

# Hitting the High Notes

The link between drugs, music and politics

By shamanic drummer Don Meinshausen

*“Do you hear the music of liberty even when no one is playing?”*

All artists who have thought independently have endured alienation and oppression. This oppression since the beginning of time is a partnership of church and state. We know that when Rome occupied Britain and Ireland there was suppression of the bards who composed and played their history in song. This continued when Rome and later England became Christian. The harp became the Irish national symbol.

The whole idea of romantic love with its songs and such disappeared from Europe during the Dark Ages due to the prevalence of the Church. No one was able to experiment with drugs during the Christian Dark Ages because it was linked to witchcraft. I cannot find much at this time about drug usage except for drinking songs. Brahms in his “Academic Overture” included one and it scandalized his alma mater Heidelberg when it was first performed. It is now played at every college graduation in the world.

One has to wait until the development of an independent middle class and the rise of the technologies of radios, record players or computers and films and the accompanying magazines and books, both scholarly and popular, for us to notice the linkage of music, drugs and the changing of values.

Bars and social clubs that served alcohol have historically been the mainstay of musicians since time began. These clubs were always under the threat of closure because of bluenoses, perceived threat of disrespect of church and state or the noisiness, rowdiness and alcoholism prevalent in these early nightclubs. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century coffee houses were banned because they were seen as dens of depravity. Even in liberal New York City today a club that does not have a cabaret license can lose its liquor license if the patrons decide spontaneously to dance. Until recently it was unheard of for any band to achieve popularity without paying their dues by performing in nightclubs for a few years. You can imagine the catastrophe for any musician that Prohibition brought in.

During Prohibition marijuana became more popular not just because it was more available than alcohol but because it was easier to handle than a hangover, a bar fight or alcoholism. There was another reason which was much more important; the increased creativity that happened under pot's influence. Jazz had its beginnings in bordellos, bars and clubs where blacks were allowed to play and therefore open to new ideas and drugs. Jazz became known for its improvisational style with some musicians packing in extra notes not following the notation. This type of consciousness is readily understood with pot users.

This is the kind of thinking that drove America's rulers drug crazy. Consider America's founding narc, Harry J Anslinger, a former Prohibition agent. Why don't these musicians play just what is written down? Anslinger actually wanted to arrest every jazz musician as well as every bartender. When he read the handwriting on the wall that Prohibition was finally going to be repealed he knew he had to find a new enemy. Marijuana was the

candidate since pot use was primarily done back then by jazz musicians, blacks and Hispanics who were either despised or had little recognition. Marijuana use was largely unknown by most people so when Anslinger's propaganda machine started to start a new Inquisition it was readily accepted by most people and legislators.

At the same time pot became more acceptable to America's new cultural elite of Hollywood. The Big Broadcast of 1933 (?) starring WC Fields (a famous comedian, juggler and alcohol user), Burns and Allen, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy and jazz great Cab Calloway. This great black singer sang "Reefer Man" which is about a pot dealer. The Hayes code that was soon passed put a stop to all that and pot use itself was made illegal. soon after.

There were many songs about drinking and drugs such as Cole Porter's "I get no kick from cocaine" which was later changed to champagne. During Prohibition nightspots suffered or went underground as speakeasies and these hired musicians who sympathized with the owners and patrons. Even today many nightspots are routinely harassed for drug consumption and dealing. There is nothing much the owners or even the bouncers can do about it since strict enforcement would drive away clientele. Still these cultural oases are routinely put upon to enforce anti-smoking laws as well since arrests are easy and looks good to the blue nosed puritans and health fascists.

The next round of repression came when LSD and other psychedelics came to prominence in the 60's. This inspired a whole new genre of rock music called acid rock. Even traditional rock and roll was under attacks by backwoods Baptists and big city party machines. Hudson county of New Jersey may still have a law against rock performances. Rock groups like Moby Grape were busted for possession with heavy pressure to snitch breaking up the group. The Moody Blues composed an anthem to LSD guru Timothy Leary after tripping with him. The Grateful Dead, America's most famous rock band was influenced by acid according to many sources and the honor was given by acid makers by having sheets of LSD made with pictures of Grateful Dead album covers. Jefferson Airplane's Paul Kantner performed at Leary's memorial service. Most groups were popular for decades and won critical acclaim and some of these groups are still performing 4 decades later.

Marijuana was also popular with many musicians including the Beatles' John Lennon and Paul McCartney who were busted for possession. Drug use was so ubiquitous that many musicians went to rehab and some died. Alcohol and legal pill use has always been a problem in the music scene as well including country western and pop. Pot use crossed all kinds of social and racial lines in the 60's. In spite of or because of Prohibition marijuana usage spread from a small base of jazz musicians to a drug that at least a third of all adult Americans have tried. That this happened without any organization or even intent shows how useless banning a drug is.

During this time there were, of course, casualties. Many had made the error that since the system lied about the dangers of pot that the dangers of cocaine, heroin, barbiturates and amphetamines were also exaggerated. This resulted in much more addictions and deaths in the musician community because the stresses of having to perform no matter how the artist felt that day. These performers despite their popularity are isolated as they go from city to city sometimes going internationally. They are away from friends, family and others who can provide stability in the chaos of fleeting popularity. This world is crazy unto itself without drugs. The musicians inhabit a nighttime world of instant

gratification after years of poverty, with constant ego infusions, a different bed every night and sometimes even a different bed partner every night. Therefore the performing musician is more likely to abuse drugs or use drugs to help creativity. And when a musician has an incident, cannot perform, checks into rehab or ODs it becomes a major scandal rather than an isolated event.

Yet still throughout this culture, as well as in popular knowledge that grows constantly through the internet, most understand that there is a big difference in the sale and use of pot and psychedelics and the misuse of hard drugs. This is referred to in the music as well. The first popular, well reviewed and box office smash independent classic 'Easy Rider' which launched the careers of Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper and Jack Nicholson. The film begins with the song by Steppenwolf "The Pusher" which emphatically makes the distinction as a cocaine deal is being made.

I remember listening to an underground college radio station during the 60's when the DJ announced that he was willing to play any drug related song that listeners wished to hear. He asked listeners to stop calling after several hundred were called in. In Mexico you have Narcocorrado, which is a ballad of drug runners and dealers in their rise from poverty to power. Many countries have similar songs, stories and films.

Each style of music has cultivated or echoed a rebellion, a culture and a response of anger from the system. While no music has been banned yet there are all types of attempts to stop the more rebellious and drug related groups from getting exposure. Some have been put into prison on bullshit charges. What all this does in the end is to make the music even more popular. The system makes its accommodations to the new culture and some form is given commercial acceptance. Then a younger, newer crowd with its newer drugs comes forth marching and dancing under a new tune and the banned begins anew.

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