

Great Moments in Weed History

S2, E8 - Jazz

ABDULLAH: This podcast is for adults 21 years of age or older. We talk about cannabis history and advertise cannabis products. If you're not 21 come back when you are.

[Spoke Media]

ABDULLAH: Hey, how's it going folks? It's Abdullah.

BEAN: and Bean.

ABDULLAH: And welcome back for another episode of Great Moments in Weed History. On this podcast, my partner Bean and I who are both cannabis journalists and media makers go through one of the more fascinating points in the long, long, long history of human beings and cannabis. I myself have no prior knowledge of the story we're about to hear today. Bean has written and researched it and I'm going to be hearing it with you for the first time. We are going to smoke some weed, we're going to drink some tea, we're going to kick it and I personally am super excited to hear our weed story today. Bean, what do you got going on?

BEAN: I bring you a story today about some of the heppiest cats to ever smoke reefer and a weed friendship that crosses all kinds of boundaries and breaks, all kinds of rules.

ABDULLAH: Incredible. So, hepcats smoking reefer, that definitely calls into mind a very specific era, an era in which cannabis prohibition was at its height. But so was the counterculture. I know there's a lot of great weed stories from that period. Well, I'm stoked to hear this. I've got this J going here. I'm going to grind up my weed here.

BEAN: Ah, now of course, if you're not quite ready to roll, where you're listening to Great Moments. Hit pause, twist up a J, pack a bong, pack a bowl, do the dabs, the way they're done.

ABDULLAH: Do those dabs.

BEAN: We'll be waiting for you when you get back. But otherwise...

ABDULLAH: I think we're ready...

BEAN: for another...

[GMIWH Theme]

[Spoke Media]

ABDULLAH: All righty. So I'm going to get this thing twisted up. Bean, why don't you kick us off?

BEAN: Sure. We're going, you said, you know, we're gonna get into prohibition in this story, but I'm gonna start our tale well before cannabis prohibition in the United States.

ABDULLAH: Ah, so we're talking pre 1937.

BEAN: So America's earliest cannabis counterculture first started sprouting up in the early 1800's in New Orleans, Congo Square.

ABDULLAH: Based on the clues though far, I have a couple of guesses as to who we're talking about. Is this about Louis Armstrong?

BEAN: Yes, he is one half of our incredible we'd friendship.

ABDULLAH: Okay, fantastic. All right, so I'm halfway there on the guesses. We're talking about New Orleans pre 1900 what does this place look like?

BEAN: Yeah, so it's pre-Civil war. New Orleans is always been this port city, this melting pot. You have French people, you have Creole people, you have indigenous people, you have a African descent people who are obviously brought to this country as part of the slave trade. This place Congo Square, which is like a public gathering area and on Sundays the local black population, including many people who were slaves would gather there. It was like a marketplace. There was ritualized drumming, dancing, and it's a place that's blending these African traditions with elements of the cities European, Caribbean, and Creole cultures. It's like a Sunday melting pot kind of joyous place. But it is in the shadow of that many of the people there are literally enslaved.

ABDULLAH: So this plays a whole melting pot, but it's a really dark time in America. I mean, a lot of people are marginalized.

BEAN: Yeah. And New Orleans is a center of the slave trade. A lot of people are being brought in through New Orleans as the port of entry, but eventually even like local white people and visitors, Congo Square becomes a place of interest in the city. People can see drumming, dancing, all these things that are very new and exotic to them. And there's also like people blazing up weed.

ABDULLAH: No way. So people are actually smoking weed. This is the early 1800's. So there is no semblance of cannabis prohibition at this time. Cannabis is just another plant among many other plants. So people are actually rolling it up and smoking and blazing in the street.

BEAN: Yeah. Any place that's a port has all kinds of things coming into it. That's what makes those cities so interesting. And, you know, along with the worst trade that ever in humanity, this is slave trade, there's also weed coming in from like the Caribbean and South America. Some of the earliest we'd to show up in the United States.

ABDULLAH: Oh my God, what a crazy scene this is. On the one hand, you've got this incredible brutality going on on the other. You have this crazy sense of freedom, you know, when it comes to using cannabis compared to now, it's not on anyone's radar.

BEAN: So as the civil war starts to heat up, and there's all this tension in the South, in 1843, the city fathers of New Orleans ban all gatherings in Congo Square. So what ends up happening is they squashed this energy in Congo Square, but it just splinters out in all these directions, like the people who were very religious who were there take that musical energy, that stew, and it kind of turns into gospel music. They move it into the church because that's a safe place to express yourself. And the more underground part of that scene, the more wild and out part of that scene creates jazz music.

ABDULLAH: So you're saying that they were innovating on this music, but in order to be free from any sort of persecution when they're performing it, they did it in a church and they sing hymns in this style of music. And on the other end you have jazz, you have this sort of more underground, you know, esoteric music that is about to become a massive musical subculture and then a very mainstream culture in the United States and all over the world.

BEAN: Yeah. And, and like New Orleans has always been a raunchy city, you know, and said with respect and Jazz is the soundtrack of raunchy New Orleans. It's literally so the, the gospel scene has pushed into the churches because that's a safe space. Where do you think the early jazz scene, where can a musician in the jazz world get a booking?

ABDULLAH: At a nightclub that a bump in honky tonk.

BEAN: And at a brothel. So as jazz, you know, becomes the most popular thing in music for the first time. Jazz musicians are starting to travel around to perform. And of course, what do you think they're bringing with them?

ABDULLAH: Lots and lots of reefer.

BEAN: And what does the reefer of that era have lots and lots of inside it?

ABDULLAH: seeds and seeds and seeds.

BEAN: And we may not enjoy getting a bunch of seeds in our weed, in our modern never stop world. But back then if you lived in a place where there was no weed growing around, that was good enough to smoke and some Hep jazz cat came to town, blew his horn in your face and

then left you with a nice bud of weed probably, you know, helped help keep the tour going. And inside it was the keys to your own self sufficiency of being a weed head.

ABDULLAH: They're literally the Johnny Apple seeds of cannabis. And in fact Johnny Appleseed was going around growing apples all over the countries so that people could make cider, would that shit and get fucked up. You know what I mean?

BEAN: Yeah. No one would move to the Midwest until there was a way to make alcohol and live frontier days.

ABDULLAH: Yeah. And here we have a bunch of jazz musicians going around the country, leaving their seeds, places where there were no seeds before, and thereby giving rise to cannabis crops all over the place. Shout out those guys.

BEAN: Yeah, to borrow a phrase, they come into your town, they help you party down and, and for many years to come. So then the next thing that starts happening, and this is so cool, is all these jazz musicians now start getting recording contracts, which are obviously super fair and you know, pay them based on their value to the, to the recording industry. But...

ABDULLAH: Everyone's getting tribe called quest before tribe called quest even existed.

BEAN: Yeah. That would be the dream deal back then. But they start recording songs that are like weed songs.

ABDULLAH: Ah. So I think I'm familiar with some of these songs are our theme song a of Great Moments in Weed History is cut from a Fats Waller song.

[Fats Waller in]

ABDULLAH: Ah, so there was a whole genre of this stuff at some point.

BEAN: Yeah, absolutely. For instance, there's Texas Tea Party by Benny Goodman.

[Texas Tea Party in]

ABDULLAH: ah, this is tea..

BEAN: Party. And then there's a song called Muggles by Louis Armstrong.

[Muggles in]

Speaker 1: 10:18 with muggles. Muggles was a jazz slang for weed back in the day. Oh, that's a great word. Give me a reefer by Bessie Smith.

[Give Me a Reefer in]

Speaker 1: 10:35 this is one of my favorites. Ella Fitzgerald cut a song called when I get low, I get high.

[When I Get Low, I Get High in]

BEAN: You know, who else was a musician of this era and had a very profound effect on the weed scene at the time.

ABDULLAH: Who's that?

BEAN: Harry J Anslinger.

ABDULLAH: What? He was a musician?

BEAN: His big ambition when he was a young person before he got into being a human paraquat and the first a head of the federal Bureau of narcotics and the guy who ran through federal marijuana prohibition.

ABDULLAH: Yeah. And the greatest enemy of cannabis in recent history.

BEAN: I would say he's the number one enemy of this podcast.

ABDULLAH: Yeah, yeah. Seriously.

BEAN: As a historical podcast.

ABDULLAH: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely. And American weed podcast. That's about weed history. Definitely Harry Anslinger, biggest asshole.

BEAN: Harry Anslinger wanted to be a concert pianist when he was young and he just didn't have the chops yet.

ABDULLAH: Get the fuck out of here. So you're telling me Harry Anslinger, the nephew of Andrew Mellon and the future head of the narcotics control board and enforcer of the marijuana tax act, and literally the propagator of reefer madness had a dream to become a musician, was not good enough, and failed at his primary objective in life, embittered to all the awesome people that can actually play their instruments, he turns into a narc, the original narc, the biggest narc and the worst narc of them all that is fucking mind blowing.

BEAN: So we can imagine that he does not dig listening to gimme, a reefer muggles or any of these other songs or a, if you're a Viper, our personal theme song.

ABDULLAH: Yeah, he's like, they're living my dream over there and having fun and playing music.

BEAN: How can I destroy that? He once said of the songs that secretly extol marijuana music half charms, but knock this music.

ABDULLAH: Oh my God, what a dick. So clearly he didn't know shit because that music is still super influential today and celebrated. so he was wrong about that too. Just saying.

BEAN: Yeah. Oh for two at least. and he threw a, some specific shade at Cab Calloway who had a hit with his 1933 song Reefer Man, which doubled as a somewhat impractical guide to finding a pot dealer. And here's the, the line that helps you identify a reefer man. If you need one cab Calloway says

[Reefer Man]

ABDULLAH: Calls watermelons pickles?

BEAN: Yeah. Like I said, it's somewhat impractical, but yeah, it makes a larger point. So Harry J. is like, I'm going after these fucking jazz musicians and it's just like the hip hop police of the 90's and beyond and they're like, fuck these musicians, they're having a good time. They're smoking weed. Women love them and love them. We don't love them. So he starts all these files on people. He starts trying to fucking set everybody up. And for like busts, he starts trying to make all these snitches. This goes so far, and this is a little idea for a stoner comedy that I have in the, on the back burner. This guy submits a proposal to Harry Anslinger. He's also a failed musician, but now he's like a cop in Sandusky, Ohio gets in touch with Harry Anslinger and he says, here's the pitch I'm gonna put together a jazz band comprised entirely of undercover fucking narcs.

ABDULLAH: And we're going to call it the Jonas Brothers.

BEAN: Well actually they had the name the Weed Hounds and the plan is we're going to tour all over the country and we'll like, like the Cotton Mouth Kings or Cypress Hill of our day. We're going to pull in everybody.

ABDULLAH: What?

BEAN: Yes.

ABDULLAH: Oh my God. And they're called the Weed Hounds, not subtle, a literal band of narcs.

BEAN: So this went all the way up to Anslinger and he said, okay, tell me how much it's going to cost. And that was when he said, no, it's too expensive.

ABDULLAH: Oh my God. But that is a fucking movie right there. The Weed Hounds.

BEAN: And my conception of it, they start out as these narcs but they realize...

ABDULLAH: They get involved in the culture and then they turn on the cops and whatever it's like...

BEAN: And then they smoke weed and actually get better at their instruments.

ABDULLAH: Which is true.

BEAN: despite all this crackdown and all this bullshit and fucking fake weed bands and narcs and, and snitches, people just keep smoking weed. and then the jazz scene is just full of weed heads and they are all about turning people on and creating this culture and really everything we understand about weed culture now in America, you know, certainly has strong roots in these, in these jazz guys, their personal style, their philosophy of life, their way of really like having a high respect for weed, you know, in a way that people don't about alcohol and a lot of other things, you know, they really wear it on their sleeve. None of the jazz scenes, cannabis aficionados is more respected as a player or more known as a ganja evangelist than Louis Armstrong. And here's in his own words to his biographer. "One reason we appreciated pot, as y'all call it now, was the warmth that always brought forth from the other person. When you're with another T smoker, it makes you feel a special kind of kinship. We called ourselves the Vipers, which could have been anybody from all walks of life that smoked and respected the gage."

ABDULLAH: That's a great thing about it. That's why so many friendships, our friendship and literally probably every friendship ease of us has is facilitated by cannabis because it's just that type of substance.

BEAN: That quote Louis Armstrong told to his biographer, but it does not appear in his autobiography because they fucking took it out.

ABDULLAH: No way. Really?

BEAN: And he was incensed and he told them his autobiography. Like I said, he's one of the most famous people in the world. He's an icon all over. And so the book is a huge bestseller. And they said, well, write a second book. And he said, Oh yeah, I'll write a second book, but going to be literally 100% about weed.

ABDULLAH: No way. Really?

BEAN: Yeah. And he was like, well, let me know when you're ready to publish that book. Otherwise I'm done writing books.

ABDULLAH: Holy shit. That's awesome. Did he ever end up writing that weed book?

BEAN: It was never published and there's no account of it, but there's a, you know, like the clear letters and everything of him saying that's the deal.

ABDULLAH: Oh man. Where is that book?

BEAN: Well, that's where we get these great quotes is from his biographer who was down, but you know, it all got cut out. So that's how it's been saved.

ABDULLAH: See, that is such a ridiculous thing that they would use to cut that out probably because he's talking about cannabis in a positive light. There's been plenty of autobiographies where people have talked about their substance use, in a discouraging way to the reader. You know what I mean? But here you have a guy speaking the truth about the healing power of cannabis and he's being silenced. This is censorship at its worst. And what's even more ridiculous is that it's senseless. It's completely fucking senseless. Why of all things would you cut that out? Your editing history.

BEAN: And we're a revising history in real time right now.

ABDULLAH: That's the point man. Because you know, if we weren't out here saying it, literally no one would, we got to find that weed book.

BEAN: So just to sort of set the scene of what the culture's like at this point, jazz is on the ascendant and these musicians are living a pretty good life in a pretty dark and repressive time otherwise.

[music in]

BEAN: So after the jazz clubs closed for the night, everybody gathers together at these places that are called T pads, which are like speakeasies where you walk in, you know, you'd probably pay a little money and somebody's private home. There's the jazz band, everybody's smoking weed, including the jazz band.

ABDULLAH: Wow, what a scene?

BEAN: Yeah. Maybe somebody made some food to sell, you know, however much a plate. And this would go all night. And this was also a completely integrated space.

ABDULLAH: No kidding. So there's people black and white and Brown all hanging out. There's lively jazz music playing. People are smoking weed, people are drinking, people are chilling and kind of just free to be themselves in this safe space.

BEAN: Yeah. And this is the incubator of all the new shit in jazz. You know, when you're playing for a paying audience, even if you're improvising, you're only going to get, so, you know, outside the lines, you have to entertain if you're, if you're promising that. But in these T Pat environments, it's like two in the morning, everybody's blazed. If you want to take it out and try some new shit, that's the place to do it. And also this is the only place where black and white and brown and everybody else musicians can play with each other. And that is super important.

ABDULLAH: Because everywhere else it's segregated.

BEAN: Yeah. And all the performance spaces certainly.

ABDULLAH: Wow.

BEAN: And so this is of course, this wonderful scene and there's 1938 article in the New Yorker by Meyer Berger. He writes this article T for a Viper where after like all this leg work, he finally gets entre into this T pad called Chappy's and he goes in and he has been jazzed up. Oh wow. I didn't even mean that by the cop. He's like asking the cops about about weed, cause he's writing an article. It's a year after federal, prohibition. And the cops are like, this is horrible. And he's like, well, let me see for myself some early legit weed journalism. And, and here's what he wrote. "Federal agents told me that Vipers -

ABDULLAH: weed smokers -

BEAN: - are always dangerous, that an overdose of marijuana generates savage and sadistic traits likely to reach a climax in acts and ice pick murders. So medical experts seem to agree that marijuana offers a shortcut to complete madness. They say it causes deterioration of the brain, but Chappy's customers scoffed at this idea. They said reefers only make them happy. And they didn't know a single Viper who was vicious or mad. And so, you know, that Viper song, that's our theme song. If you're a Viper, you know, the first line?

ABDULLAH: Dreamed about a reefer five feet long?

BEAN: That's right. And the next line is mighty Mez, but not too strong.

ABDULLAH: Mez! So I've heard some things about a character in weed history named Mez who brought the good weed and tells more about Mez.

BEAN: Yeah. So a Milton "Mez" Mezzrow, he grew up like a middle-class Jew in Chicago, but by 16 he's in juvie for stealing a car. And while he's in there, he learns how to play the saxophone

and he becomes like really obsessed with jazz music. When he gets out, he's practicing, he's trying to become a musician, he's getting little gigs and then he tries weed for the first time and here's how he described it in his 1946 autobiography, which is called *Really the Blues* and which is just an amazing like document at the time.

ABDULLAH: Okay. So this is in Mez Mezzrow's own words.

BEAN: Yeah. This is the first time he smoked weed. And here's him describing what happens when he goes right out to play music high for the first time in front of an audience. He says, "the first thing I noticed was that I began to hear my saxophone as though it was inside my head.

ABDULLAH: Yeah, that sounds kinda familiar.

BEAN: All the notes came easing out of my horn, like they'd already been made up, greased and stuffed into the bell. So all I had to do was blow a little and send them on their way, one after the other without an ounce of effort.

ABDULLAH: That is a great description because really, yeah, it feels like the music's going through you, you know, to quote a that DJ Shadow album really like the music is going through you in a way, you know what I mean? And you're just sort of channeling it.

BEAN: Yeah, absolutely. And so he immediately becomes a weed evangelist and so he gets a reputation for being like a pretty decent saxophone player and having the best weed. He gets the hookup.

ABDULLAH: Ah, and do we know where this weed is coming from? This crazy fire we'd have back then?

BEAN: Yeah. Well, what we know is he's in Chicago. It's originally from Mexico. he's getting it in Chicago. He doesn't, he's not like a smuggler. He does. He's got a hookup.

ABDULLAH: Okay, gotcha.

BEAN: He gets, he gets it and he distributes it. And this is his own words from, from the autobiography. He says, I used to get a Prince Albert tobacco can full of marijuana clean and without sticks or seeds in it for \$2.

ABDULLAH: and what's the equivalent of \$2 today.

BEAN: it's about \$30 in a current U S dollars. And you know, just the lid. These are big cans, that the tobacco used to come. And you ever heard the phrase a lid?

ABDULLAH: Yeah, a lid. So it's basically like the size of one of those cans. That's still, you buy a tobacco can like that at the smoke shop or a pharmacy.

BEAN: Yeah. And just the lid full is about an ounce. These are the big cans and that's where the term lid comes from. And I was really like kind of blown away to realize this is going all the way back to the twenties Mez is getting his weed in these cans.

ABDULLAH: Yeah. He's getting it for about 30 bucks. Right. Equivalent to today's 30 bucks. And that's a fair amount of wheat.

BEAN: That's a huge amount of weed and it's got no sticks or seeds in it. If no stems, no seeds, that's high end for this time. Even high end for a lot of places now.

ABDULLAH: Oh, totally. A lot of places in the world it's hard to get seed free weed.

BEAN: And then he throws a little shade at the end of this quote. You're ready for this. He says, talking about his own weed compared with the golden leaf I was getting in Chicago, the grief of they pushed around Detroit was like the scrapings off old wooden bridges. So he's definitely throwing some shade at that Detroit weed and I love that he calls it greefa.

ABDULLAH: Oh, because Oh yeah. Because that's what my Angelou called it, right?

BEAN: Yeah. One of my favorite episodes from season one. Definitely check it out. if you know who Maya Angelou is and love her, it's an incredible story. And if you don't, all the more reason.

ABDULLAH: It's true. She has a really amazing cannabis story and that one's definitely one to hear. And she called weed greefa as I guess a lot of people did at the time.

BEAN: And so we're going to take a break in a little bit, but before we do, quick question for you. Do you know how people started having quote jam sessions now?

ABDULLAH: No, how?

BEAN: This all starts in Chicago. No coincidence. The home of Mez Mezzrow where basically wherever Mez Mesereau would go after ours. All the weed loving musicians of Chicago would gather and yeah, like we said, black, Brown, white and everything in between. And he would find a spot, whether it was the basement of a club or you know, the back room of some place and he'd host these just impromptu smoke seshes. Naturally everybody brings out their instruments. Huh? Mez says, I think the term jam session, it originated right in one of those smokey sellers long before that of course, the colored boys. Okay. Parlane at the time.

ABDULLAH: Sure.

BEAN: Used to play together for kicks, but the idea was usually to try to cut each other, each one trying to outdo the others, improve himself best. Our idea being the Vipers was to play together and make our improvisation really collective.

ABDULLAH: That is fucking crazy.

BEAN: Yeah. And when we come back, we're going to travel with Mez and with his amazing a gold leaf. We'd to New York city sick. Alright. I can't wait to hear more about it. I'm a roll another joint. We'll be right back.

[Smoke Weedia]

ABDULLAH: And we're back. I've got a joint already rolled up, so I'm going to spark this thing and let's get into the second half of this story.

BEAN: Very apropos. You know, we're in a very weedy part of a very weedy story because Mez Mezzrow one half of our weed friendship is leaving his hometown sweet home, Chicago. He's heading to New York city. This is 1928. This is the height of the Harlem Renaissance. The city, and especially Harlem is, you know, again, one of these scenes and one of these places where it's happening where artists and writers and dancers and dissidents are all in the mix together. And there's just one thing missing there.

ABDULLAH: There weed sucks.

BEAN: Yeah. But it's not gonna suck for a long because the Mezis on the way.

ABDULLAH: Hell yeah.

BEAN: And he has got this interstate hookup now to the best reefer that anyone in the baked Apple has ever seen. And so he sort of immediately falls in with the local Viper scene, which is headquartered at a rib joint on 131st street called the barbecue, where they all go to like blaze up, have some food, and listen to the jukebox and trade jazz gossip. So here's how the Mez describes his landing in Harlem. Hmm. I laid it on the cats in the barbecue and pretty soon all of Harlem was after me to light them up. I wasn't working then and I didn't have much money, but I couldn't refuse to light up my new friends. Before I knew it, I had to write to my connection for a larger supply because everyone I knew wanted some.

ABDULLAH: Wow. Okay, cool. So he sees a market opportunity for sure.

BEAN: Yeah. I think his original intention, he's always a kind of a guy who like, he'd go to lunch and hook up his friends. And of course, you know, if you do that on the regs, you've got gotta have a little something for your time and your, efforts. He's more sorta that guy. But once he lands in New York and right in the heart of the scene, everybody is like, I gotta have some. And he says, well, there's the demand.

ABDULLAH: You get that supply in there.

BEAN: And so a Mez, you know, he sends the Telegraph back to the connect in Chicago. You know,send weed... need lots jazz lungs.

ABDULLAH: Jazz lungs. The best telegram ever sent.

BEAN: Yeah. And so he says, you know, overnight I was the most popular man in Harlem. I, he's of course be, you know, joking. But he says on the corner, I was to become known as the reefer King, the link between the races, the philosopher, the Mezz, pops boy pops being Louis Armstrong. the man that hit the world, the man with the righteous Bush and he who dig if the Digger.

A; The man with the righteous Bush is definitely my favorite one in there. Wow. This guy has a lot of aliases. He's a veritable Aphex twin.

BEAN: Yeah. And then the jazz scene of the time, and it's this wordplay thing that we always ended up coming back to, jazz slang is so rich because they're all big and they give him 15 nicknames cause they're all big and it's fun to come up with a new nickname for the weed dude. And then he says, you know, I don't mean to boast, but that's what the cats called me at different times. And just for verify that cause you know, here's a white dude showing up in Harlem and you know, saying I was at the center of all this stuff, but just to verify, so Cab Calloway a of reefer man fame, he wrote a dictionary of jazz slang at one point and the entry for Mez says, quote anything Supreme or genuine.

ABDULLAH: Ah, so the word Mez did just like came to mean dope. You know what I mean? Like really cool. And I mean that speaks volumes for the guy. And to boot, he brought the best fucking weed around into the party every single time. Sounds like a standup dude.

BEAN: Yeah. It's almost like how chronic, you know, not just means weed...

ABDULLAH: It means dope.

BEAN: It means chronic. Yeah. So Mezsays that mellow Mexican leaf that I brought really started something in Harlem, a whole new language, almost a whole new culture. The slogan and our circle of Vipers became 'Light up and be somebody'. Does that phrase light up and be somebody ring a little bell?

ABDULLAH: No. Where have I heard? Isn't it, is it in one of the songs?

BEAN: It is an episode, one of Great Moments in Weed History. It is what Willie Nelson's best friend told him when he gave him weed for the first time light up and be somebody.

ABDULLAH: That's right. Full circle, Holy shit. Light up and be somebody. that's kind of the tagline of this show, I feel like it's some way.

BEAN: Hey, light up and be somebody.

ABDULLAH: Thanks, man. I will.

BEAN: And so weed obviously is a huge part of how Mez Mezzrow and Louis Armstrong become very close friends and sometimes they collaborate. And so here is Louis Armstrong beyond a friend of the podcast, an icon. He says to man's man, they can say what they want to say about us Vipers, but you just dig them lush hounds always whipping their old ladies and wasting up all their pay. They come up town juice to the gills, cracking out a line and passing out in anybody's hallways. You know, coming up to Harlem, white people drunk acting like assholes. Don't nobody come up that way when they pick up on some good grass.

ABDULLAH: That's not the weed heads. That's never the weed heads.

BEAN: Yeah. And never will be there, no matter how much of this culture changes and adapts. I don't think it's ever going to be the asshole culture that's, that's in the plant.

ABDULLAH: Yeah. It mellows you out.

BEAN: And so I just love this aspect of their weed friendship at one point. Louis Armstrong and Mezzrow agree that they're going to smoke reefer every day for three months and then they're going to quit cold Turkey for two weeks to see what happens.

ABDULLAH: Interesting. Yeah. I mean, that's definitely a worthy experiment. I think. I've considered it.

BEAN: Yeah. I call that going home to New Jersey.

ABDULLAH: Yeah, right. Traveling abroad somewhere that doesn't have any weed.

BEAN: Yeah. So Mez says, you know, obviously the smoking weed part goes very well, but there are also like, okay, we can stop for two weeks and this is fine.

ABDULLAH: There's no repercussions. There's no withdrawal. There's no DT's. Cannabis is an easy thing to take a break from.

BEAN: And they are literally experimenting with marijuana.

ABDULLAH: Yeah.

BEAN: They're creating a scientific set of variables to test out and that's, you know.

ABDULLAH: Experimenting with not marijuana.

BEAN: And so, at one point this, this book, really the blues is just an amazing ride and like a first person account from the most respected, weed source of the day. And he talks about this one time a bunch of gangsters show up and are like, Hey, let us in on your action. We'll bank roll you, we'll make this thing huge, you'll get rich. And he's like, no fucking way. I don't want this to be a violent racket. I don't want you to have anything to do with it.

ABDULLAH: Ah. So he wanted to stay true to the cause.

BEAN: He definitely was all about the plant, you know, and he all about the plant and all about jazz. He's one of those guys who was like a jazz nerd and definitely a weed nerd in the best sense. And then these other guys show up and they are literally like a bunch of business assholes and they're like, it's not federally illegal yet. Cut us in on your action. Cause everyone knows he's got the fire.

ABDULLAH: Yeah.

BEAN: He's got like the, he started the fire.

ABDULLAH: Yeah.

BEAN: And he's like, no, fuck you. I don't like corporate cannabis. I don't want this to be big business. I just, it's fine how it is. So then in August, 1940, New York hosts the world's fair...

[music in]

BEAN: ...and they have a exhibit inside the worlds fair called New Orleans jazz club.

ABDULLAH: So basically, they're just pumping weed smoke in the room, like playing a jukebox.

BEAN: Well, they've got the jazz, they've got the bar, they've got the bar stools, they've gotten the alcohol. But guess what's the one thing they forgot to put?

ABDULLAH: Ah, a crucial piece. The weed.

BEAN: And so being very dedicated to authenticity, our beloved, Mr. Mezzrow, Mez to his friends, He who diggith the Digger, Man with the righteous Bush, First of his name, Bringer of Mez, he says..

ABDULLAH: Bringer of Fire.

BEAN: Prometheus's of our story. Prometheus of American cannabis says, I gotta make this shit real. So he tries to bring 60 pre-rolled joints in that he's gonna just slang and give people cool and like, hep it up, but he gets caught.

ABDULLAH: And is weed illegal now at this point?

BEAN: Yeah, it's 1940. So it's federally illegal and it's illegal in the state.

ABDULLAH: Okay. And it's very illegal. The last three years I've seen massive shifts, when it comes to cannabis and it's the dark ages. Anslinger is doing his thing.

BEAN: Yeah. That's a good point to make here up until all, like basically this part of the story kind of, this is federally legal and this is all, you know, there's state laws against it, so people are definitely fucked with but now we are entering this much darker period. And Mez, is up in the pens, but when he's checked into prison, he checks the box for Negro and cause he wants to be with the black people. He just figures it, it'll be better. Right?

ABDULLAH: Yeah.

BEAN: Even though he's a Jewish guy who looks like a Jewish guy, he just tells them I'm really light-skinned. they let him in. It's a segregated prison. and he immediately forms a jazz band with all these black dudes he's in prison with. And then there are there's a crew of Mexican Americans who are digging a tunnel nearby for the WPA and they start smuggling, they can hear this jazz band playing while they work and they dig it. So they bring them weed through this tunnel and give it to the band.

ABDULLAH: Holy shit. That is like cartoonish.

BEAN: That's the America I love.

ABDULLAH: Seriously. So they actually found a way to get weed into the prison?

BEAN: It was just a confluence of events. So FDR has got these guys, these Mexican-Americans digging a tunnel, a part of all these, New Deal projects. They were close enough to hear the jazz music. They start calling back and forth and one thing leads to another and they're like, yeah, we brought you a little gift, a little marihuana to fuel your jam session.

ABDULLAH: That's fucking awesome.

BEAN: And you know, while he's inside a Louis Armstrong who is really Mez's hero, they're real friends. They hang out on the daily, but he is his hero, you know, from long before they met.

And a Louis Armstrong just, you know, sends him letters of encouragement, you know, helps him with his family while he's stuck in prison, you know, and definitely steps up as a really good friend to him. And Louis Armstrong had also been arrested back in the day. So you know, he knew a bit of what he was going through.

ABDULLAH: Yeah, yeah.

BEAN: This happened to Louis Armstrong back in 1930 and he was outside the cotton club and Culver city and he as he describes it, he's with his a drummer, Vic Burton. And he and Louis Armstrong says, Vic and I were blasting this joint, having lots of laughs and feeling good. So who obviously shows up?

ABDULLAH: Well, everyone's having a good time and things are going well, so it's probably.. Da Police.

BEAN: And so Louis Armstrong says just then two big healthy dicks by which he meant detectives. they came from behind a car and nonchalantly said to us, we'll take the Roach boys. So these are as whole like Hollywood cops with a killer, like action movie line, all ready to go.

ABDULLAH: We'll take the road boys.

BEAN: And what they tell him is they're like, we're fans, man. We're sorry they gave us this assignment. Nothing we can do. Just so you know, you were ratted out by a rival band leader. Does that sound familiar?

ABDULLAH: Yeah. Didn't that also happened to Fela Kuti in that episode.

BEAN: Yeah. Yeah. I don't know what's up with these fucking band leaders that is failed musicians and then band leaders, probably like a subset of successful but controlling asshole musician.

ABDULLAH: Yeah, less successful than leader is also a failed musician, that's like a Sally Arie thing. You know what I'm saying? This is totally a trope. There's always a guy who sucks at music, who's jealous of the person that's awesome at music and they're going to try to undercut him every time.

BEAN: And so I'm going to bring it home then, with like I said, another great moment within a whole stash of great moments. So there's like many different versions of this story. I still think it's true. They can't all be true, but I think at least one of them must be true. And as the story goes, Louis Armstrong, and this is definitely true, he was a Goodwill ambassador by the state department and they sent them all over the world to perform like as an advertisement for America. And he would play super-popular concerts and he was working for the state

department. And the first couple of times he did this, they just took him right through customs without looking at his bags.

ABDULLAH: Ah, yeah. This was like back in the day used to be able to get away with this kind of shit.

BEAN: Especially if you were Louis Armstrong. Yeah. So he's, you know, got the whole man to take care of. And he's by the a, as the story goes, he's got like three pounds of weed with him and he's trying to, he's, you know, expecting to go right through the airport with this three pounds of weed and somebody pulls him aside and says, you know, you're going to have to go through customs.

ABDULLAH: Oh shit.

BEAN: And if you've ever seen Louis Armstrong on stage, he's a notoriously sweaty individual. And as the story goes, he goes from pretty calm and chilling in the airport to like, you know encore levels of Louis Armstrong's sweat.

ABDULLAH: Yeah. You know, there's like, you know, a famous picture of him playing and wiping his forehead with his handkerchief. Yeah. Yeah. Sweaty guy.

BEAN: Sweaty guy. He's in the airport. He's got three pounds of Mez. He's worried, who should come into this scene and I guess to save the day?

ABDULLAH: Mez, himself?

BEAN: The anti Mez.

ABDULLAH: The cops.

BEAN: Richard Nixon.

ABDULLAH: What? Richard Nixon himself.

BEAN: He is the vice president at this point. This is much later in the story. This is in the 1950s and there is sitting in the VIP section of the airport. He's sweating and worried. Richard Nixon just randomly walks in because he was flying somewhere else. He's a VIP and then I will give you, here's how Miles Davis told the story, which was told to him by somebody in Louis Armstrong's band who was there. So this is Miles Davis. When Nixon saw Satchmo...

ABDULLAH: Which is Louis Armstrong's nickname.

BEAN: Yeah. The vice president immediately rushed up to him and almost getting down on his knees. He grabbed for Satchmo his hand as if he was going to kiss it.

ABDULLAH: Whoa. The Nixon was a huge fan, huh?

BEAN: Yeah, he's slobbering all over him. Nixon began telling Louis Armstrong what a national monument he was. You're like the statue of Liberty. You're a national treasure. I'm your biggest fan.

ABDULLAH: Whoa. Random side of Nixon we're learning about here. He was apparently a jazz head.

BEAN: He certainly, you know, Louis Armstrong was very, very popular music of the day. We kind of think of it now as like jazz is more esoteric and he's the jazz guy and a little hole, but he was a pop star.

ABDULLAH: Right. Okay. Gotcha. So Nixon is kissing his ass real fucking hard.

BEAN: Yes. And so this little end to the story will bring us home and our great moment, Miles Davis continues. So when the flight was announced and everybody's going to go through customs and Louis Armstrong is sweating and scared, Nixon asks him, is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Armstrong? Now, this is Richard Nixon calling a black man, Mr. with like total respect and Louie doesn't miss a beat. He picked up a couple of pieces of his luggage with all the weed in them and he handed them to Nixon and he said, yeah, would you mind carrying these for me to the plain Mr. Nixon? And that was how Louis Armstrong got his stashed through customs.

ABDULLAH: Whoa. Holy shit. He actually used Nixon as a mule.

BEAN: He mule them up.

ABDULLAH: Holy shit. Literally the originator of the drug war was carrying around three pounds of jazz legend Louis Armstrong's weed onto a plane.

NIXON: Well, I'm not a crook.

BEAN: And I like to think of that as like a really long burn on Harry J fucking Anslinger. I outlived you. I lived your bullshit and I got your second coming. Like you said, Richard Nixon really launched that modern war on drugs to be my drug mule.

ABDULLAH: Dude, that's fucking insane.

[music in]

ABDULLAH: Definitely a really great moment in weed history because you have the face of authoritarian anti-drugness actually helping a jazz legend, smuggle weed onto a plane. It doesn't get any better in that. Who knew that Louis Armstrong, who is a household name was a weed head and has an amazing weed story. Well, that's it for this episode of great moments in weed history. Thanks for hanging out with us. We'll see you next time.

BEAN: Great Moments in Weed History is a Spoke Media production. It's hosted by me, David Bienenstock, AKA Bean and Abdullah Saeed.

ABDULLAH: We're produced by Cody Hofmockel and Brigham Mosley with help from Lee George and Reyez Mendoza.

BEAN: This episode was mixed by Evan Arnett.

ABDULLAH: Our head of post production is Will Short.

BEAN: Our executive producers are Alia Tavakolian and Keith Reynolds.

ABDULLAH: Check out our show notes where you'll find more information about things we discussed today and links to our sponsors.

BEAN: And if you really love the show, honestly the best thing you could do for us is to simply tell your friends about it at the next smoke sesh.

[music out]