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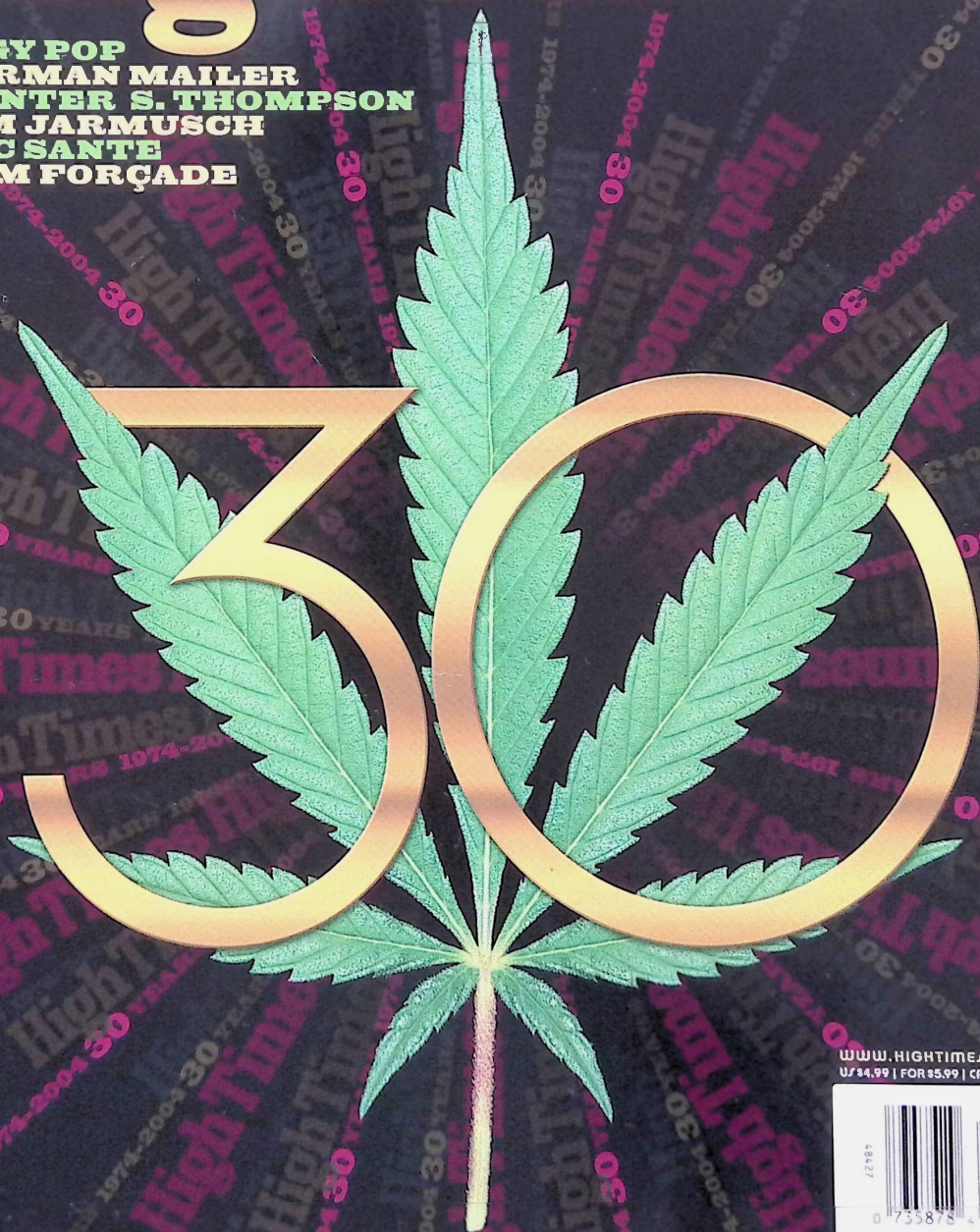
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CELEBRATING FREEDOM

NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 2004

High Times

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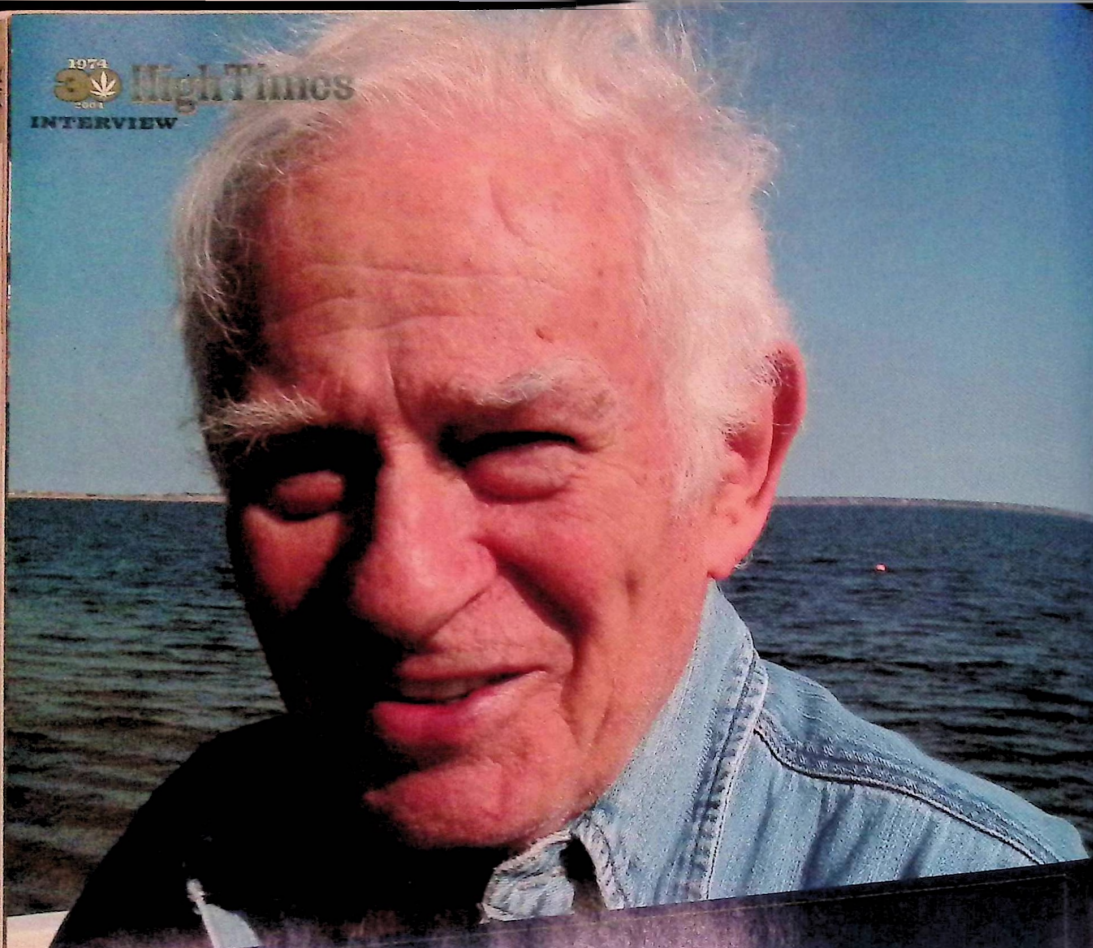


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NORMAN MAILER

High Times Interview by Richard Stratton

ON POT

Thirty years ago, when *High Times* was in its infancy, I did a long interview with Norman Mailer that was published in two parts in *Rolling Stone* magazine. Mailer and I first met in Provincetown, MA, in the winter of 1970 and have been close friends ever since. At one time we owned property together in Maine, which was put up as collateral for bail when I got busted for struggling marijuana in the early '80s. The Feds were all over the connection between Mailer and me; he testified for the defense at trial of my partner in Toronto, Rosie Rowbotham, who ended up doing over 20 years for importing hashish. Mailer later testified at my trafficking organization Rowbotham and I ran, along the lines of Timothy Leary's figurehead status with the Brotherhood of Eternal Love conspiracy out of Laguna Beach, CA.

But Mailer was more a friend of the cause than a co-conspirator. He certainly had what to an assistant United States attorney might qualify as "guilty knowledge." He knew what I was up to. I remember standing with him on the balcony of his Brooklyn Heights apartment

one night, looking out at the glittering behemoths of the Lower Manhattan financial district, then down at the containers stacked on the Brooklyn docks below like mini-skyscrapers and telling him, "Right down there, Norman, in those containers, there's seven million dollars' worth of Lebanese hash. All I have to do is get it out of there without getting busted." The novelist in him was intrigued, but the criminal in him would always remain subservient to the artist. The government put tremendous pressure on me to give them Mailer, as though he were some trophy I could trade for my own culpability. They were star-fucking: John DeLorean had been busted in a set-up coke case; Mailer's head would have looked good mounted on some government prosecutor's wall.

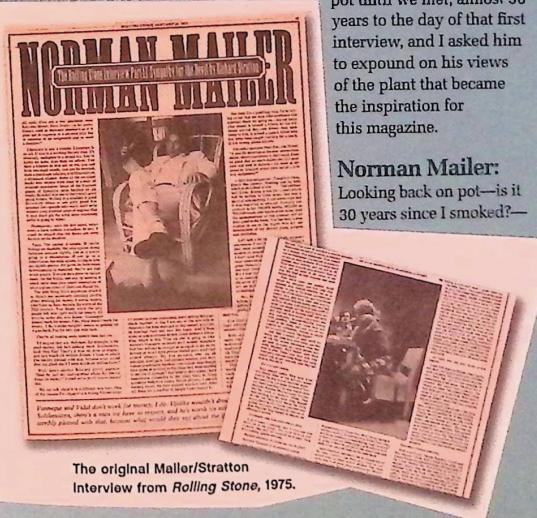
When I went to prison in 1982, Mailer became—after my mother—my most loyal visitor and correspondent. And when I was released in 1990, I stayed in his Brooklyn Heights apartment while the Mailer family summered in Provincetown. I've known Mailer's youngest son, John Buffalo, since he was born and turned to him when I needed someone to act in my stead here at the magazine while I finished work on the TV show I produced for Showtime. But, as with my criminal enterprise, Mailer has no financial stake in the outcome of the *High Times* mini-media-conglomerate conspiracy. He's an interested observer and adviser.

All this by way of saying there's real history here, so much so that there was never any pretense at making this a typical interview: it's more like a master speaking to an apprentice about what he has learned. I'd read Mailer extensively before I met him. His writing, in essays such as "The White Negro" and "General Marijuana," his nonfiction *The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner's Song*, and the novels *The Naked and the Dead*, *An American Dream*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and *Ancient Evenings*, to mention just a few Mailer works, have reshaped post-World War II American literature. Mailer's whole notion of the existential hipster living in the crucible of his orgasm probably contributed as much to my fascination with the outlaw life as the cannabis plant itself.

I've smoked pot with Mailer on a number of occasions and have always been impressed with where it took him: to the outermost reaches of the universe and back to the murky depths of the human psyche. But I had never really sat with him and got his thoughts on

pot until we met, almost 30 years to the day of that first interview, and I asked him to expound on his views of the plant that became the inspiration for this magazine.

Norman Mailer:
Looking back on pot—is it 30 years since I smoked?—



by the '70s I began to feel it was costing me too much. We'll get to what I got out of it and what I didn't get out of it—but by the '80s, I just smoked occasionally. And I don't think I've had a toké—and this is neither to brag nor apologize—in 10 years. But I look back on it as one of the profoundest parts of my life. It did me a lot of good and a lot of harm.

What I'd like to do today is talk about these dimensions of pot. People who smoke marijuana all the time are, as far as I'm concerned, fundamentalists. Their one belief is that pot is good, pot takes care of everything—it's their gospel. I think they're about as limited—if you want to get brutal about it—as fundamentalists. Fundamentalists can't think; they can only refer to the Gospels. Pot people can't recognize that something as good as that might have something very bad connected to it—which is not to do with the law, but what it does to you. That's what I'd like to talk about. The plus and minus.

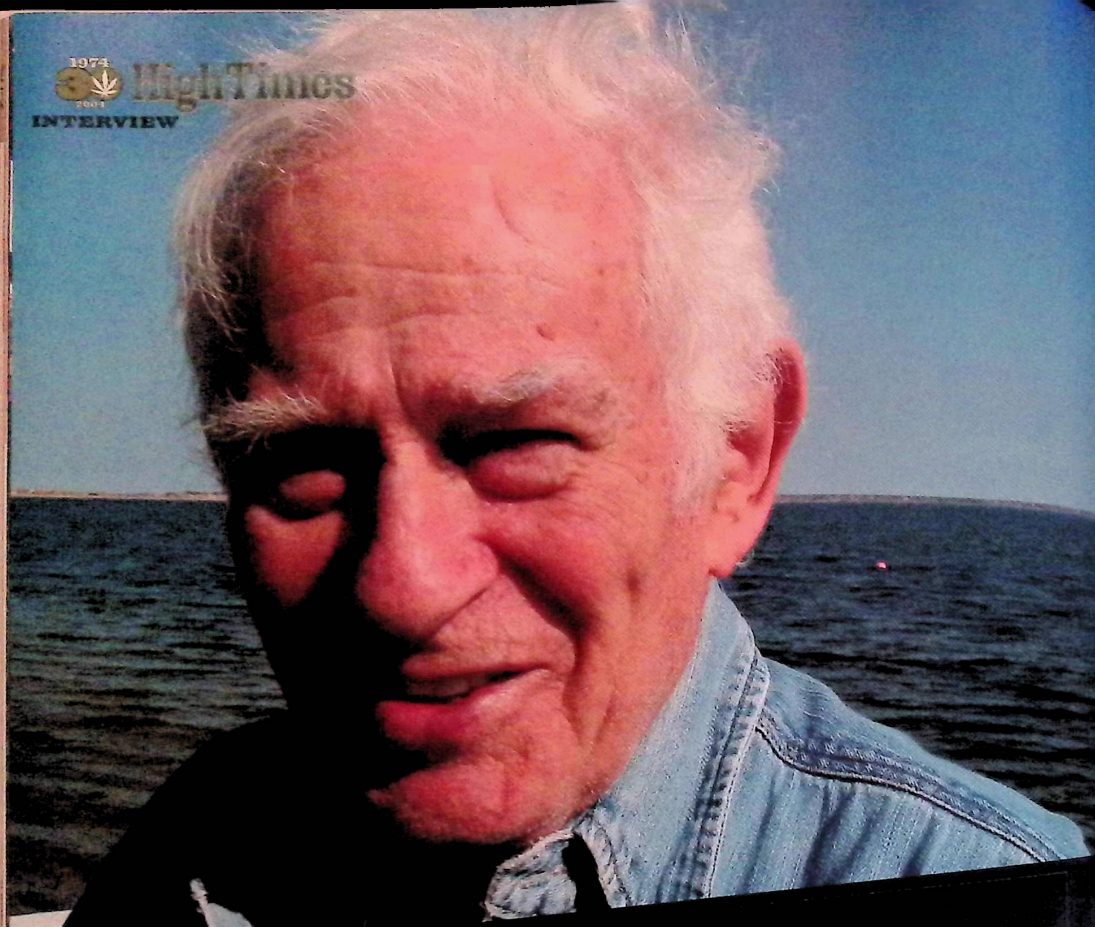
The other thing I'd like to talk about is the cultural phenomenon of pot. That is rarely gone into. Instead, people are always taking sides—pot's good, pot's bad; pot should be outlawed, pot should be decriminalized—there's always this legalistic approach. But I think marijuana had a profound cultural effect upon America, and I wouldn't mind seeing this magazine exploring all that pot did to the American mentality—good and bad.

Richard Stratton: Marijuana is already a huge cultural phenomenon. In the 30 years *High Times* has been around, pot has gone from a marginal anomaly in our society to something that's almost mainstream.

Mailer: Yeah, only not mainstream yet. Too many attitudes have settled in on pot, and there's too much dead-ass in the thinking of pot smokers now. Some 30 years ago when it was all new, we really felt we were adventurers—let's say 40 years ago—we really felt we were on the edge of startling and incredible revelations. You'd have perceptions that I still use to this day—that's part of the good. When I first began smoking, I was a typical liberal, a radical rationalist. I never believed in a Higher Power. I still dislike those two words—Higher Power. I didn't believe that God was there. I couldn't explain anything, because when you're an atheist, you're living without a boat on an island in the Pacific that's surrounded by water: There's nowhere to go.

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But Mailer was more a friend of the cause than a co-conspirator. He certainly had what an assistant United States attorney might qualify as "guilty knowledge." He knew what I was up to. I remember standing with him on the balcony of his Brooklyn Heights apartment

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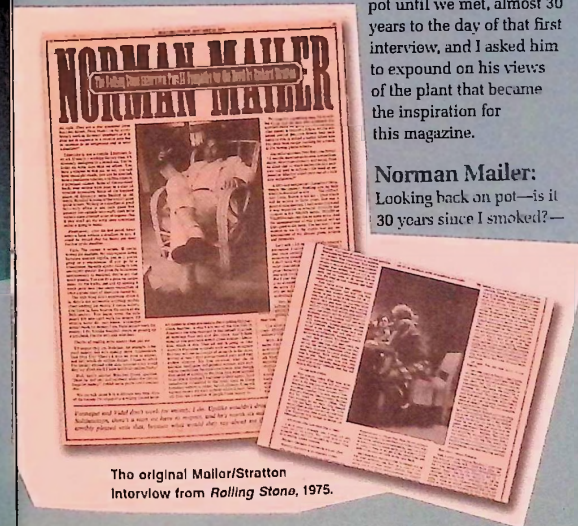
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The original Mailer/Stratton interview from *Rolling Stone*, 1975.

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'Were God and the devil both present when we smoked?'
Maybe God needed us to become more illumined?'



ON POT

It's hard enough to believe in God, but to assume there is no God, no prime force—how can you begin to explain anything that way?

I was a socialist, more radical than most liberals, but I was altogether a rationalist. I was also at the point of gutting into one or another kind of terminal disease, because my life was wrong. My liver was lousy and I wasn't even drinking a lot. My personal life was not happy and I was congested, constricted. I couldn't have been tighter. Then pot hit.

In the beginning, I remember that pot used to irritate the hell out of me, because nothing would happen when I smoked.

and vomited. I'd never vomited like that in my life. It was exactly as if I was having an orgasm of convulsive vomiting. Spasmodically, I was throwing off a ton of anxiety. I've never had anything like that since and I wouldn't want to. Not again. Pretty powerful convulsive experience.

Afterward, I rinsed my mouth out, went downstairs to where my then wife was sleeping on one couch, and I lay down on the

when I wrote about it, I would say that jazz is the music of orgasm. Because that was what it seemed to me. These very talented, charged-up players full of their joys and twists and kinks—God, they had as many as I did—were looking for the musical equivalent of an orgasm. They would take a song, play the melody, then go into variations on it, and they got themselves into a tighter and tighter situation with the take-off on the melody.

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'So many minefields have been built up to protect the intellect from pot, which is seen as the disrupter, the enemy.'

I've noticed that intellectuals with highly developed minds usually have trouble turning on. The mental structure is so developed, so ratiocinative. So many minefields have been built up to protect the intellect from pot, which is seen as the disrupter, the enemy. The first few times I smoked, I just got tired, dull and irritated. I was angry that nothing had happened. It went on like that for perhaps a year. Three, four, five times I smoked, and each occasion was a blank.

Then one night in Mexico I got into a crazy sexual scene with two women. We were smoking an awful lot of pot. Then one of the women went home and the other went to sleep and I felt ill and got up

other and stayed there. Then it hit—how that pot hit! I don't know if it ever hit any harder. It was incredible: I was able to change the face of my wife into anyone I wanted. It went on before my eyes. I could play all sorts of games in my mind. Whole scenarios. It went on for hours. When it was over, I knew that I was going to try this again.

A couple of days later, I was out in the car listening to the radio. Some jazz came on. I'd been listening to jazz for years, but it had never meant all that much to me. Now, with the powers pot offered, simple things became complex; complex things clarified themselves. These musicians were offering the inner content of their experience to me. Later,

can't speak musically, but I can tell what was going on in that odyssey. They were saying: This is very, very hard to get out, it's full of knots—but I'm going to do it. And they'd climb a tower of music looking to reach the gates at the top and break through. It wasn't automatic; very often they failed. They'd go on and on, try more variations, then more. But often they couldn't solve the problem they'd set themselves musically, whatever that problem was. And sometimes, occasionally, they would break through. Then it was incredible, for they would emerge with you into a happy land just listening to music. Other times they'd stop with a little flair, a sign-off, as if to say: That's it. I give up. All that was what I heard while high, and I loved it. I became a jazz buff.

Over the next couple of years, I went often to the Five Spot, the Village Vanguard, the Jazz Gallery. I'd hear the greats: Thelonious Monk, Sonny Rollins, Coltrane, Miles Davis. Those were incredibly heady years, listening to those guys for hours on pot, or without it, because once pot had broken into my mental structure, it had cracked the vice, you might say, that closed me off from music. I had become such a lover of pot that I broke up with a few friends who wouldn't smoke it. At the end of a long road—10 years down that road—I committed a felony while on pot. That didn't stop me, but I did smoke a little less as the years went on.

I'm a writer: The most important single element in my life, other than my family, has been my writing. So as a writer, I always had to ask: Is this good for my writing? And I began to look at pot through that lens. It wasn't all bad for editing—it was crazy. I'd have three or four bad ideas and one good one, but at the same time I was learning a lot about the sounds of language. Before, I'd been someone who wrote for the

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ON POT

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sense of what I was saying, and now I began to write for the sound of what I was writing.

Stratton: Like a jazz musician.

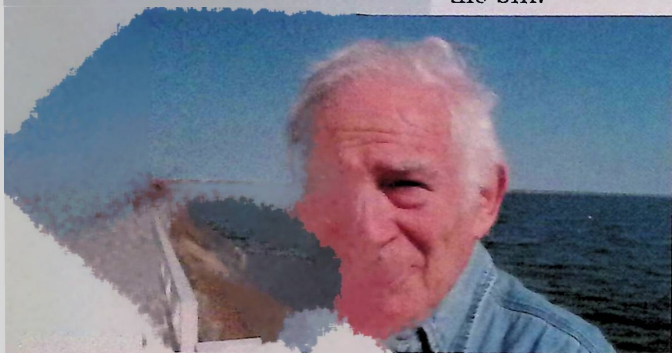
Mailer: Well, I wouldn't go that far, but to a degree, yes. I'd look for the rhythm of the long sentence rather than the intellectual impact, which often proved to be more powerful when it came out of the rhythm. So occasionally the editing was excellent. But it was impossible to write new stuff on pot. The experience was too intense. On pot, I would have the illusion that you need say no more than "I love you" and all of love would be there. Obviously, that was not enough.

Stratton: Let's talk about the detrimental aspects of pot, how you feel it worked against you.

truth comes in at the point of your pen. It just feels true. As you are writing! Such a moment is most certainly one of the reasons you write. But if I received similar truths via pot, I was no longer stretching my mind by my work as a novelist.

In fact, with the noticeable exception of Hunter Thompson, who has broken—bless him—has broken every fucking rule there is for ingesting alien substances...indeed, there's nobody remotely equal to Hunter—I don't know how he does it. I have great admiration for his constitution and the fact that he can be such a good writer with all the crap he takes into himself. Unbelievable, unbelievable—but no other writer I know can do it.

'Pot gives so much more than booze on the one hand—but on the other, never quite presents the bill.'



'I ended a few romances over the years because when I got on pot, I couldn't stop talking. And finally I remember one girl who said, "Did you come to fuck or to knit?"'

Mailer: Well, the main thing was that I was mortgaging time, mortgaging my future. Because I'd have brilliant insights while on pot but could hardly remember any of them later. My handwriting would even break down. Then three-quarters of the insights were lost to scribbles. Whenever I had a tremendous take on pot, I was good for very little over the next 48 hours.

But if you're a novelist, you have to work every day. There are no easy stretches. You do the work. Marijuana was terrible for that. So I had longer and longer periods where I wouldn't go near pot—it would get me too far off my novelistic tracks. When it hit, three or four chapters of my next book would come into my head at once. That would often be a disaster. The happiest moment you can have when writing is when a sense of the

Stratton: So you believe that, if you were to smoke some good pot right now, you'd let your mind go—and you might see the rest of the book in your head, but you might not have the impetus to sit down and write it?

Mailer: That's right. One mustn't talk about one's book. For instance, I'm doing one now where I haven't even told my wife what it's about. She's guessed—she's a very smart lady, so she's guessed—but the thing is, I know that to talk about this book would be so much more stimulating and easy and agreeable than to write it that I'd end up talking to people about what a marvelous book I could have done. I believe pot does that in a far grander way—it's the difference between watching a movie on a dinky little TV set and going to a state-of-the-art cinema.

Stratton: Most of the writing I'm doing these days is screenwriting. And because of the nature of the material I'm working on, I usually have a detailed outline. I know where I'm going, I've already seen the movie in my head. So when I write, after having smoked some pot, I find that what it does for me is I can just sit back and watch the scene play out in my mind. And I don't have to worry about getting lost, because I've got the structure of the screenplay holding me in check.

Mailer: I can see that would work for screenplays, but in a novel you've got to do it all.

Stratton: What about sex on pot?

Mailer: Sex on pot was fabulous. That was the big element. I realized I hadn't known anything about sex until I was able to enjoy it on pot. Then again, after a few years, I began to see some of the negative aspects. Once, speaking at Rice High School—I had a friend, a priest named Pete Jacobs, who'd invited me to speak there; it's a Catholic high school run by the Christian Brothers in Manhattan, and it's a school well respected by a lot of Irish working class all around New York, Staten Island, Queens, because they give you a very good, tough education there. The Christian Brothers are tough. But Pete told me, "Say what you want to say. These kids will be right on top of it." They were. They weren't passive students at all. One of them asked me, "How do you feel about marijuana and sex?" And I gave him this answer: You can be out with a girl, have sex with her for the first time on pot and it might be fabulous—you and the girl go very far out. Then two days later you hear that the girl was killed in an automobile accident and you say, "Too bad. Such a sweet little chick." You hardly feel more than that. The action had exhausted your emotions. On pot, you can have a romance that normally would take three to six months to develop being telescoped into one big fuck. But over one night, there's no loyalty or allegiance to it because you haven't paid the price. About that time, I realized that fucking on pot was crazy because you'd feel things you never felt before, but on the other hand, you really didn't attach that much loyalty to the woman. Your feelings of love were not for the woman, but for the idea of love. It was insufficiently connected to the real woman.

'When it comes to the legalization of pot, I get dubious. Pot would be taken over by media culture. . . . All the same, the corporate bastards who run most of America will not legalize it in a hurry. Pot is still a great danger to them.'

it bounced off her reality rather than drawing you toward it. Other times, you could indeed get into the reality of the woman and even see something hard and cold and cruel in her depths, or something so beautiful you didn't want to go too near it because you knew you were a lousy son of a bitch and you'd ruin it.

One way or another, I found that pot intensified my attitudes toward love, but it also left me detached. It was a peculiar business. So there came a point where I began to think: Who gave us pot? Was it God or the devil? Because by now, I was my own species of a religious man. I believed in an existential God who was doing the best that He or She could do.

God was out there as the Creator, but God was not all powerful or all wise. God was an artistic general, if you will—a very creative and wonderful general—better than any general who ever lived. By far. But even so, generals finally can't take care of all their troops. And the notion of people praying all the time—begging for God to watch over them, take care of them—so conflicted with what I felt. I felt that God cannot be all good and all powerful. Not both. Because if He's all good, He is certainly not all powerful. There's no way to explain the horrors of history, including the mid-century horrors of the last century, if He is all good. Whereas if God is a great creator—not necessarily the lord of all the universe, but let's say the lord of our part of the universe, our Creator—then God, on a grander scale, bears the same relationship to us that a parent does to a child. No parent is all wise, all powerful and all good. The parent is doing the best that he or she can do. And very often it doesn't turn out well. That made sense to me. I could see our relation to God: God needs us as much as we need God. And to me, that was exciting, because now it wasn't a slavish relationship anymore. It made sense.

Stratton: You feel marijuana helped you discover this existential God?

Mailer: No question. That was part of the great trip. But I began to brood on a line that I'd written long before I'd smoked marijuana, a line from *The Deer Park*. The director who

was my main character was having all sorts of insights and revelations while dead drunk, but then said to himself, "Why is my mind so alive when I'm too drunk to do anything about it?" That came back to haunt me.

Because I thought: Pot is giving me so much, but I'm not doing my work. I don't get near enough to the visions and insights I'm having on pot. So is it a gift of God—pot? Or does it come from the devil? Is this the nearest the devil comes to being godlike? It seemed there were three possibilities there: One could well be that marijuana was a gift of God and, if so, must not be abused. Or was it an instrument of the devil? Or were God and the devil both present when we smoked? Maybe God needed us to become more illuminated? After all, one of my favorite notions is that organized religion could well be one of the great creations of the devil. How better to drive people away from God than to give them a notion of the Almighty that doesn't fit the facts? So, I do come back to this notion that maybe God and the devil are obliged willy-nilly to collaborate here. Each thinks that they can benefit from pot: God can give you the insights and the devil will reap the exhaustions and the debilities. Because I think pot debilitates people. I've noticed over and over that people who smoke pot all the time generally do very little with their lives. I've always liked booze because I felt: It's a vice, but I know exactly what I'm paying for. You hurt your head in the beginning and your knees in the end, when you get arthritis. But at least you know how you're paying for the fun. Pot's spookier. Pot gives so much more than booze on the one hand—but on the other, never quite presents the bill.

Stratton: I'm not sure that's true of every one who smokes pot.

Mailer: I'm sure it's not.

Stratton: A lot of people are motivated by pot, I am, for one.

Mailer: What do you mean, "motivated"?

Stratton: I mean that it doesn't debilitate me. I don't want to sit around and do nothing when I'm high. I get inspired, energized.

I don't subscribe to the theory of the anti-motivational syndrome. If anything, when I'm straight, I'm often too hyper and too left-brain-oriented. I go off on tangents and I don't stop to look around and try to find a deeper meaning in what I'm doing.

Marijuana will slow me down and allow me to connect with the mood of what's going on around me. And that, in turn, inspires me to go further into what I'm trying to do.

Mailer: I ended a few romances over the years because when I got on pot I couldn't stop talking. And finally I remember one girl who said, "Did you come to fuck or to knit?"

[Laughter]

Stratton: That's one of the interesting things about marijuana—how it affects everyone differently. It seems to enhance and intensify whatever's going on in the person at any given moment. Let's say that we were going to do some stretching right now and we did it straight. We'd be like, "Oh, man, this hurts. This is an ordeal." Now if we smoke a little pot and then stretch, it would feel good and put us more in touch with our bodies and the deeper sensations of the activity.

Mailer: I learned more about my body and reflex and grace, even, such as I have—whatever limited physical grace I have, I got it through pot showing me where my body, or how my body, was feeling at any given moment. Here, I can agree with you. Dancing—I could always dance on pot. Not much of a dancer otherwise, but on pot, I could dance. There's no question it liberated me. All of these good things were there. All the same, when it comes to the legalization of pot, I get dubious. Pot would be taken over by media culture. It would be classified and categorized. It would lose that wonderful little funky edge that once it had—that sensation of being on the edge of the criminal. All the same, the corporate bastards who run most of America will not legalize it in a hurry. Pot is still a great danger to them. Because what they fear is that too many people would no longer give a damn about the corporation—they'd have their minds on other things than working for the Big Empty. To the suits, that makes pot a deadly drug. The corporation has a bad enough conscience buried deep inside to fear, despite their strength, every type of psychic alteration that they haven't developed themselves. HT

Coming in Part 2: Mailer on the corporatization of democracy.