

Bring Me the Head of Cheech and Chong
Richard Gehr

*I work and I sleep and I dance and I'm dead
I'm eatin', I'm laughin', and I'm lovin' myself
I never watch TV except when I'm stoned
Like humans do*

– David Byrne, "Like Humans Do"

Considering how the use of marijuana is portrayed in popular culture, it's curious that anyone would be inclined to try it in the first place. Marijuana's widespread appeal seemed promising during the sixties, when it reached a tipping point on the strength of its primary marketing medium: music. But something odd began to happen nearly as soon as marijuana began saturating mass culture through movies and TV. Cannabis was no longer regarded as the botanical muse of poets, artists, and Louis Armstrong. Instead, it became inextricably entwined with a sort of naïve and docile idiocy that persists today. As Otto the busdriver inquires between bong hits as Springfield erupts around him in *The Simpsons Movie*, "Hey, what's going on?"

Cannabis of course enjoys a venerable millennia-long history of benevolent consumption in much of the world. In India, for example, *bhanga* (or *ganja*) was closely associated with the long-haired, musically inclined deity Shiva, a benevolent cosmic dancer, devoted husband, and responsible parent known as the Lord of Bhang. In the fifth century BC, the Greek philosopher Democritus described a group of magical plants including *gelotophyllis*, or "laughing leaves." Cannabis was taken quite seriously among Islamic Sufis but has at least as often been a vehicle for pleasure (or "entertainment insurance," as a friend refers to it during his pre-cinema tokes).

Inspired by Thomas de Quincy's *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, Charles Baudelaire published one of the earlier and better-researched characterizations of the cannabis experience in his 1860 book *Les Paradis Artificiels*: "At first, a certain absurd, irresistible hilarity overcomes you. The most ordinary words, the simplest ideas assume a new and bizarre aspect. This mirth is intolerable to you; but it is useless to resist. The demon has invaded you..." A century before Bob Dylan turned on the Beatles, Dr. Jacques-Joseph Moreau was providing cannabis to hep French writers including Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, Honoré de Balzac, Alexandre Dumas, Gerard de Nerval, and other members of his Hashish Club.

Marijuana first slipped into America's popular consciousness through jazz musicians. "Jazz was born in a whiskey barrel, grew up on marijuana, and is about to expire on heroin," clarinetist Artie Shaw is said to have declared during the fifties. Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, and Charlie Parker were among the countless jazzmen enamored of cannabis, which, like the music itself, came up the river from New Orleans, where it was known as *moot* or *muggles*. The herb's most public advocate among the jazz community was probably Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow, a self-styled "voluntary negro" who moved to Harlem from Chicago in 1929. With marijuana, Mezzrow wrote in his autobiography *Really the Blues*, "I began to feel very happy and sure of myself. With my loaded horn I could take all the fist-swinging, evil things in the world and bring them

together in perfect harmony, spreading peace and joy and relaxation to all the keyed-up and punchy people everywhere. I began to preach my milleniums on the horn, leading all the sinners to glory."

The thirties were an especially ambivalent time to be an American pothead. Songs like Armstrong's "Muggles", Sidney Bechet's "Viper Mad," Cab Calloway's "That Funny Reefer Man", Fats Waller's "Reefer Song," and Benny Goodman's "Texas Tea Party" and "Sweet Marihuana Brown" linked cannabis to a slightly naughty sort of good, clean fun. At the same time, fear-mongers such as Federal Bureau of Narcotics Commissioner Harry Anslinger were ginning up the evidence to link cannabis to barbarity, madness, and illegal Mexicans. The 1936 propaganda film *Tell Your Children* was funded by a church group and linked marijuana use to manslaughter, rape, and suicide. *Tell Your Children* did a brisk business on the exploitation circuit after it was retitled *Reefer Madness* and even brisker biz when it was rediscovered in the Library of Congress in 1971 by NORML founder Keith Stroup, who introduced it to college and cult-film audiences. Anslinger's anti-marijuana crusade prevailed in 1937, when marijuana was prohibited on a federal level.

Speed more than cannabis informed the beat experience, although Jack Kerouac reportedly wrote his magical *Dr. Sax* (earlier titled *A Novella of Children and Evil*, *The Myth of the Rainy Night*) in William Burroughs's Mexico City bathroom in 1952 on a combination of marijuana and morphine. The beats collided with the nascent hippie population during the 1965 "acid tests" Ken Kesey hosted in the hills of La Honda, California. The Grateful Dead, in their relatively short-lived earlier Warlocks incarnation, provided improvised music. Marijuana, which Terence McKenna considered a "subliminal psychedelic," was ubiquitous in sixties bohemia, yet overshadowed by its more potent tryptamine and phenethylamine associates: LSD, psilocybin mushrooms, and mescaline. The well-chronicled "revolution in the head" that took place over the next few years, however, mainstreamed cannabis as the world's second most popular inebriant, after alcohol.

Cannabis and comedy's special affiliation flourished in clubs across the country. San Francisco's brilliant Firesign Theatre, comedy's Beatles, released their first album, *Waiting for the Electrician or Someone Like Him* in 1968. Firesign's genius involved blending the free-associative techniques of "The Goon Show" (a fifties British radio program starring Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan) with the improvisatory splendor of contemporary San Francisco music, as refracted through skeptical hipster spectacles. Marijuana's personality traits include loopy associations, paranoid fantasias, and bad puns, all hallmarks of the Firesign Theatre experience. Their 1970 masterpiece, *Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers* (the title references roach disposal and, according to the liner notes, replaced *We'll be Heironymus Bosch in Jest a Minute, but Faust...*) consists of a dense and complex recreation of the interior processes of George Leroy Tirebiter. Objectivity and subjectivity dissolve into a puntastic word stew as he watches TV in a bleak, media-saturated, subliminally fascist, consumer-driven America not unlike our own. Dystopia has never been quite so hilarious.

Not unlike how sixties stoner music devolved into heavy metal, or "stoner rock" as one of its variants is known in Europe, sixties stoner comedy begot less-than-lovable knuckleheads Cheech and Chong, who released their eponymous first album in 1972. The first track on their album ridicules an elderly blues musician named Blind Baby Chitlin'.

Their comedy was pretty standard fare, except when Robert "Cheech" Marin and Tommy Chong stepped into their respective wild Mexican stoner and burned-out-hippie personas. The pair would undoubtedly argue that they were mocking the stereotypes used by the likes of Harry Anslinger to discredit marijuana as shiftless Mexicans in the thirties. But there is a mirthless side to their shtick that never precisely transcended or inverted those stereotypes. Cheech and Chong's albums and stand-up routines led to a series of successful movies, beginning with 1978's *Up in Smoke* ("Smoke it up. Let's get Chinese eyes"), in which the pair try and fail to gain a foothold in straight society, primarily because they are fools ("You mean we're smoking dogshit, man?"). Although they've been compared to Laurel & Hardy, Martin & Lewis, and Abbott & Costello, Cheech & Chong have less to do with their comic predecessors than the subsequent legion of bong-hit buddies they quadruple-handedly spawned.

As Peter Biskind chronicled in his 1998 book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-and-Drugs Generation Saved Hollywood*, the late sixties and early seventies were also a robust era for ambitious mainstream filmmaking. Released in 1967, *The Trip* was a classic exploitation vehicle starring Peter Fonda and directed by Roger Corman (with B-reel footage directed by Dennis Hopper) from a script written by Jack Nicholson. Replete with hot Santa Cruz blondes and cheesy special effects, and better than it had any right to be, *The Trip* enjoyed modest success and paved the way for 1969's *Easy Rider*, directed by Hopper and starring Hopper and Fonda. *Easy Rider's* LSD scene, shot in New Orleans during Mardi Gras, nearly derailed the film from the get-go. The film, which eventually had to be rescued from the volatile Hopper and edited behind his back, contained a jewel of a scene involving Fonda, Hopper, and Nicholson (who played an alcoholic ACLU lawyer) sharing an ostensible real joint around a campfire. Nicholson's stoned monologue about Venusians "livin' and workin' amongst us in vast quantities ever since 1946," made him a star.

Not unlike film itself, cannabis often seems to synthesize dreaming and waking states. Director Robert Altman (who "took to grass like a guernsey," according to Biskind) did this especially well in his films such as *The Long Goodbye*, in which Elliot Gould portrayed Philip Marlowe, a forties-era private dick displaced to swinging early-seventies Los Angeles; *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, whose conclusion suggests the whole movie was nothing but a pipe dream; and *Jazz '34: Remembrances of Kansas City Swing*, Altman's smoky intimate imagining of a Depression-era jam session in his hometown. Altman's famously improvisational directing style would also appear to be rooted in his passion for jazz.

A list of some of the more popular stoner movies of the past couple of decades would have to include Amy Heckerling's *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused*, the Coen brothers' *The Big Lebowski*, Stephen Gyllenhaal's *Homegrown*, and Kelly Reichardt's *Old Joy*, all of which ignite artistically. *Fast Times* and *Dazed* are teen movies that transcend the subgenre. Cannabis is used in both as a fact adolescent life and to critique users' respective milieus. "Look at this nothing town," moans *Dazed's* central character from a hillside after a night of heavy smoking. *Lebowski* celebrates slacker absurdity through the larger-than-life Dude. *Homegrown* is a well-acted comic thriller set among the marijuana fields of Northern California. And a strange sort of slacker Zen is achieved in the modestly magnificent *Old Joy*, a buddy movie in which a couple of old friends go on a camping trip and get high.

Nothing much happens, but the screen nearly implodes with everything left undone and unsaid between them.

In the marketplace, however, stoner buddy movies celebrating loutish behavior have unfortunately prevailed over more loose-limbed, political, and poetic examples of cannabis's cultural profile. Marijuana is obviously no panacea or magic bullet for what ails either individuals or society at large. And yet, as David Lerner wrote in *On Drugs*, "the protean cannabis high varies so much according to the cultural and individual construction of users that it is necessary to conclude that it is its potential for allowing the user to escape the consumerist worldview that must be interdicted. The specter of a recent counterculture of mass contemplation must be somehow unremembered." Unfortunately, most stoner movies, and countless pro-marijuana anthems generated by the hip-hop industry, portray the plant as merely another commodity, like alcohol.

So another list would include such examples of adolescent bong porn as *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*, *Half Baked*, *Grandma's Boy*, *How High*, *The Stoned Age*, *Puff Puff Pass*, and *Dude, Where's My Car?* Like *Easy Rider* no less than *Up in Smoke*, these movies feature misfits with a mission. More recently, though, these thin-soup quests involve tracking down the perfect junk food, chasing girls, locating even more pot, busting a buddy out of jail, or finding some dude's car.

On television, the premium-cable sector has opened up promising outlets for a new generation of easy riders. HBO series such as David Chase's "The Sopranos," Alan Ball's "Six Feet Under," and David Milch's "Deadwood" and "John From Cincinnati" exist somewhere between art movies and psychedelic soap operas. Closer to the *Raging Bull* school, "The Sopranos" existed in a criminal demimonde in which the absence of cannabis was itself notable. However, a variety of substances were used naturally, casually, and sometimes as plot devices in "Six Feet Under." (In Ball's film *American Beauty*, Kevin Spacey played a depressed suburbanite who escapes from his cage with the help of his dealer-neighbor's product.) David Milch's "Deadwood" was the opiated heir to *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, with characters often delivering Shakespearean soliloquies revealing increasingly deeper psychological levels. And in "John From Cincinnati"'s ten pre-cancellation episodes, a group of Southern California surfers (likely inspired at least in part by the Brotherhood of Eternal Love, a community of Laguna Beach surfers who distributed vast quantities of Orange Sunshine LSD during the late sixties) are offered otherworldly salvation and redemption via what Milch has referred to as "waves of association."

The Cheech and Chong mentality even persists in Showtime's "Weeds," strangely enough. The show's premise—Nancy, a hot suburban widow played by Mary-Louise Parker, resorts to dealing pot in order to pay the mortgage and maid—seemed promising. "Weeds" smokers themselves (e.g. her brother-in-law, best friend's husband, and accountant), though, are mostly portrayed as functioning adults who use cannabis to tether themselves to their inner wasters. Nancy herself eschews pot due to "control issues," which allows her to remain above the hazy fray, sexy and judgmental at once.

Nancy, does, however, inspire Snoop Dogg to rap ecstatic about the joys of her "MILF weed" in one memorable episode ("it's the good mommy smoke"). No pop music celebrates cannabis as overtly as rap. Snoop Dogg's "Blown Away," Layzie Bones's "Smoke On," "Mr. Magic's "Puff Puff Pass," and Outkast's "Crumblin' Herb" are just a few examples among hundreds of verbal celebrations of cannabis usage. Having evolved

out of the Jamaican DJ tradition, rap undoubtedly also inherited reggae and Rastafarianism's infatuation with ganja, the herbal embodiment of Jah Rastafari, rather than a mere inebriant or boutique product (like MILF weed). Those in the know don't necessarily need to tell. Improvisatory rockers and jazzbos may use marijuana as a gateway to associational serendipity, but they rarely advertise it.

If cannabis is more an enhancing drug than a transforming drug, as many believe, it's not surprising that it plays so well into pornographic male fantasies. *High Times* magazine, like most marijuana culture, offers unabashed cannabis porn. At the same time, is there anything wrong with asking for a little gravitas with our gravity bong? America has a long history of infantilizing its population, especially in areas of moral suspicion. Perhaps the best way of legitimizing marijuana use in the long run is by representing it as a grownup pleasure rather than as something that simply reduces grown men to hapless dudes.

One could point out that on TV the Nickelodeon channel's "SpongeBob Squarepants" as well as the Cartoon Network's Adult Swim shows "Space Ghost," "Harvey Birdman," "Sealab 2021," and "Venture Bros." all offer a veritable cornucopia of disassociation, irony, absurdity, and knowing stoner humor. And *Being John Malkovich*, *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and even *Stranger Than Fiction* are all inventively constructed and even intellectually challenging manifestations of subliminal cannabis consciousness. Keeping psychedelic culture on the down low until legalization arrives—or not—is certainly a viable alternative to flaunting one's preferred routes to ecstasy or mental entertainment. But when the choice is made to leap over the counterculture, why must it always be with bad accents, an oversized spliff, and two or more male dimwits. I declare it high time to give the buddy system a rest.