

# HOMEGROWN TRUTHS

Ron Mann's *Grass* Lights a Torch For Reefer Sanity

By Steve Gravestock

# GRASS



## Some filmmakers stumble on to their subjects; others get them handed to them.

For Ron Mann, his latest film *Grass* was something else entirely—fate. “Back in 1979, I made my first film—a short called *The Only Game in Town*. Later on it won an award from the Academy of Canadian Cinema, and it went out to theatres and played in front of Cheech and Chong’s *Up In Smoke*,” laughs Mann. “So in a lot of ways this was a film I was destined to do.”

A seven-year labour of love and dedication, Mann’s fifth feature-length documentary, *Grass*, is an appealing (and often appalling) expose about America’s war on drugs: marijuana division. “My real aim was to do an *Atomic Café* on drugs,” explains Mann, “to make the film as entertaining as those obscure antidrug movies the government produced. The same hysterical reaction to the Cold War would be similar to the hysterical reaction to the drug war.” Narrated by notorious hemp spokesperson Woody Harrelson, the film begins at the turn of the century, when Mexican migrant workers introduced marijuana to the border states and were immediately persecuted for it. Not because anyone was especially upset about the weed itself, but because the Mexicans made an easy political target for politicians and the yellow press.

Stylistically, the film is perhaps the most layered of all Mann’s films—with more stock footage than he has ever used before and almost no interviews. He wanted to get away from the television style of documentary, which oscillates relentlessly between interview and clip. A barrage of different techniques, the film features animated graphics (which divide it into very specific sections, and play on the drug-war metaphor to hilarious effect); priceless archival footage, ranging from the aforementioned anti-dope flicks to obscure 1960s television shows; and public service announcements about the demon weed. Harrelson’s laconic narration suggests a pro-pot Gary Cooper. And if you heard Guido Luciani’s lush orchestral score alone you’d be more likely to associate it with a Pink Floyd album than a documentary. (In some way, the assembled participants and the subject made odd bedfellows. Luciani’s instructions to the orchestra—that this wasn’t the kind of grass you’d find on your lawn—prompted the reply, “Well, maybe not on your lawn.”) There’s also a campy, propulsive vintage soundtrack.

“Film needs a voice and the voice of our film is rationality,” says Mann. “We have a narrator, Woody Harrelson, who is really just telling the facts. We also have a kind of irreverent use of music which provides a kind of meta-commentary all the way through. It also just triggers people—it puts them there.” Much of the first half of *Grass* is devoted to the exploits of one Harry J. Anslinger, America’s first antidrug czar, and one of the most shadowy and compelling characters you’re ever likely to encounter on-screen. A lifelong bureaucrat and media genius/whore, whose career echoes those of J. Edgar Hoover and Estes Kefauver (the Midwestern senator who

was one of the principal proponents of comic-book censorship), Anslinger paved the way for the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and the Drug Enforcement Agency. His main tool was a full-scale media campaign about the evils of pot, despite the fact that there were far more dangerous narcotics out there (most notably heroin).

As Mann illustrates, it was a precisely targeted onslaught. “The reason the antimarijuana campaign really took off was because it was called the ‘Assassin of Youth,’” says Mann. “And if I was reading in the newspaper that there was this new drug that caused murder and death and insanity and they were selling it in schoolyards, I’d be concerned too.” As a result of this campaign, Anslinger was able to bully the states into turning drug enforcement over to the federal government—and accrue a great deal of political clout along the way. “You look at Anslinger’s archives, and he supplied heroin to Roy Cohn. He’s a very powerful figure, in part, because he had some very powerful partners; powerful and dangerous—the drug industry and pharmaceutical industry, for example—who would lobby on his behalf. He would also have temperance organizations and the police backing him.”

Of course, not all of Anslinger’s publicity efforts worked as well. Says Mann: “Anslinger tried to round up, for publicity purposes, a massive jazz musician bust. But his team members came back and said, ‘We can’t do it. We can’t infiltrate.’” Despite his overwhelming power, Anslinger is almost a completely unknown entity outside of pot activism circles. Mann first heard about him when he found a book called *Reefer Madness* in the early 1980s. “It had an introduction by William Burroughs, who said that he [Anslinger] was responsible for the beginning of fascism in America. I found that history fascinating. He was a J. Edgar Hoover type and I really wanted to tell his story. My view is a little different from that book. I think Anslinger was just misguided; he’s really someone who believes that he’s protecting people, as temperance people do. Unfortunately, it gives them justification to go to great lengths, to do just about anything.

“It’s interesting about Anslinger. When he was a little kid he saw his next door neighbour suffer from heroin addiction. That was the beginning of what he says made him committed to wiping out all narcotic evil. In a way, I can understand why that traumatized child, as simplistic as that sounds, wanted to protect others from the horrors of heroin addiction. But the problem was the addict should have been treated by a doctor rather than treated as a criminal. Basically, Anslinger was a cop who had the view that all addicts were criminals.”

If Anslinger’s 19th-century, temperance ethics make him somewhat understandable, the focus of the film’s second half—Richard Milhous Nixon—is far less sympathetic in Mann’s eyes: “[He] was very much concerned with power and using it for his own political goals.” Nixon emerges as a key figure because of his decision to escalate the war on drugs, while tossing out a report that recommended the decriminalization of pot, a report he commissioned. Nixon’s actions came at a critical point—right when the public consensus on pot was changing and people were becoming more tolerant. In the intervening decades, subsequent administrations (with the

lone, notable exception of Jimmy Carter) have flooded money into the war on drugs. That fact is driven home by art director Paul Mavrides' graphics—which tabulate the outrageous sums of money spent during each decade—including \$200 billion during the Clinton administration accompanied by 600,000 arrests, which makes you wonder just what Clinton was inhaling.

"When I began this film," recalls Mann, "most people that I talked to didn't know how marijuana was criminalized. People didn't know who Harry J. Anslinger was. There's this historical amnesia and, if we're at a moment where the consensus is changing, it's really important that the debate not be swept away again," warns Mann. "You can look at the film as a cycle of reefer madness and it's also a kind of call for reefer sanity. People might want to see more of an upbeat ending. They might want to see more about medical marijuana, the decriminalization movement, but all I see is more money being spent and more arrests."

## Which brings us to one of the key points of the film. *Grass* isn't merely a history of marijuana laws, it's an analysis of political subterfuge and opportunism.

As filmmaker and Mann associate Jim Shedden (*Brakhage*, which Mann produced) once pointed out in conversation, the ostensible subjects of Mann's work function as entry points to much deeper and more problematic (and usually highly charged political) issues—from *Imagine the Sound* and *Poetry in Motion* through to *Comic Book Confidential* and *Twist*. *Chicago Reader* critic Jonathan Rosenbaum told Mann that *Grass* is the film that most resembles the work of Mann's mentor, fiercely political documentarian Emile de Antonio (who made *In the Year of the Pig*, *Millhouse: A White Comedy* and *Point of Order*).

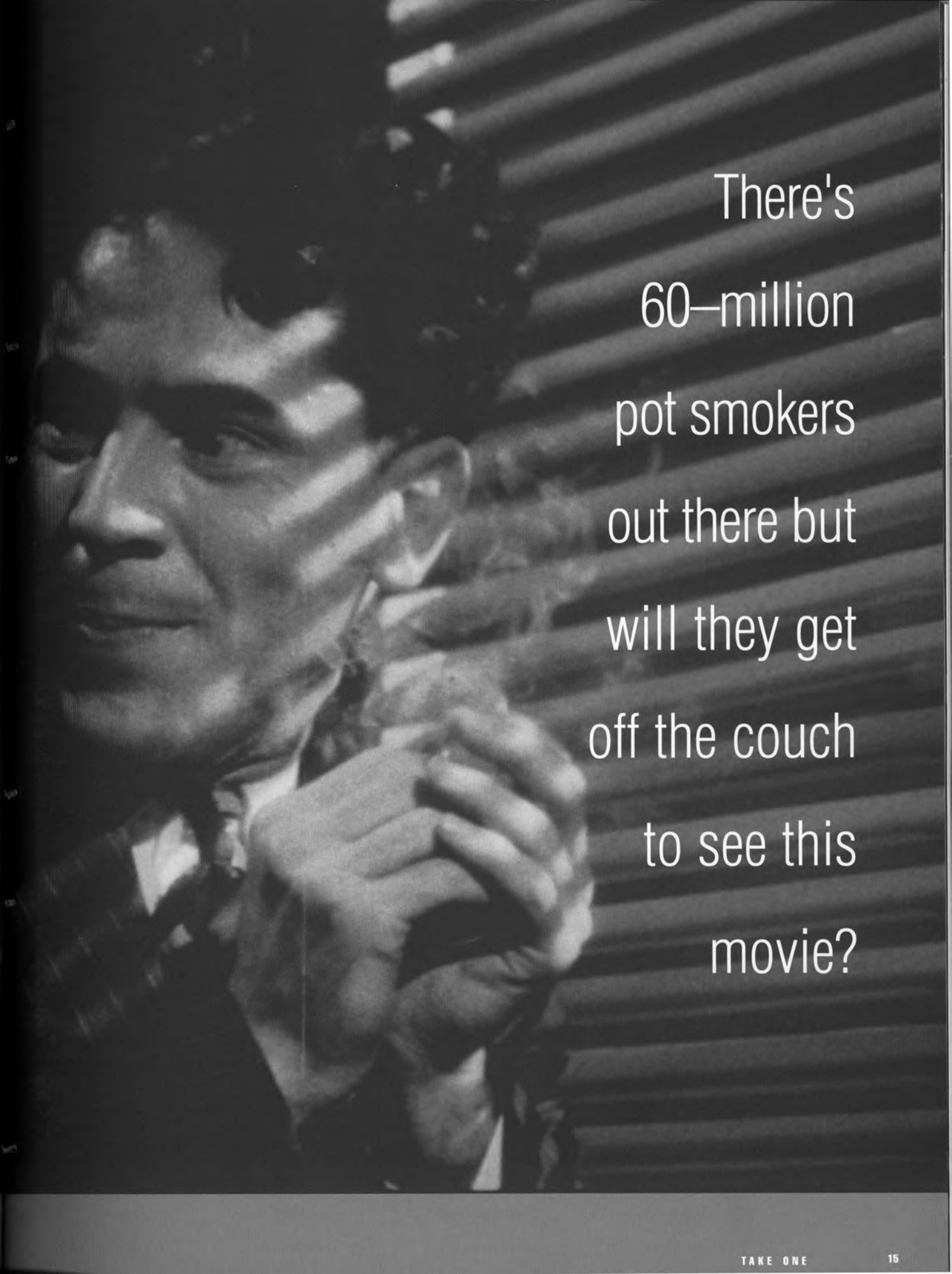
"Most of my films celebrate popular culture, underground artists, marginal artists," says Mann. "They bring them to a mainstream audience. This film brings an underground issue forward, but it's motivated by a desire to do what's right. That's very different. That makes the film political. I was surprised at the reaction to the political content. I think people do respond to the wastefulness of the American war on marijuana—

especially the cost. There is a political point being made—more overtly political than anything I've ever done—and it's summed up by Woody Harrelson saying it [the American antimarijuana campaign] has been misguided and totally ineffective." (The political nature of drug laws and antidrug campaigns, incidentally, is underlined by a story in *The Globe and Mail* the week before the screening of *Grass* at the Toronto International Film Festival. The story detailed how Mexico's economy was harmed by being designated as soft on drugs, an idea spearheaded by the United States—the kind of moral and political chicanery *Grass* exposes.)


Like *Comic Book Confidential*, Mann's best-known film, *Grass* explores a paradox. The former looks at artists who were neglected because they worked in a popular, trashy medium; the latter looks at another guilty pleasure. "It [pot] is the most popular [subject I have tackled]," says Mann. "It's just not acknowledged as being popular—people don't admit that they smoke pot because no one would admit that they're a criminal. Would you admit that you smoke pot? It's an unpopular history. There's still a taboo about it. Most people I know are still hypocritical about it. In a way we haven't come to terms with marijuana. The boomers haven't...to be honest or upfront about it."

The film touches on several of Mann's recurring themes: children and education as political footballs (evident in *Comic Book Confidential* and *Dream Tower*, his account of Rochdale, Toronto's late 1960s alternative college) and the underlying racism of U.S. government policies—and by extension American society (one of the key themes in *Twist*). The persecution of the Mexican workers and the residents and musicians of Harlem bring this home in the early part of the film. An interview with a white, middle-class college girl who faces charges for possession augur in a sea change (albeit a brief one) about two-thirds of the way through. "Laws changed when they affected the white middle class, especially the daughters and sons of the white middle class," Mann notes. "That's the only reason. If it was just blacks and Mexicans smoking pot believe me no one would care. That's the history of Prohibition. Its roots are racist."

At heart, though, the film's principal subject is control—not only of facts and figures—but mythology and history. The war-on-drugs graphics are accompanied by a similar set detailing the various myths propagated about pot. One of the comic high points in the film is the Reagan-sponsored myth—"Pot is bad for you, though we're not sure why." If the film has enough texture and subversive humour to satisfy any pothead, it's also analytical enough to give Noam Chomsky a good buzz. "You need to know who's generating it [information] and to what purpose," explains Mann. "I don't let people off the hook easily. We have a history of the same lies being told over and over and over. I said at the beginning of the film that if you lie and keep on lying, people will eventually believe the lie, which is perhaps what William Burroughs was talking about."



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Control, in more ways than one, is an ongoing concern for Mann, whose compilation films depend on access to archival footage. For Mann, an underground filmmaker who works aboveground (he clearly envies the freedom of avant-garde filmmakers like San Francisco filmmaker Craig Baldwin, who disregards almost every conceivable copyright licencing law), it's an increasingly difficult battle to obtain it. He swears this will be his last compilation film. Seven years ago, when I interviewed him about *Twist*, he railed against garbage collectors who purchased archival material for the sole purpose of cashing in. Now inflation has entered the picture. "[The costs] have gone up," says Mann. "It's gone crazy. One company charged me \$40,000 for three clips and these clips were each less than a minute. Because of the specialty channels, a lot of conglomerates are buying up archives. Potentially, we won't be able to license our history the way that things are going."

*Grass* itself presented a very particular problem—especially with the music. "I went through many [music] lists and came up with about 1,500 marijuana songs. A lot of them I couldn't put in. There's an economic censorship that happens because you can't afford something and then there are

publishers who don't want to associate with a film about grass. A song like *Tea For Two* we couldn't use. We contacted Herb Alpert's publishers because we wanted to use *Tijuana Taxi*. Alpert wrote them a note that said we were all going to burn in hell.

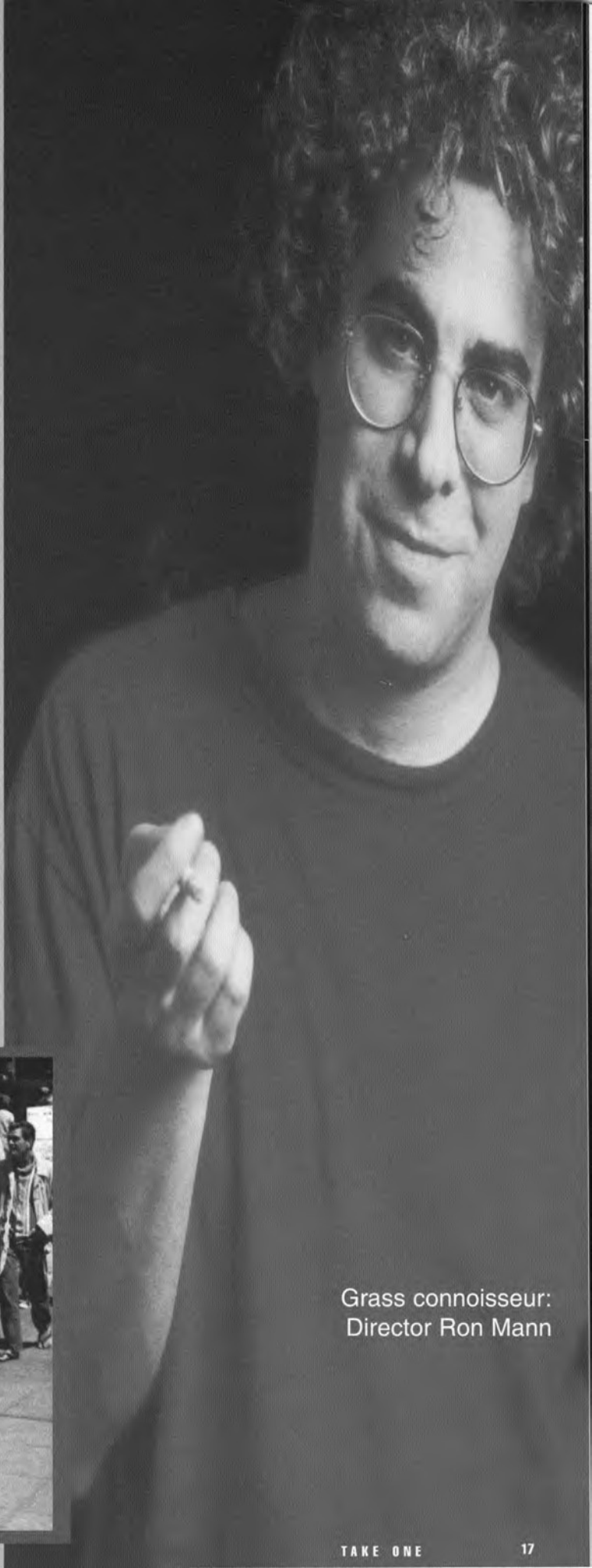
"Negotiating the music rights was a truly arduous task, one that stretched the editing process out much longer than needed, especially when you consider that the film was cut to its soundtrack. In one sequence we had *The Joker* and we couldn't use that," he says, "then we had Friends of Distinction's *Grazing in the Grass* and we couldn't use that; so we wound up using *Takin' It to the Streets*. That one sequence had four different songs."

One of the things that buoyed Mann during the making of *Grass* was the commitment displayed by the group of people around him—editor Robert Kennedy; art director Paul Mavrides; co-producer Sue Len Quon; musical director Guido Luciani; narrator Harrelson; and sound designers Rosnick MacKinnon. "When I asked Woody Harrelson why he agreed to be the narrator," says Mann, "he said he just wanted to do what's right and, in a way, that sums up why

people got involved with the movie. It takes a lot of courage for Woody Harrelson to come out and be an activist," he reflects. "People don't want to be activists; people just want to say everything's okay. It's not okay. It's worse now than it's ever been."

Part of Mann's mission, of course, is to preserve and/or revive some of the spirit of the 1950s and '60s, though not in any sort of nostalgic way. From *Imagine the Sound* to *Grass*, his work focuses on artists and activists who might otherwise have been overlooked, and, perhaps even more significantly, their reasons for doing what they did. "I have reacted against the revision of history and you can look at *Grass* as part of that same reaction," Mann says. "The 1980s produced a reduction of the 1960s, where everything then was sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. That's very alien to me. A lot of progressive thinking came out of the cross-fertilization of the arts in the 1960s. *Dream Tower*, for example, was about education sprung from some very conservative thinking. There were a lot of mistakes made about education in the 1960s, but there were a lot of things that we could learn from today. It's almost the year 2000 and you've got to look forward, but I think the same issues still exist.

"Really, it [*Grass*] is all just part of a bigger picture," adds Mann. "I have a lot of films still to make. But I have this commercial drive to make the films a little bigger. I could make a film about underground radio, which is what I really want to do, but it would be commercial suicide," he pauses. "But who knows, I may do it anyway." Meanwhile, Mann is betting on an audience that hasn't been relied on since the heyday of Jodorowsky and the midnight movie. If he succeeds, he may just disprove one of the most prevalent myths about marijuana. "There's 60-million pot smokers out there," he asks, "but will they get off the couch to see this movie?" ♦



Grass connoisseur:  
Director Ron Mann

