

A big wheel in L.A.'s bike world

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L.A. bicycle activist Joe Linton with one of LA Eco-Village's non-cycling residents.

If there's a geographic birthplace for Los Angeles' burgeoning bicycle culture, it's [Eco-Village](#), the cooperative living compound tucked away on an East Hollywood side street and home to many of the activists who over the past 15 years have sparked an improbable cycling revolution in this most car-loving of cities.

And if you're looking for someone who was there for the birth and has remained a leading voice through the movement's sometimes challenging adolescent years, meet Joe Linton, the affable, versatile and endlessly energetic community organizer—and longtime Eco-Villager—who's on a mission to humanize L.A.'s streets, one lane, path and policy at a time.

Linton, along with a handful of other bicycle pioneers, has played a seminal role in Los Angeles' ongoing transportation transformation—with the most visible and exuberant public manifestation of their years of work coming this Sunday, October 9, in the form of [CicLAvia](#), in which 10 miles of city streets will go car-free for a freewheeling street festival/bike excursion/urban explorathon that's expected to draw 100,000 participants.

Sunday's CicLAvia, the third in what Linton and others hope will eventually become a far more frequent facet of Los Angeles street life, runs from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on a route that stretches from Hel-Mel (the Heliotrope Drive and Melrose Avenue neighborhood that's home to the community-christened [Bicycle District](#)) to Hollenbeck Park in East L.A. New spurs will extend the route north for the first time to [El Pueblo de Los Angeles](#) and south as far as the [African American Firefighter Museum](#). (A route map and directions are [here](#). Information on getting there via Metro

—and navigating all the bus detours—is [here](#).)

And Linton will be, as he has for so many of L.A.’s big moments in cycling, right in the thick of it. As a fulltime consultant to the event, he’ll be helping to deploy an army of some 400 CicLAvia volunteers (and he’s still on the lookout for more. Click here to [sign up](#).) He’ll probably also jump in to serve as a “route angel,” assisting with simple bike repairs along the way. And leading up the event, he’s been blogging about what’s in store, from [street chess to dodge ball to Balinese gamelan music](#), along with colorful overviews of what the new route will offer to the [south](#) and [north](#).

Linton’s CicLAvia portfolio, mingling big picture vision and in-the-trenches hard work, reflects his multifaceted approach to activism. Not only did he co-found the [Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition](#)—the influential bike advocacy organization that helped shape the city’s recently-adopted [Bike Plan](#)—he also designed the organization’s first T-shirt. In addition, he’s worked for [C.I.C.L.E.](#), another prominent L.A. bike group.



Lois Arkin, founder of LA Eco-Village

Linton doesn’t look like a stereotypical cycling fanatic. On a recent morning in Eco-Village and the nearby Bicycle District, he wears the local equivalent of business casual—black polo shirt and khakis (although it must be noted that in his case the khakis are shorts.) He smiles often as he runs into fellow activists, and is candid about how far L.A.’s cycling movement has come—and how far it still has to travel.

“Some weeks I feel like we’re finally changing,” he says, “and some weeks I feel like ‘Oh man, they’re up to the same old tricks that they said they wouldn’t do.’”

Overall, he seems to be a glass-half-full kind of guy. A vigilant monitor of how government agencies follow through on their commitments—he’s [watching the progress](#) of the city’s bike plan closely—he also sees the importance of selling his fellow Angelenos on the notion that making streets friendlier for cyclists will improve everyone’s quality of life.

Thus, no car-hating here: “I don’t think we need to fight against cars. I think we need to promote fun, wonderful alternatives and the cars will gradually fade away. We’ll still use them for things that we really need them for but I think they’ll be less and less in demand.”

He shrugs off being called a “founding father” of the movement—“I think I am just one of many folks who are working hard on this”—but it’s hard to find anyone who’s contributed more, or longer.

So how’d a fellow from suburban Orange County end up helping to rewrite the rules of the road in one of the largest and most vehicle-entrenched cities on earth?

Well, like the best bike paths, Linton’s route has had some interesting curves in it.

Linton, now 48, grew up in Tustin and remembers riding his bike all over, including to the ocean by way of the [Santa Ana River Trail](#). A visual [artist](#) and [author](#) as well as a cyclist, he studied biochemistry at Occidental College but “got politicized” and left the pre-med track. He lived and worked for a time in Long Beach, ditched his car, moved to L.A. and got a job as a systems analyst at Children’s Hospital. At the same time, he plunged into the world of activism, notably on behalf of [Friends of the L.A. River](#).

By 1996, he was living at Eco-Village, where the [Bicycle Kitchen](#), the non-profit bike repair organization that would also become a major player in L.A.’s cycling evolution, was born in the compound’s actual kitchen. Before long, he

was a fulltime activist.

Talk about being in the right place at the right time.

“We like to consider LA Eco-Village as the center of bicycle culture in L.A.,” says Lois Arkin, Eco-Village’s founder, who on a recent morning was strolling along a shady back path at the compound, a basket of just-harvested guavas on her arm. “It all emanated from here. This is where it all started.”

You can see why. With its backyard composting, potluck dinners, bicycle room, solar dryer (read: clothes line) and egg-laying hens, Eco-Village is a full-on green living demonstration incongruously come to life right behind a bustling Vermont Avenue strip mall complete with Little Caesars and KFC. The buildings will soon be owned by a residents’ cooperative and the land held by a community trust, to ensure that the same mix of very-low-to-middle-income residents can always live there, Arkin says.



Linton and others welded together cast-off bike parts to create this fence.

It’s the kind of place that gives a \$20-a-month rent discount to residents who don’t own a car. Where else would L.A.’s bicycle revolution begin? Arkin credits Linton and other residents such as Ron Milam, who with Linton co-founded the bicycle coalition, and [Bobby Gadda](#), who helped import the CicLAvia concept from Bogotá and now serves as its [board president](#) (as well as one of Eco-Village’s resident beekeepers.)

There’s a lot riding on their efforts—and on CicLAvia, Arkin says: “The big goal for Angelenos is for us to overcome our stereotype and our stereotype is that we’re car-centric. We simply need to transcend our stereotype. That may give the whole world hope and more optimism.”

Nearby, the Bicycle District stands as an example of transcended stereotypes. As traffic buzzes by on Melrose, this stretch of Heliotrope is buzzing in its own way. Bicycles and a few cars line a walkable block that’s home to an organic coffeehouse, hip eyeglass boutique and Scoops ice cream shop, as well as the Orange 20 Bikes store and the nonprofit Bicycle Kitchen, which has relocated from Eco-Village’s kitchen to its own storefront. (The original kitchen’s now a food co-op.)

“I always describe this as our slice of Portland,” says Matt Ruscigno, a public health consultant specializing in vegan nutrition. “This is phenomenal. I mean, look at all these bikes.”

And everybody, it seems, knows Linton.

“A lot of bike energy is concentrated here,” Linton says. “It’s way cooler today than it was in the ‘90s.”

As if to prove his point, up rolls Kelly Martin, “operations facilitator” at the Bicycle Kitchen. As she takes off her bicycle helmet and opens the door, she and Linton reflect on CicLAvia’s bigger meaning.

“What CicLAvia does is it slows L.A. down to the pace of a cyclist or a walker,” Martin says.

“It’s a democratization of public space,” Linton agrees. “If you take the cars away, it becomes a really egalitarian space.”

On this morning, less than a week before CicLAvia, he’s pushing a simple message: “I think a healthy city gives

people options. You should have choices for trips, and you use the one that works for you.” (In this part of town, though, it’s clear that going without a car is a badge of honor, with people exchanging their number of car-free years as easily as their phone numbers. Linton’s number is 20. He bikes just about everywhere, although he travels by foot and public transit a fair amount, too.)

Nearby, Ron Milam, Linton’s bicycle coalition co-founder who now has his own consulting practice, sits at one of Cafecito Organico’s sidewalk tables. He takes a few minutes to reminisce about the early days, and victories like bike lanes on Silver Lake and Venice boulevards, and getting Metro to increase its funding for cycling and pedestrian projects.

“Of anybody, Joe put the most time and energy into it,” Milam says, recalling that while others debated whether a bike coalition was needed in L.A. County, “Joe said, ‘Absolutely, let’s do this!’ ”

When that can-do spirit hits the streets Sunday, CicLAvia participants are likely to experience something fresh, whether they traverse the route on two wheels, or two feet.

“Cyclists and pedestrians can share spaces,” Linton says. “They do it all over the world; they do it all over L.A. That’s what makes cities great. We all need to enter the mix and be respectful.”



Here’s how they rolled—and strolled—in the Bicycle District during the last CicLAvia in April/Flickr photo by ubrayj02

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