whose reputation precedes him. Last February, Pam Anderson invited him to Vienna to take part in the city's annual Opera Ball. But when folks there found out Mathews was appearing, cancellations rained down as women despaired of having something horrible thrown at their furs. It turned out that he really wanted to go to the ball, that he had taken dance lessons and faxed the organizers to assure them he had no intention of throwing red paint—or anything else.

"I plan to use waltzing as a weapon to charm the women out of their furs," he wrote.

"They were so scared of Dan," Anderson said. "They thought we were going to set rats loose and swing animals over our heads. I was like, 'Why would we do that? That would hurt the rats and the animal I'm swinging over my head.' People are just very afraid for no reason."

Well, come on: there *are* reasons and some of them involve red paint. And Mathews maintains that PETA will occasionally employ guerrilla tactics no matter how many kids join.

"Much of what we do is to attract young people, but we never set out to be a popular group or the biggest group," he said. "That's just happened. We see our role as that of the provocateur."

After the session at Klasky Csupo, we head over to the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

(GLAAD) to pick their brains. Mathews is impressed by that organization's ability to reach the media, how journalists, TV and film producers seek GLAAD's counsel when writing stories or scripts involving gays. He would like PETA to become a similar resource. He tells GLAAD's Nick Adams as much, and Adams tells him that he's always admired PETA's unremitting "rage."

Dining with Pam Anderson and her weapons of mass distraction

They talk about how to reach out, how to get past scaring people and help educate them. Somewhere in the conversation, Mathews says one of the things he's trying to get out to more media outlets and law enforcement departments is that most serial killers begin by torturing and killing animals. He tells of one example, a man who enjoyed putting live kittens on a barbecue. Adams turns his head in disgust and says, "I could never do your job." This from a man who deals with "Fags go to hell."

Adams suggests that Mathews move back to California to make and monitor industry relationships for PETA. But Mathews says he can only take LA for three days at a time. He does come out about twice a month, but he's just as likely to pick up Connie and head to Trinity Broadcast Network's headquarters in Costa Mesa and check out a Jesus movie in Sensaround: "The Jesus they have in that movie is so hot."

He lives in Norfolk, Virginia, where PETA relocated in 1996 and whose claim to fame is that it's home to the Atlantic fleet. Life in Norfolk would seem a horrible sentence for someone who hangs with the jet set, but Mathews says he prefers Norfolk, which he calls "civilized," adding that it's "fun to live in a Navy town in the age of 'Don't ask, don't tell.'" Still, after a trip to Amoeba Records in Hollywood to get gifts for Pam, he does admit that "one of the drawbacks to living in Hooterville is that there aren't any good record stores."

The truth is he's no more sophisticated than the folks of Norfolk, and says the reason he's excited to go to Vegas is that it's not only a chance to hang with Pam but that he loves trash. "I'm very low class. If it's a choice between Paris and Tulsa, frankly, I'll take Tulsa."

He offers as evidence the fact that the only thing for which he does not let his PETA life intrude—he missed his own 25th birthday to meet with a toothless cow skinner who gave him evidence of cattle being skinned alive—is that he schedules nothing between 7 and 8 p.m. on Saturdays so he can watch *Lawrence Welk*.

"I love it," he said. "It's like some freaky acid trip. I was watching one recently that was called 'Songs About Space,' and I swear, one of them involved Bobby and Cissy doing an interpretive dance to the theme from *Close Encounters* wearing gold-foil jumpsuits. It was like the whole country was having a revolution in the '60s, but you'd never know it from watching *Lawrence Welk*."

The best veggie burger he's ever eaten was at the Lawrence Welk Resort in Escondido.

HOW TO STUFF A LETTUCE BIKINI

So now, finally, we're at the private airport where we meet Ms. Anderson, who's a real nice kid if you've never had the pleasure. She has been an animal advocate since she was young, and, in fact, called PETA several times to do things for the organization before they took her up on it: "I said,

'Hi, I'm on a show called *Baywatch*, and I think I can do something for you.'

She and Mathews are flying to Vegas at the request of a new magazine celebrating its launch. They asked her to come; she said sure, if you cut PETA a check, and so, tonight, Mathews will accept a giant novelty check for \$10,000.

"I never feel like I'm doing enough," she says, and then remembers the rolls of posters depicting her wearing nothing but lettuce. Very little lettuce. She takes them out and laughs and Mathews laughs. He says that he read where someone said that Pam promoted PETA's cause by using her "weapons of mass distraction" and gestures toward her breasts like a model displaying a toaster on *The Price Is Right*.

Pam laughs and laughs.

"That's fantastic," she says. "Oh, I can't believe we didn't come up with that!"

"Don't worry," Mathews says, still laughing. "We'll pretend that we did."