A Smoke Signals Sampler

In late summer Scribner will publish Smoke Signals by Mary Lou Lee, a truly PC (as in pro-cannabis) writer and organizer. Lee is also co-editor of O'Shaughnessy's. His beat was a story about the cannabis growers in Marin County. The book is subtitled "a social history of LSD." The new one is "a social history of marijuana — medical, recreational, and scientific."

Some excerpts follow.

• A key aspect of cannabis as a social phenomenon has been its boundary-crossing quality. It seemed to be a flame from one culture to another. So did jazz. The music and the weed were fellow travelers, so to speak, and a community of shared experiences was often born even after the onset of federal prohibition, when viping lyrics were distinctly out of favor, contraband cannabis could be procured at jazz clubs, and the hippest musicians came to work with because many of its 421 diverse constituents were not readily available for scrutiny, especially when the sons and daughters of middle class realists, Symbolists and others who defied convention were found gathering in cabarets and cafés, their home in Marin County, at the old Thunder Horse Playhouse on 118th Street in New York City. That was where the great saxophonist Lester "Fats" Young gave Jack Kerouac, the fledgling writer, his first taste of marijuana in 1945. It would prove to be a seminal, flame-levitating moment.

Kerouac and his cohorts got high together in small groups, much like the bohemian writers who congregated at the Hashish Eaters club in mid-nineteenth century Paris. In the United States today, there is a strong connection to this great stoned lineage of European artists, which included the Dadaists, Surrealists, Symbolists and others who defied convention. Kerouac loved the spirituality engendered by cannabis, how it loosened the powers of analysis and undermined the strictures of the mental. The feeling was addictive in that it engendered euphoria. They didn't watch a night smoking fat marijuana bongos, listening to jazz, reciting poetry and confiding their deepest secrets, their hopes and fears, in a muffled, stoned rap session.

Marijuana was a truth drug, of sorts, for the Beats. As beat poet Allen Ginsberg recalled, "All that we knew was that we were making sense to each other, you know, talking from heart to heart, and that everybody else around us was talking like some kind of strange, lunar robots in business suits."

• On August 28, 1964, the day Bob Dylan lit his first joint in a New York City hotel room, Dr. Raphael Mechoulam was working intently in his laboratory at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The young Israeli chemist and his research partner, Yechiel Gaon, would soon become the first scientists to fully isolate and synthesize delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, marijuana's principal psychoactive constituent. Mechoulam's groundbreaking research was supported by the U.S. National Institutes for Health (NIH), which had suddenly become desirous of more objective information about the herb. The use of marijuana soared among middle class youth, officialdom started to get anxious, especially when the sons and daughters of prosperous politicians were caught smoking it.

Queried by members of Congress as to whether pot caused brain damage, the NIH scurried to gather basic scientific data. But hard science was difficult to come by in large part due to the stubborn refusal of the Federal Bureau of Investigation to hand over a joint that was purchased from a local drug dealer. For a long time, the illegality of cannabis acted as a deterrent to research in the United States. From a scientific perspective, the riddle of THC was not easy to unravel. The small number of researchers who studied cannabis over the years found the herb difficult to work with because many of its 421 distinct compounds are "lipophilic" (soluble in fat but not in water), which means they can't be separated and scrutinized without sophisticated equipment. Scientists would eventually ascertain that at least 100 of these lipophilic compounds — known as "cannabinoids" — migrate to the Mary's anxious term coined by Mechoulam, mari-juanac, to the ancillary compounds of terpenoids and terpene (essential aromatic oils). The isolation and synthesis of THC would prove to be a highly significant event in the history of psychiatry. Mechoulam, then 34, announced his discovery in a letter to the editor of the Journal of the American Chemical Society on July 3, 1964. Although he didn't realize the time, Mechoulam had lit a slow-burning fuse that would detonate a revolution in medical science.

• "Hoover University," located at Quan-tico Marine Base in Virginia, was a training school in teaching specks how to penetrate left-wing networks in the 1960s. Students who attended this elite FBI academy were instructed not to wash for several days in order to project the appropriate countercultural image when they approached radical groups. The more astute spies recognized that if they insinuated themselves into the radical wing of the antigovernment movement, they might be expected to share a joint now and then with the would-be revolutionaries. Smoking marijuana during an undercover assignment "required a much higher degree of training than merely smoking a cigarette," acknowledged former FBI agent Carl Payne, who wrote about his time as an undercover leifer. During breaks between lectures on the New Left, FBI agents would sneak away to get stoned. "We were definitely a happy group as we floated over on the lighting and applied them in a rather ideosyn- cratic way to marijuana horticulture. Owsley maintained the herb grew better if you made love in your pot patch. Marijuana cultivators had something else in mind when they spoke of "sexing the plants," a practice that entailed identifying and uprooting all the males to prevent the female marijuana plants from being pol-linated. The sexually frustrated females produce bigger flower clusters with more sticky, aromatic resin in an attempt to catch pollen that never arrives. Known as sin-semilla (Spanish for "without seeds"), the unfertilized female buds, oozing psycho-active THC and other phytocannabinoids, are the most prized part of the mari-juana crop. This ancient meth-od, called "hand sexing," was adopted by some growers. The term "seedless reefer" was rediscovered and resurrected by American narcotics agents in the 1970s. Sexing the plants was simple — all you need- to know was what the male and female flowers looked like in their earliest stages. Mountain Girl wrote about it. So did Mel Frank and Ed Rosenthal in The Marijuana Grower's Guide. Cannabis, a hearty, adapt-able plant that almost anyone could grow, also lent itself to sophisticated breeding and cultivation techniques, such as cloning and crossing strains, which were explained scientifically in Robert Connell Clarke's Marijuana Botany. These books would influence an up-and-coming generation of ganja gardeners who quickly picked up on the rule — if you want great stuff, snuff the male.

• Cheerful, feisty and legally blind, Evly Musikka was the third person approved for the Compassionate Investigative New Drug program, the second glaucoma patient to qualify, and the first woman to get pres-cription pot from Uncle Sam. Born with congenital cataracts, she credited canna-bis with partially restoring and preserving her sight in one eye after several botched surgeries. "If you smoke or eat marijuana, your whole system gets so much better," said Musikka, who became a federal pa-tient in 1988 shortly after a Florida judge declared her innocent of marijuana charges on the grounds of medical necessity. She had been busted for growing a few plants in her backyard.

Musikka felt compelled to speak out for people in need of medicinal cannabis. She had the time of her life touring the country with the Cannabis Action Network (CAN) in the early 1990s. "Those kids were wonderful. They worked their little fannies off — that's for sure," Musikka remembered. "They...continued on next page
were determined to put everything aside and go out and educate people. They had the same idea as I did. We’ve got to tell people! If people knew the truth, they would not keep this prohibition.”

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Musikka gave CAN instant credibility. She was a walking, talking repudiation of the official fiction that cannabis had no therapeutic benefit. Her very existence exposed the knotted lie at the heart of marijuana prohibition. “The medicinal aspect was crucial —that’s what the press wanted,” said CAN founder Debby Goldsberry. “And we had Elvy. It seemed like everywhere we went Elvy appeared on the front page of the newspaper the next day. She toured with us constantly for several years. She lived in the van with us. It was like having your grandmother along.”

There was no generation gap on this caravan. They were all united by their devotion to cannabis. “It’s a holy weed. I thank God for it every day of my life,” said Musikka. Whereas some medical marijuana advocates were squeamish about conflating recreational and therapeutic consumption, Elvy didn’t mince words: “It’s a very positive, mind-altering experience. It enhances creativity . . . I enjoy the high.”

Cannabis-smoking was not uncommon among world class athletes —soccer stars, swimmers, skiers, boxers, football and baseball players, the gamut — who found marijuana, a pain-management and stress-reducing medicine, to be well suited for the injurious lifestyle of an athlete.

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Canadian Ross Rebagliati, the first snowboarder to win Olympic gold, was almost stripped of his medal after he tested positive for marijuana in 1998. He said he had inhaled secondhand pot smoke at a party. Within extreme winter sports circles “marijuana culture is widely accepted and is not something looked down upon,” according to Rebagliati.

In bygone days, a marijuana bust might have torpedoed a promising athletic career. But this was ’98 —year of “the Dude,” the pot-smoking slacker played by Jeff Bridges in The Big Lebowski. Throughout the wide world of sports and celebrity entertainment, it was indisputable —the Weed, like the Dude, abides.

“Be there or be in DARE.” — W.T.