

MISTER BLUE

Mister Blue first experienced Burning Man in 2001 as a volunteer at Recycle Camp. By 2002, he had become the project manager for the camp. At that time, he was running a lighting design business in the San Francisco Bay Area and was active in the medical marijuana movement. In 2005, he took on a full-time role as the facilities manager at the Burning Man headquarters in San Francisco.

Blue has always been passionate about using alternative energy sources at Burning Man. In 2004, he managed a biodiesel test at the Greeters station, and in 2006, he brought a 3,500-watt solar array to the Center Camp Café. During the “Green Man” year in 2007, Burning Man used B99 biodiesel in 87% of its generators and built a 35,000-watt solar array.

Since 2012, he has also worked as a waste stream logistics manager for The Transfer Station Authority (TSA), which he co-founded. Additionally, he has been responsible for the lighting design of the Man base since 2004.

This interview was conducted by “Flo”, Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2016. Most of Flo’s questions have been omitted to improve reading flow.



BLUE Way back in the beginning, the first role that I had was the project manager for Recycle camp. That role hasn’t changed really at all. There was a job description that I wrote up quite a long time ago. I don’t know if they still have it. I’m not sure that it exists anymore. The computer I wrote it on doesn’t exist anymore. [chuckles] A long time ago.



Blue doing Resto. Photo credit: Jessica The Hun. Year unknown.

FLO I’ve read that you wrote your current job description in 2004. Is that correct?

BLUE That’s a different one. 2004 was the job description for the facilities manager position or the facilities manager role at the Burning Man headquarters in San Francisco. It was probably 2005 when I wrote it. I started to spend some time at the headquarters in 2004, but it wasn’t until early spring of 2005 when I basically created that position for them.

FLO So, when did it all start? Can you go back to your first Burning Man? Because if I understood it correctly, you went your first year to Burning Man, and your second year to DPW, head of the Recycle Camp. Is that correct?

BLUE Well... sort of, not really. Recycle Camp’s not part of the DPW. But, other than that, that’s correct. So, I went to Burning Man for the first time in 2001. I was renting a room in a house in Oakland, California with a girl who had been to Burning Man one time before in 2000. She had been to Recycle Camp. She suggested that maybe I would enjoy that camp.

FLO Is that because you had already been invested in environmental—?

BLUE Nah. Other than running a lighting business in the Bay area and running a “green business” I guess. But people weren’t talking about green businesses in 1997 when I started managing a business that I bought with a friend of mine. But I managed the business to be as clean and efficient. And you know, we

“Way back in the beginning, the first role that I got was the project manager for Recycle camp.”

were in the Bay Area, so it wasn’t that out of place to be recycling things like that. But it was a lighting design company, so we’re using a lot of electricity just in the lighting design art that we were creating. So, as a company, we were always conscious of not wasting any energy, wasting anybody’s money, wasting anything really. So, that was always on my mind. Other than that, I wasn’t really doing anything regarding environmental issues or activism or anything like that other than... you know, supporting causes in different ways. I was a little more into medical marijuana at the time. If I was active in anything, I was active in medical marijuana.

FLO Because it was not legal yet in California at the time?

BLUE 1995 is when I moved to California. 1996 is when Proposition 215 was passed, when it became legal as medical marijuana in California. Only California though. If I was active in anything it was that at the time. But I definitely had it in my mind that whatever I was going to work on was going to include a concern for the environment.

FLO Ok, what did your lighting business exactly do to limit waste? Was it the lightbulb? Were you consuming less electricity? Was it the way you were organized?

BLUE It’s just using the right lighting technology; you create the same and or better lighting effects people wanted without using as much electricity. By technology I mean lightbulbs. Layman’s terms: you can save a lot of energy by properly sizing lightbulbs. And proper placement. Proper quantities. Using the right technology. Over time, certain other technologies would come into play. People would want to use them. Compact fluorescents and things like that. And now we’re into LEDs.

There are always people questioning whether the environmental cost to create the new technology is greater than the gain from using the technology. So, any time you’re talking about a technology there’s a transition period where you’re going to go from one type of technology to another type of technology. And... you have to get through that period of time where the cost is higher than that eventually things have a way of evening out and going the other direction. We’re seeing that with all kinds of things: wind power, solar power, you name it. Televisions. [chuckle] Everything’s cheaper now than it was before. You know, there’s a transition period for every technology.



Photo credit: It looks like a selfie by Blue. Year: 2017.

“using the right lighting technology; you create the same and or better lighting effects people wanted without using as much electricity”

FLO Did you ever do solar energy or no? On or off playa?

BLUE I mean, personally myself I haven't been heavily involved in solar, other than meeting people, learning about it and making connections. The DPW fuel station might have been the first part of Burning Man infrastructure that ran on solar power technically. But, in 2006 I helped bring a solar array to the Center Camp Café. It was 3,500 watts of solar panels mounted on top of a shade structure. The shade was the solar panels, and the power equipment was mounted right there, and we could walk underneath the solar panels and look at the different equipment. It showed you the power coming in and going out. It powered the spoken word stage at the Café where people did poetry and other presentations/performances. It only ran during the day, and it was a very small sound system, so it didn't require a lot of power. We were able to run a spoken word stage off the sun that year. That was in 2006.

In 2007, the Green Man year—

the theme was the Green Man for Burning Man—we built a 35,000-watt solar array to power the Man base pavilion and the neon on the Man. It didn't work 100% of the time. It wasn't 100% flawless. So, some challenges to try and do that. Many challenges to create that size of a solar array out in the desert in the time that we had. But, out of that, the solar array that was on the Playa in 2007 is here in Gerlach. It's right over by the Community center. That was the very first solar array of Black Rock Solar. It was the beginnings of the entity known as Black Rock Solar, the nonprofit. That was because there were several of us, me included, that thought that it would be extremely inefficient to drive all those solar panels all the way out here and then turn around and drive them all the way back somewhere. There had to be some way to use them out here permanently, and so other people got involved with finding the funding to make that happen.

I wasn't involved with the actual installation because I worked full time at Burning Man headquarters, and I was back in San Francisco. But one might say it wouldn't be there if it wasn't for me, and there's a few other people. If it wasn't for all of us, it wouldn't be there. First we had to get it out to the Playa to use at the event. It was because we got that to happen that we also decided we needed to figure out what to do with it once it's out here. Should it go to the Work Ranch, or should it go, you know, somewhere in town or something.

The idea of trucking them back to Reno or wherever they came from, you know, didn't make any sense at all. It seemed like the amount of energy it cost to truck them out and truck them back we might as well not have used them in the first place. There'd be no savings. There'd be no reason to do it. Which, you know, is

part of the challenge with Burning Man, it's a short period of time really.

It's long for those of us who spend three months to do it, but it's pretty much a short period of time that you're actually out there doing the event. To replace all of the power that we're generating with old generators, using alternative sources such as solar and wind, the quantities that we're talking about are not really doable. Now, you could change that reality by demanding and requiring less energy. But, you know, as long as we're requiring the amount of energy, we require to do the event, you're not replacing it with solar and wind anytime soon. For some reason it never took off at the Center camp Café.

The first time we ever ran a bio-diesel generator at Burning Man was in 2004. It was a test I did at the greeters station. It worked great. Unfortunately, the company that I worked with didn't do what I asked

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Blue (left) and Coyote (right). Probably at Last Supper. Photo credit: Unknown, 2016.

them to do, which was change the oil at the end of the event. Simple request. They chose not to do it.

Two weeks after the Burning Man event, someone else rented the same generator. There was a problem with the generator. They blamed it on the biodiesel. Which, you know, that's what people are going to do: blame the thing that they don't understand instead of the fact that they didn't change the oil. So, there's no way to know for sure. Had they changed the oil, we might not have had any problems whatsoever and then no one would be able to say anything. In 2005 we didn't do anything with biodiesel.

In 2006 though, we were trying biodiesel again. Working with a new company, Kolar Power Rental, that was dedicated and interested in using biodiesel. We contracted with them for five generators at Burning Man—three event infrastructure

generators & two theme camps. Then in 2007, we actually worked with Kolar Power Rental completely: 87% of the generators in the Burning Man infrastructure were running on biodiesel. In 2008, it all stopped again.

2004, 2006, and 2007: they were the only years that Burning Man has used biofuels.

FLO So, coming back to... your first involvement with Burning Man...

BLUE I was volunteer project manager for Recycle camp starting in 2002. I don't know whether they considered me an employee or not in 2004. I worked for a month and a half in 2004. In the office. And then I started again in 2005, and early 2005 is when I started working full time in the San Francisco office.

I'd already been DPW since 2002. But that was because of a job called

Transpo between San Francisco and Nevada. In 2002, 2003, 2004 I did it as a contract job for the DPW. They paid me as a contractor to manage the trucking between Nevada and the Bay Area. I still manage that process, only it's not a DPW role anymore. It's part of my full-time position in what's called the Admin & Facilities Department.

My job is facilities manager. We have a 26,000 square foot facility and I manage the facility with the office manager. We have 2 assistants and everything you can think of to keep an office running. You have to keep copiers running, you have to keep paper ordered, supplies for the restrooms. The lightbulbs working...I manage contracts with vendors like the office cleaning service. There's nothing that exciting about being a facilities manager for any company, really. But there isn't any company that can run without



Blue at the DPW Parade. Photo credit: Stephen Chun. Year: 2015.

“in 2007, 87% of the generators at Burning Man were running out of biodiesel.”

someone doing the work. So, either the owner of the company is doing it, or they hire someone. Before me it was one of the owners of Burning Man who was in charge of the facility, and that was Danger Ranger. Danger Ranger wanted to step away and I happened to be there and saw an opportunity.

FLO So, you are the facilities manager in the San Francisco office, and then you are also, I understood, managing the trucks, that are going back and forth. And then you also are the head of TSA, which is the Transfer Station Authority. Would you like to tell me you about this part of your job? The TSA?

BLUE The Transfer Station Authority is something that started as staff recycling. The recycling collections started in 2002 because I was the project manager of Recycle Camp, and the project manager of trucking between the Bay Area and Nevada. I took it upon myself to take recyclables from staff camps that were not aluminum cans. All the aluminum cans went to Recycle camp. I took all the other recycling, put it in the trucks that were driving back to the Bay Area, and put the recyclables in the recycle bins at the Burning Man headquarters.

FLO So, it was just you by yourself driving trucks?

BLUE Yeah. In 2002, 2003, and 2004. '05. '06. '07. '08. '09. '10. And '11. I mean in the beginning there were only a few bags. The few bags turned into quite a few bags, which turned into crates. Then I went from big, large wooden crates to big white sacks—aka super-sacks—which we're still using today in places to collect aluminum cans and plastic bottles. And then from there I went to collecting the recyclables in dumpsters. Big 30 cubic yard dumpsters. For instance, Recycle camp takes aluminum cans from participants, in the beginning we were collecting the aluminum cans in burlap bags, which coffee beans come in. And when I took over the camp there was about 250 of these coffee bags worth of aluminum. Now we're probably talking over 2,000 of those coffee bags worth. A few years ago, we were filling one dumpster, then it grew to two, now we're up to three. And that's only at Recycle camp. Recycle Camp is separate from the TSA.

FLO What do you think about this part of the job which is education on sorting your trash. Because when I talked to people that were doing TSA, for example, TSA collection, they were telling me this is a huge part of their work to educate people, to show them where to put their trash and how to sort them. Would you have any position on that?

BLUE [chuckles] Well, there are always going to be people that argue that there's plenty of room in the United States to build landfills: that we shouldn't be worried about it. Then there are people that want to argue that landfills will be the energy source of the future, we'll be mining them. We'll be extracting all the resources out of the landfills and creating electricity using incinerators. So, like I say, there are people who will argue against sorting anything. There are

certainly people who have already expressed confusion as to why we sort recyclables where in some places we're actually commingling recycling. Which, you know, if any one of them want to step up and take my job from me that'd be great. If they want to just criticize things, they can just stop. But if they think they can do what I'm doing better, they can take it over anytime.

I'm not really interested in trying to explain why I do what I do. It makes perfect sense to me, and I don't really need to explain it to anybody. We sort it because it's the right way to do it. Again, you can do things the right way or you can do things the wrong way. It's always easier to do things the wrong way. Almost always. In the long run, it's not less expensive. There are so many costs that people don't understand when they do things the wrong way. In the long run, it doesn't take less time because you're going to end up doing— I mean, somebody's sorting it somewhere. Or the entire system is doing in wrong which... the fact of the matter is that all these materials are resources, not garbage, not waste, not trash. They're not whatever all these words people use that are not correct. They're actually resources that need to be recovered, recycled and reused. Aluminum cans are extremely important to recycle. The energy difference between creating aluminum can from raw materials vs. from recycling it is like 95% more energy. So... people can argue all they want. I've done enough research, I'm not the only one that thinks this.

FLO We can definitely tell that you have a way of transmitting this to people. So how do you explain to the crews? How do you describe the work they have to do?

BLUE That's not the job that I do so much, other than lead by example [at TSA]. The part that I'm doing



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is managing the contracts and schedules with the haulers, the people who bring us the dumpsters and take the materials away. I have three crew managers I support who manage the crews and do all the training. I really haven't had to teach anybody for some time now. I just hire the right managers, typically promoting someone, and they come already knowing what to do.

In fact, they come wanting to and knowing how to do it better than I would ever have asked anybody to do in the first place. All I wanted people to do was separate aluminum cans from plastic bottles from steel cans from glass bottles, etc.

And then we started diverting compostables and organics at the commissary. Everything else goes in the landfill. That's all that I asked for people to do. The people that have decided to be a part of the TSA, the Transportation Station Authority, are just wild and crazy about sorting trash and separating these resources, you know?

I'm still confused as to why everybody [else] is still confused and why everybody thinks this is rocket-science, or difficult, or these are hard to grasp concepts. Aluminum, glass, plastic, steel, compost, landfill. It's really not that hard! We're out here in the middle of nowhere so we have issue with certain things like small paper, small pieces of wood and sawdust and so we have to consider burnable vs. compostable vs. landfill. If it's compostable then there is no question, compost it. If it is something we can just burn—because I'm not sure if it makes any difference really—then burn it. The amount of what we call burnables is so little that in the big scheme of things it really wouldn't matter if we just landfilled it all. In fact, I won't go into it too much, but we've had a lot of burnables that ended up getting landfilled because people didn't burn it.

Like I say, for me there's only so much education that people want. There are so many bigger, more important things to go educate yourself about. This is so simple. I really don't understand why people don't get it. That's where I'm at, so I'm not really the best person to educate people, because I don't think this is something that requires much education. Others think education is very important. Signage and this and that. So, you have to play the game a little bit. But again, fortunately, I have other people that do that work mostly for me. I mean, I do it at higher levels. I do it at staff meetings

because I'm the one that's there, at the meeting, representing TSA. Someone has to do it.

FLO What about the compost?

BLUE We've been separating and collecting compostables and organic food waste at the commissary since 2007. We have been sending our materials to a commercial composting facility. But like anything else, one of the biggest challenges with regards to creating compost, like recycling other materials, there has to be a market for it. If nobody's buying the end result of the compost they process at the compost facility, then they have no incentive to create the compost. So, that's one of the biggest challenges I found when I started working with compost facilities. I thought there were plenty of people that wanted to buy the material at the end, and I would be giving them very valuable materials for them to turn into compost that is even more valuable. Ah, it's the opposite of that. There aren't that many people buying it and they can't



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Blue doing Resto. Photo credit: unknown, 2016.



Blue working on the Man's lighting design. Photo credit: Gogo Bernhard. Year: 2012.

sell enough of it to actually cover the cost of processing it. We have to pay a tipping fee to the compost facility, in addition to the dumpster and transportation costs. So it is actually costing more money to take this material to the compost facility than it is to take the same amount of waste to the landfill. Which is why a lot of people would rather just throw it away to the landfill. Why do we spend more money to get rid of it?

The only real challenge that we have with collecting compostable, organic materials and food waste on the Playa, is it creates a lot of liquid. And the liquid wants to leak out of the

dumpsters onto the ground. Every year we're trying to figure out ways to combat the liquid. To be honest, I think I've figured out the best way: don't fight it. Have a containment for it. Collect it. We have a vendor that can come and make it go away. You know, the same people that service the porta-potties can make this liquid go away. So, there's no reason for us to fight it while we're out there for the month that we're there. We should just accept it as part of reality. Make sure that we have a containment for it, and then use the resources that are available for us to make it go away. It just goes off with the wastewater that has to go back to

wastewater treatment facility in the Reno area anyway. No big deal.

FLO Do you know where the collection boxes go afterwards?

BLUE Unfortunately, I don't get to know that for sure. I'm working on that. I suppose that's maybe my only other challenge after this year is I'm trying to figure out how I can get the vendors to be more accountable to all the materials once they leave the Playa. So I can know where things are going and that they're going to the right places. Because after all, that's what I'm paying them to do, actually transport all the stuff from

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one place to the other and I don't have any way to know that it actually happened.

FLO So then, during the event, I guess you're focusing on either TSA or the lighting of the Man. Did you participate in the lighting of the Man this year?

BLUE Yeah, this is my 13th year managing the lighting crew for the Man base. It's an extremely challenging project, one that I'm on the verge of leaving because of the challenge that is created by the mismanagement of the whole project itself. But I don't really want to dwell on that part. You know, there's also the possibility of great change between last year, this year and next year. So, you know, anything's possible.

FLO So, I went to an Earth Guardians tour at some point, and they took us to the Recycle camp and they took us to the Alternative Energy Zone (AEZ) camp, and that was meant to show us the solar panel activities and also how they were managing the greywater. So, I was thinking about those two camps, and I wanted to know if you know AEZ at all or if you were related to them at some point?

BLUE No. I don't have any connection really with the AEZ. They've been around longer than I've been around. They were on the Playa when I went my first year. They're a group of people that choose to run their camp without any generators and they have a lot of lights and lot of things going on, and they do it all using alternative energies. I mean, to a certain degree they're proof that every camp can do it. I didn't even mention this earlier: in 2007, the same year we were doing the Green Man theme and the 30,000-watt solar to run the Man base, I met some electricians from Las Vegas who had a small solar generator on a trailer.

A 3,000-watt solar array on a trailer with charge controller, batteries and inverter. They brought it to Recycle camp and we ran Recycle camp for the entire event week with this solar generator.

Yes, we used the grid for power to set up the camp and then once we were done setting up the camp we ran our camp the entire week off of the sun. At that time I lived in a really small little RV that did not have air conditioning or anything, and everyone else lived in tents. Then it went away at the end of the event and we used the grid for striking the camp. Plenty of times over the years it's been proven it can be done. Anyone can go out to Burning Man and do that. People go out for the entire week without a generator. In fact, tens of thousands of people do it every year. So, there's nothing new about any of it. That's the fascinating thing to me is that so many people think that there's something new to talk about. There's nothing new to talk about. It's all been talked about, it's all possible.

FLO Do you think that the DPW sub-culture is compatible with going towards a more sustainable Burning Man?

BLUE DPW culture has the potential. The whole Burning Man culture has the potential, but it has less to do with the culture unless we agree that the culture is the people. It has to do with the people. It all has to do with the people. Nothing will happen if the people don't want it to happen.

The thing is that probably the #1 challenge to being a sustainable anything, is that we're a temporary everything. If we want the event to be a more sustainable event, it's about doing it right. That's the simplest way of looking at it. When I say doing it right, what I mean is, with every single part of what we do, we can

look at how we're doing it, and ask ourselves, are we doing this right? Is there a better way to do this? Do we need to be doing this at all? And maybe we will agree that one day we will not be able to use diesel fuel if we want to actually be sustainable.

I think the most difficult thing is to agree on what the word sustainable means. Technically the Burning Man Project and the Burning Man Event will never be sustainable if the definition is; "We don't require any outside inputs, we can do everything we're doing because we're creating all of our inputs to our process and we're taking care of all of the outputs from our process. In fact, we're putting them back into our process." That's being sustainable.

So, let's not kid ourselves and pretend we're actually going to be that! Unless we're going to rewrite the entire mission of the Burning Man Project as a sustainable organization, it's about doing things in as sustainable a manner as possible. It's about looking at each of the different parts of what we do and asking how best can we do this part. That's like... that's really as close as you're going to be able to get. It's like the city of San Francisco saying that it's going to be a zero-waste city by the year 2020. I hate to say it, but that's probably not going to happen by the year 2020. It may never happen. It isn't about actually being a zero-waste city or being 100% zero waste. It's about having a goal to work towards and looking at the way you're doing something and seeing if it's in alignment with that goal. And many who are confused may think that people like myself believe there's a magical path to sustainability. No, I'm the first person to say none of this is magic. It requires determination, setting intentions, doing the hard work, and following through.

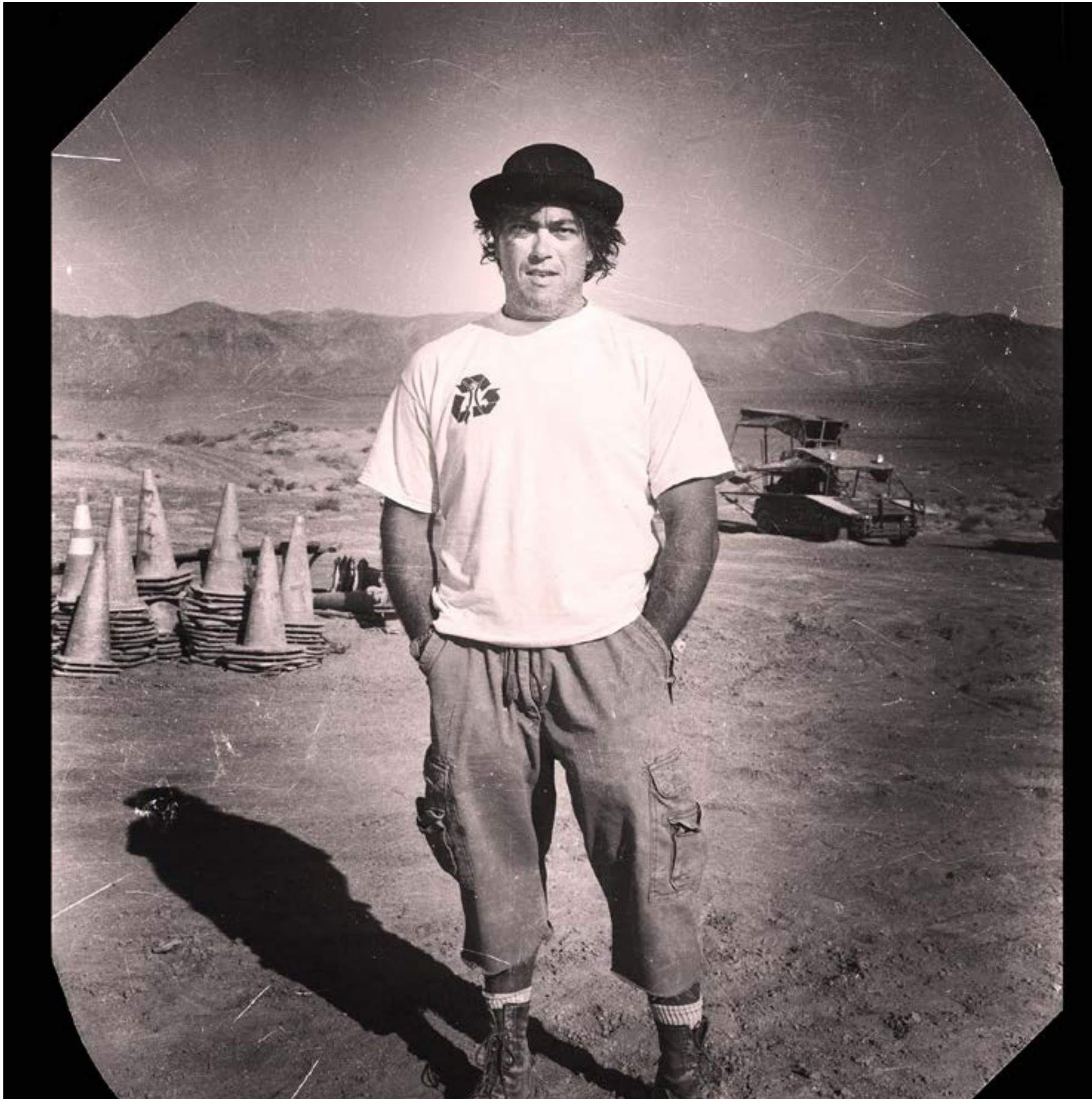


Photo credit: Michael Garlington. Year: Unknown.

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