

“Tight Gage — More a Medicine Than a Dope”

By Louis Armstrong

Louis: The Louis Armstrong Story, 1900-1971 by Max Jones and John Chilton. Little, Brown and Company, Boston/Toronto 1971.

Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong by Terry Teachout; Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt 2009; 474 pages, \$30

In his later years, at his beloved home in St. Alban's Queens, the great trumpet player made hundreds of audio tapes of spoken reminiscences. This account by Armstrong of getting busted for marijuana possession appeared in the 1971 biography by Jones and Chilton.

Speaking of 1931...we did call ourselves “vipers,” which could have been anybody from all walks of life that smoked and respected tight gage. That was our cute little name for marijuana, and it was a misdemeanor in those days. Much different from the pressure and charges the law lays on a guy who smokes pot — a later name for the same thing which is cute to hear nowadays.

We always looked at pot as a sort of medicine, a cheap drunk and with much better thoughts than one that's full of liquor. But with the penalties that came, I for one had to put it down, though the respect for it — gage — will stay with me forever.

I have every reason to say these words and am proud to say them. From experience. Now I'll relate a few incidents from the West Coast in California when Vic Berton, the top drummer then in all Hollywood, and I got busted together. It was during our intermission at this big night club which were packed and jammed every night with all sorts of my fans, including movie stars.

Anyway, Vic and I were blasting this joint having lots of laughs and feeling good enjoying each other's company. We were standing in his great big lot in front of some cars. Just then two big healthy dicks [detectives] came from behind a car nonchalantly and said to us, “We'll take the roach boys.”

Vic and I said nothing. So one dick stayed with me until I went into the club and did my last show. He enjoyed it, too. Because when he and I were on our way down to the police station we had a heart-to-heart talk. First words that he said to me were, “Armstrong I am a big fan of yours and so is my family. We catch your program every night over the radio. In fact, nobody goes to bed in our family until your program's over. And they're all great.” Which I was glad to hear, especially coming from him.

Then I confidentially told him, “Since you and your family are my fans they'd be awfully sad if anything drastic would happen to me, the same as the other thousands of my fans. So please don't hit me in my chops.”

When he said to me, “Why, I wouldn't think of anything like that.” That's all I wanted to hear. Immediately I said, “OK let's ride.”

I also told him, “After all, I'm no criminal. I respect everybody and they respect me. And I never let 'em down musically.”

“Hell,” he said, “you ain't doing any more 'n' anybody's doing. It's when they get caught is when they're found out.” Then this dick confidentially told me, he said, “Armstrong, this wouldn't have



LOUIS ARMSTRONG MUGGING WITH AN ATOMIZER in a photo from “*Swing Era New York: The Jazz Photographs of Charles Peterson*,” by W. Royal Stokes, Temple University Press, 1994. Stokes' accompanying text: “Flit-gun at the ready in February 1942, Louis fumigates the room of the telltale fragrance. The pinched thumb and forefinger of the woman indicate that she holds the offending marijuana ‘roach.’ To the left of Armstrong is pianist Nick Aldridge, who appeared in the 1943 film ‘Stormy Weather’ with a group billed as the Tramp Band.”

happened if that band leader — he probably smoked marijuana himself — who's playing just up the road from you, and the big name that he's supposed to have, didn't get jealous because you are doing bigger business than him. So he dropped a nickel on you.”

Meaning, “he dropped a nickel into the telephone and called us and stoolpigeoned on you.”

“They sent me and my partner to come up for the assignment, and when we found out that you was the one we must nab, it broke our hearts.” They told me, “you must understand we can get you six months for a roach.” Meaning the stub of a joint of gage...

When we reached the police headquarters there were several officers, including the man at the desk, sitting around. And the minute we came through the door they all recognized me right away. They too had been diggin' my music nightly over the radio. Oh, boy, were those guys glad to see me. They gave me one look and said, “What' ta' hell are you doing here this time of night away from the club?”

So we yakity yakity while I was being booked. That's one reason why we appreciated pot, as y'all calls it now. The warmth it always brought forth from the other person — especially the ones that lit up a good stick of that ‘shuzzit’ or gage, nice names.

Now when it came to summing it up, the difference between the vipers and those using dope and all other kinds of drastic stuff, one could easily see who were actually dope addicts. First place they were never clean, and they stays dirty-grimey all the time. Show most addicts a bucket of water and they'll run like hell to keep it from touching them. But a viper would gladly welcome a good bath, clean underwear and top clothes — stay fresh and on the ball.

I spent nine days in the Downtown Los Angeles City Jail, in a cell with two guys who were already sentenced to 40 or 45 years for something else. Robbery, pickpocket, or whatever they were in for, didn't make any difference to me, and they cared less as to what I was in for...

So I got to trial. Everybody were there — which takes in my boss, manager and a whole gang of lawyers — and I said to

myself that I was straight.

Meantime the Chicago papers were all on the stands, with big headlines saying “Louis Armstrong will have to serve six months for marijuana,” and things like that. The judge gave me a suspended sentence and I went to work that night — wailed just like nothing happened.

What struck me funny, though, I laughed real loud when several movie stars came up to the bandstand while we played a dance set. and told me, when they heard about me getting caught with marijuana they thought marijuana was a chick. Woo, boy, that really fractured me!

Every night I would run across those same detectives who arrested me, glad as ever to see me, and me back on the mound blowing again.

Now I'm back in the club, and everything's running along very smoothly when one night the washroom boy comes up to the bandstand and says there is a white boy in the washroom who wants to see me in there. I asked who it was, and he said, I don't know but he just came up from the south and he has a large croaker

sack — meaning Burlap bag — full of something that he said is especially for you. Hmmm...

I went into the men's room and there was this fine ofay musician, a good one, whose father was big judge down south, so you can easily see he was well off. He led me to the corner and showed me this sack. It was full of gage in the rough — dirty looking and had to be cleaned. He said “Louis, this muta — one of the names lots of the Ears used — came from out of the backyard where the chickens trampled all over it, so it should be well seasoned.”

He and I went to the hotel over on Central Avenue, rolled up our sleeves, cleaned it real beautifully and rolled up one a piece. We dragged on down half-way to a “roach” and he was right. When we got on down there we could taste the cackling, the crowing and the other things those chickens did. Beautiful!

We finished at the club with a big closing night, and a big farewell celebration from everybody. With a promise to return, which I did a year later, I left the coast, arriving home in Chicago on a Sunday morning. Had a sleep up into the afternoon, then had my supper while listening to some of my records. Lil was out visiting some place. The door bell rang. I went to the door and found one guy standing there, pointing towards four other youngsters getting out of the car. I said “Boys, I'm very glad to see you. It's been a long long time.”

The minute they came in they told me, “Pops, we came to serenade you.” Those boys pulled out their guitars, ukets et cetera and wailed awhile with a perfect beat which lifted me up just beautifully. Then they put up their instruments, one cat pulled out a big bomber, lit it, took two drags and looked straight into my eyes as he passed it to me, saying, “Pops, we all feel you could use this stick after all you've been through.”

I said, “Aw boys, y'all didn't have to do this,” reaching for that joint at the same time.

Each of them pulled out a stick a piece and started blowing and talking about a lot of interesting things. That moment helped me to forget a heap of ungodly things. Made me have the right frame of mind for my opening day at the theater

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CHARLES PETERSON, ZUTTY SINGLETON, AND ARMSTRONG relaxing after a concert. Stokes' text: “At the table in drummer Zutty Singleton's Harlem apartment in February 1942, Charles Peterson, Louis, and his friend since their youthful New Orleans days have clearly enjoyed the host's chicken gumbo — as well as what Pops is pinching between thumb and index finger... As is always the case when he appears in the photo, photographer Peterson composed the frame and then had someone hold the camera and click the shutter, in this case Commodore record label producer Milt Gabler.”

Louis Armstrong *continued from previous page*



ARMSTRONG IN SEATTLE HOTEL ROOM, photographed by Milt Hinton (c) The Milton J. Hinton Photographic Collection, www.MiltHinton.com. Hinton was playing bass with Armstrong at the time (1953). After a gig, writes Terry Teachout, Armstrong “unwound by smoking a joint, catching up with his correspondence, and listening to music on the two reel-to-reel tape recorders that he carried with him wherever he went. Armstrong was one of the first Americans to purchase commercially manufactured tape recorders (Bing Crosby was another) when they became available after World War Two... He transferred his record collection to tape so he could listen to music on the road.”

on the South Side, which was really something else. After all, the vipers and fans in Chicago thought I was actually serving time from the incident on the coast with my boy, Vic Berton, whom I still think is the greatest drummer of all times.

The vipers and fans in Chicago thought I was actually serving time from the incident on the coast.

So the theater was packed to the rafters. They came to hear what their boy Louis had to say, and when I was introduced you can imagine the house coming down with thunderous applause which lasted for a whole gang of minutes. Made my heart flutter with happiness.

Soooo, when they quieted down, I said “Yeah, you thought I was. But I wasn’t.” And that did it. Such yells! “Dipper! Satchelmouth! We’re glad to see you back!” We went into our show and every tune was a gasser. We did three shows a day, each one packed and jammed...

As we always used to say, gage is more of a medicine than a dope. But with all the riggermaroo going on, no one can do anything about it. After all, the vipers during my haydays are way up there in age, too old to suffer those drastic penalties. So we had to put it down. But if we all get as old as Methuselah our memories will always be of lots of

Teachout’s Perspective

Some light is shed on Armstrong’s marijuana use and the 1930 bust in these excerpts from his most recent biography, “Pops,” by Terry Teachout.

All that is known for sure is that he started smoking it on a regular basis in 1928 and continued to do so for the rest of his life. He would later explain to an acquaintance that it “makes you feel good, man. It relaxes you, makes you forget all the bad things that happen to a Negro. It makes you feel wanted, and when you’re with another tea smoker it makes you feel a special kinship.” It was also, unlike alcohol, legal, though 29 states had outlawed its use and sale by 1931.

It became customary for Armstrong

and his sidemen (except Earl Hines, who disliked marijuana) to get high before making a record, which probably explains how ‘Muggles’ got its name...

He left behind two posthumously published accounts of his experiences with the intoxicant herb in which he admitted to having enjoyed it enormously. The least hypocritical of men, he saw no reason to conceal the fact, known to all his friends, that he smoked pot nearly every day: “I felt at no time when ever I ran across some of that good shit, that I was breaking the law, or some foolish thought similar to it...”

In the first of these accounts, Armstrong discusses “gage” (his preferred nickname for marijuana) in connection with his mother’s advise to take a laxative daily. She had given him a potion concocted out of “Pepper Grass, Dandelions, and lots of weeds similar to gage” that she picked by the railroad tracks, brought home, and boiled up into a ‘physic.’” Later he saw young white musicians looking “fresh —neat and very much contented” after their gigs, and learned that they were smoking marijuana instead of drinking alcohol. He did so and became an ardent advocate.

At one point he started writing a book in which he called for the legalization of marijuana, declaring it to be “an Assistant —a friend, a nice cheap drunk” and claiming that it was both “a thousand times better than whiskey”... and safer than “Heroin, Cocaine, etc. or some other unGodly shit...”

Armstrong’s preference for marijuana over alcohol was known to jazz musicians everywhere, as well as to fans who shared his tastes. One “club” of St. Louis smokers presented him with a joint the size of a baseball bat, along with a card dubbing him “King of the Vipers.” Many younger players later said that it was Armstrong who first got them high.

“The first person I ever saw smoke marijuana,” Charlie Barnet wrote in his memoirs, “was Louis Armstrong.... During an intermission we all went over to hear Louis. He was down in the basement rolling the stuff and I know I had some that night.”

Marijuana was still legal in most states when Armstrong started using it. Mezzrow remembered how the two of them would “roll our cigarettes right out in the open and light up like you would on a Camel or a Chesterfield...”

After his bust on Nov. 14, 1930 Armstrong was accused of violating the California Poison Act, which banned marijuana possession. On Dec. 8 he was arraigned and pleaded not guilty. He changed his plea to guilty on March 10, 1931, and was sentenced to 30 days in jail. Teachout comments:

California v. Louis Armstrong

Armstrong recalled that he spent a total of nine days in jail before being released, though his account, taped nearly four decades later, incorrectly suggests that he served this time immediately after his arrest.

Why was he let off so easy? According to Charlie Barnet, the police “had no substantial legal precedent because marijuana wasn’t classified as a narcotic then, and they were afraid of being sued if they interfered with performances at the club.” That may have been part of it, but Ralph Berton, Vic’s younger brother, later claimed that the drummer’s boss, who led the band at the Ambassador Hotel’s popular Coconut Grove night club, put the fix in...

The King of Vipers went back to work at the Cotton Club with the utmost promptitude. He continued to play there until the following March, when he went on trial before Judge William Tell Aggeler, who preached him a starchy little sermon...

Armstrong then served nine days of his 30-day jail term, after which the judge obligingly suspended the remainder of the sentence.



The Triumph of “Scientific Medicine”

Rockefeller Medicine Men by E. Richard Brown; University of California Press, Berkeley, 1979, 283 pages

Marijuana prohibition was imposed in the first third of the 20th century, as millions of Americans were shifting from work on family farms to industrial jobs. Also in this period, practitioners of “scientific medicine” were marginalizing all other alternative approaches to health care, including herbal medicine.

E. Richard Brown explains who was behind the rise of scientific medicine and why.

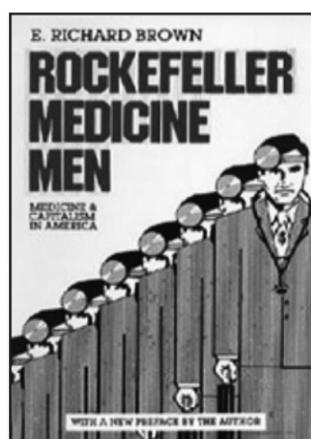
A Baptist minister named Frederick Gates advised John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to underwrite medical research and education. “Gates appreciated the human body as one of nature’s puzzles, to be investigated by science... Science was helping industry reshape the organization of production by developing machinery to control and cheapen human labor and more cheaply extract from nature a salable product. Science would also extract from nature the secrets of life itself while medicine would apply them to understand disease and develop methods of preventing or curing these pestilences of life and commerce. Improving the health of the popula-

tion was thus an engineering job that involved understanding and manipulating nature...

“Gates embraced scientific medicine as a force that would: 1) help unify and integrate the emerging industrial society with technical values and culture, and 2) legitimize capitalism by diverting attention from structural and other environmental causes of disease.”

Thanks to Gates, “The Rockefeller Foundation discovered what the missionaries also knew: medicine can be used to convert and colonize the heathen... because medical care is so seductive to even the most reluctant people.

“In China, Gates switched from supporting the religious missionaries to building a Western medical system... In the Philippines, the foundation’s International Health Commission outfitted a hospital ship to bring medical care and ‘the benefits of civilization’



to the rebellious Moro tribes. The foundation officers were ecstatic that such medical work made it ‘possible for the doctor and nurse to go in safety to many places which it has been extremely dangerous for the soldier to approach.’”

In the U.S., “their domestic medical programs had exactly the same ends, though

Gates and others were far more circumspect in discussing them.” In other words, the corporate leaders were intent on bringing the “benefits of civilization” to us, too.

The goal of the Rockefeller Foundation in the U.S. was to transform the medical profession into a modern priesthood that would inculcate respect for technology and industrial culture. “Research institutes were the temples of the new religion,” Brown observes.

The American Medical Association became the mechanism for driving out competition from herbalists, homeopaths, and all other practitioners who had not been trained at elite medical schools (whose labs and hospitals required underwriting by the wealthy, and whose tuition fees effectively excluded working-class students).

Scientific medicine “focused attention on the individual.” It derived credibility from the work of European bacteriologists who had “identified discrete, external, and specific agents of disease. This perspective encouraged the idea of specific therapies to cure specific pathological conditions, and it diverted attention from the social and economic causes of disease.”

The cult of technology supported a definition of medicine that excluded “crude” herbs. It was conceded that a plant might contain a specific active ingredient that could be isolated, synthesized, and marketed as medicine.