

Thelma White:

She Was Hip All Along

The actress who played the pot-dealing seductress in *Reefer Madness*, Thelma White, recognized the falseness of the film and didn't want to appear in it, but the studio owned her. When she died in Los Angeles at age 94, her Associated Press obit was poignant and informative:

"Ms. White played a hard blonde named Mae who peddles 'demon weed' to unsuspecting young people in '*Reefer Madness*,' a low-budget cautionary tale written by a religious group. In the film, she lures high school students to her apartment for sex and drugs, turning them into addicts who shoot their girlfriends, run over pedestrians and go insane.

"A musical and comedy actress who made more than 40 movies, Ms. White was horrified when RKO Studios picked her for the antidrug film. But because of her contract, she had little choice but to accept the role.

"I'm ashamed to say that it's the only one of my films that's become a classic," she told the *L.A. Times* in a 1987 interview. "I hide my head when I think about it."

"Born Thelma Wolpa in Lincoln, Neb., in 1910, Ms. White was a carnival performer as a toddler before moving on to vaudeville, radio and movies.

"*Reefer Madness*" was destined for obscurity, but in 1972, Keith Stroup, founder of the National Organization for Reform of Marijuana Laws, discovered it in the Library of Congress archives, bought a print and screened it at a New York benefit.

"Robert Shaye, founder of New Line Cinema, saw the film and recognized its appeal as an unintentional parody. He re-released it through his then-fledgling company, holding midnight showings."

Reefer Madness helped transform New Line Cinema from a small company that booked speakers for college

events into a major movie distributor.

The *L.A. Times* obit informs us that "Ms. White twice saw an off-Broadway musical that spoofed the movie. The musical 'was campy and over the top, and she loved it,'" according to her godson, her sole survivor.



THELMA WHITE

The writing credit on *Reefer Madness* went to two Hollywood professionals who mostly turned out B- westerns. According to Kevin Murphy and Dan Studney, authors of the latter-day musical that Ms White enjoyed, "*Reefer Madness* began its cinematic life as a 1936 cautionary film entitled '*Tell Your Children*.' It was financed by a small church group, and was intended to scare the living bejeezus out of every parent who viewed it."

The small church group must have commissioned the script from the pros.

"Soon after the film was shot, however, it was purchased by the notorious exploitation film maestro Dwain Esper (whose films included '*Narcotic*,' '*Marihuana*,' and '*Maniac*'). He took the liberty of cutting in salacious insert shots and slapping on the sexier title of '*Reefer Madness*,' before distributing it on the exploitation circuit.

"Esper was an absolutely notorious figure who would do things like stealing unattended prints of studio films out of

projection booths and film exchanges, and then physically drive them from small town exhibitor to small town exhibitor until the authorities caught up with him. A delightful, poignant and detailed portrayal of this lunatic opportunist is featured in exploiter Dave Friedman's autobiography, '*A Youth in Babylon*,' which is a book every cult movie or pop culture enthusiast ought to read.

"After a brief run, the film lay forgotten for several decades. There was no concept of 'after market' in those days, especially for films that existed outside the confines of the studio system. For this reason, neither Esper nor the original filmmakers bothered to copyright the movie, and it eventually fell into the public domain.

"Murphy and Studney got their info mainly from White herself and documentary maker Ray Greene, whose films include 'Schlock!'"

It's hardly surprising that a "small church group" financed *Tell Your Children*. Muslims and Jews don't have a monopoly on aggressive "fundamentalists." (Tod Mikuriya once made a bumper sticker that said: "Drug Police — Armed Clergy.")

Reefer Madness reportedly received backing of some sort from Harry Anslinger, the commissioner of the Bureau of Narcotics, who was leading the

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campaign to impose marijuana prohibition under federal law. Anslinger was a manipulator of the media and understood the influence of Hollywood. The movie's message jibes perfectly with his.

"Marijuana is an addictive drug which produces in its users insanity, criminality, and death," Anslinger told Congress in '37. They believed him and the grotesque ramifications are still being felt.

There is a movie to be made about the making of *Reefer Madness*. Woody Harrelson, made up properly, could play Anslinger (then about 40). But who could play alienated, musical Thelma White?



ANSLINGER-



HARRELSON

Before the DEA there was the FBN

Anslinger's Army

The Strength of the Wolf by Douglas Valentine, Verso, 2004

The Strength of the Pack by Douglas Valentine, TrineDay, 2009

Drug Warriors and Their Prey by Richard Miller, Praeger, 1996

By Tom O'Connell, MD

In *The Strength of the Wolf* and its sequel, *The Strength of the Pack*, Douglas Valentine has written a two-volume history of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. The FBN was established as a branch of the Treasury Department in 1930. It provided employment for agents who had previously been enforcing alcohol prohibition. The FBN disbanded in 1968, making way for the Drug Enforcement Administration (a branch of the Justice Department).

For more than three decades the FBN director was Harry Anslinger, who led the "reefer madness" campaign that culminated in Congress passing the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937, i.e. imposing federal prohibition. There is evidence that Anslinger was "only following orders" from the Secretary of the Treasury, Andrew Mellon (whose niece the ambitious young Anslinger had married). *The Strength of the Wolf*, unfortunately, does not shed light on which high-level decision makers masterminded marijuana prohibition. Nor does the author challenge the intrinsic legitimacy of drug prohibition.

Valentine's interest in the FBN began in 1968 when research for a book about CIA activities in Viet Nam led him to a cluster of former FBN agents willing to reminisce. His strength lies

in providing the agent's-eye view of an expanding government bureaucracy.

Without Valentine's interest and diligent research, we'd have almost no record at all because academic historians and biographers have displayed so little unbiased interest in the drug war's origins.

The CIA, as Valentine documents meticulously in *Strength of the Pack*, has had the dominant role in American drug



Harry Anslinger, director of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, at a photo-op c. 1933.

policy since 1947. United Nations treaties pushed through by the U.S. — with Anslinger playing an active diplomatic role! — now obligate 195 nations to outlaw cannabis except for medical use. "Our" obligation to enforce these treaties provides an excuse for the U.S. to maintain military bases and armed forces worldwide.

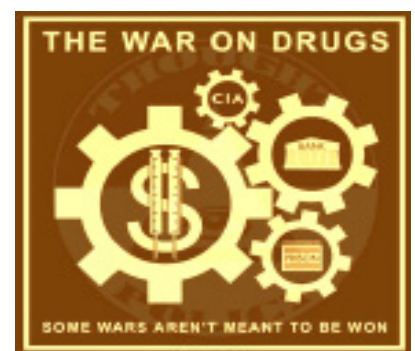
Many Americans look at our crumbling infrastructure and empty treasury and ask, "Why must we be the cops of the world?" The CIA arranged for a fall-back answer long ago: to enforce drug prohibition treaties.

Richard Lawrence Miller, like Valentine, is a non-academic historian whose area of special interest is not drug policy. His previous book, *Nazi Justiz*,

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Law of the Holocaust, was published in 1995, and research for it and *Drug Warriors and Their Prey* must have overlapped. Both are studies of the techniques by which minorities can be made into scapegoats, targets of mob fear and hatred, and then transformed into enemies of the state and "legitimate" targets for destruction by law enforcement.

What Miller makes chillingly clear in *Justiz* is that the transformation of Germany from an orderly society into a criminal nation was meticulously "legal." National Socialism was imposed under color of law by the legal profession itself. In the United States, where 2.3 million people are behind bars, the process has been more leisurely and less murderous.



Jive from previous page

riff— solo musical passage, often improvised.

set— group of musical numbers played by orchestra between rests.

sent— made happy.

session— a group gathering of musicians to play, particularly to improvise.

sharp— fashionable in a flashy manner; also, shrewd, clever

shoot— inject (heroin) with a hypodermic needle.

skin-pop— same as joy-pop; also, accidentally missing vein while injecting heroin.

sniff— to take heroin by inhalation.

solid— Understood!

square— bourgeois, conventional, provincial, stupid, ill-informed, not hip.

stash— concealed supply of drugs; to conceal.

stick— marijuana cigarette.

stick deal— sale of pre-manufactured marijuana cigarettes, as distinguished from sale of marijuana in bulk.

straight— supplied; stocked up.

stuff— marijuana, heroin, cocaine.

through the ceiling— very high.

turn off— to become sober; to come down from a "high."

turn on— to smoke marijuana; to take narcotics.

uncool— dangerous, unpleasant, uncomfortable, unsatisfactory.

weed— marijuana.

white stuff— heroin; cocaine.