

# GIGS

## CHEECH AND CHONG -- COLORADO SPRINGS -- 1972

It's past cliché that concerts were a different thing in the sixties (a period of American history that took place between 1965 and 1975, more or less) than they are now. And not just the prices and impact. It's like a church that got defrocked and petered off the rock. We're left with icons, with a Last Supper painting of those who died before we got tired of them, with second-hand memories and rumors.

But who was the major icon of that era? Who put the stamp on the times, survives them to continue as they were and will be?

Not Hendrix or the Zep or Credence or even the Floyd. Or any of the litany of those who succumbed at 29 years of age to Rock Star Disease. In fact, it's not always the musicians who stamp the times in their image. Who remembers bands of the time as much as they remember Hope and Crosby on the Road? You still see FaceBook memes of George Carlin; Lenny Bruce types the beat proto-hip era more than any music of that day. And the Sixties were uniquely summed up by the careers of a couple of kultur klatch comics called Cheech and Chong. They were uniquely of those times, and did a lot to make them as they were. They weren't guitarists or singers—they were Dopers. And still are. And they're still Cheech and Chong. Can Led Zeppelin say that? Can Eric Clapton? Does going to a concert by Zep or Floyd or Stones bring it all back? Not really. Go to one and get a load of the people. It ain't your mama's sixties, pilgrim. But crawl into a VW van with Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong and I'm betting you'll Be There Now. It was an attitude. And a lot of that attitude was a molecule. The bestrode the times like giants.

I was not all that aware of that in 1972, when I pocketed my two comped tickets to see their act and hopped in the 1964 Barracuda belonging to my roomie, Chris, who couldn't attend because he was still kicking a malady he'd picked up during a junket to India to study at the lotus feet of the 14 year old Perfect Master, *Guru* Maharaji. No longer a doper anyway, at that point. I had no use for 14 perfect masters, myself because I was still a doper, and dope dealer, and much more inclined towards a fat doober and a 16 year old perfect mistress. I fired up the peculiar Barracuda (remember them? with the 14 square foot aft Vistadome we used to call "Ass Under Glass"?) and headed toward my Date with the Decade.

I was going to pick them up at the glassy, tacky towers they'd erected on the site occupied for years by the redstone Antlers Hotel, it's two staunch towers framing the view of Pikes Peak as you drove into Colorado Springs on Pikes Peak Avenue. A treasure replaced by junk—I was taking a jaundiced view of the coming decade already.

Then I was going to drive them to their concert, then drive them home whenever they felt like it. The promoter, Barry Fey, had asked me on the phone if I could take care of getting them to the show. I kept a straight face when I told him I could somehow find it in me to help him out. And thanks for the tickets. Just me and Cheech and Chong and the Barracuda. This is what publishers of underground counterculture papers are really in it for. Hypocenters.

Oh, and I was going to try to sell them some dope. Go ahead, giggle. Or chuckle or guffaw or whatever. How do you know the Kings of Dope don't regularly score from ragtag dealers in small Colorado cities, huh? Anyway Chucky made me promise to give it a try.

Actually, I thought trying to sell drugs to rock stars was pretty silly. Most especially those particular stars. But did promise Chucky, and he was my partner. He would have been there hitting them with his self-imagined smooth approach himself, but he'd had to drive to the Twin Cities in a purloined gold Corvette in order to do some huge deal that didn't really materialize. He really got pouty when I pointed out that my magazine, supposedly our cover story for dealing dope, was actually paying the rent and keeping us solvent while his powerplay deals fizzled.

It could have been worse. At almost exactly the same time I was heading up to Cheech and Chong's room at the ugly new Antlers Hotel, he was getting cute to impress some chick in the Minneapolis airport and said the word "hijack", leading to his immediate arrest and over four hours of hassling by security creeps. And I mean a LOT worse: he was arrested and searched during the only window of time in over eight days when he wasn't holding a bunch of dope and at least one gun. Say what you will about "security"...

Meanwhile, as he sat naked in a cold little white room enduring smirks by rent-a-guardians, I was sitting down at a table with Cheech and Chong. You get used to being in the presence of the famous and talented, but I have to say that it was a special even being with these two. In some ways they were the most iconic of "sixties" recording artists. Other groups might sing about drugs (however cleverly disguised) but these cats' whole act was drugs. They WERE drugs in a big way. As big a legend as bands who filled arenas. Their "Big Bamboo" album was a totem of the times, one of those events like Woodstock or Chicago that made things what they meant. Making the album cover look like a big pack of rolling papers was genius, up there for sheer time-mark status with the zipper on Sticky Fingers or Tommy or Dark Side. But actually putting a giant rolling paper in it? Gummed and watermarked and everything, just like the real thing? If there is ever a hall of fame of album covers or Sixties artifacts that would have to be one of the first things voted in. I often wonder how many of those thousand of giant papers actually got rolled around illegal herbs and fired up. I know mine did. We'd had a party to celebrate scoring 10 kilos of some very nice Michoacan weed and invited over all the local retailers we hope to impress into take it off us as middlemen. We were really lucky because the house next door had just been recarpeted.

I brought the album out and opened it, removed the super-paper, and held it up. Our living room went nuts with applause and a bunch of industrial-strength stoners ganged around to aid in the rolling process. A modern case of old-fashioned American log-rolling. Within minutes we were in possession of a neat, tidy, corners-tucked joint; about three inches thick, a foot and a half long, and weighing well over a pound with no stems or seeds, just golden shake. The area was rife with proffered lighters. Then Chucky remembered the carpet job.

He ordered everybody to wait and ran out the door. Raised eyebrows, questioning glances, but stoners are hard to nonplus. In minutes he was back with a cardboard tube that the carpeting had been rolled up on. About five four inches inside diameter and eight feet long. Chuck found the hacksaw and cut it down to half that length. There was now anticipation in the air, people sensing the approach of a moment they would mention again for years. As you see before you right now.

Inspiration struck him again... a one-two punch that put him into the annals. This time he motioned for his live-in girlfriend du jour to bring him the vacuum cleaner. He got the duct tape himself. A pattern was beginning to emerge. Once the vacuum hose had been reversed, now plugged into the "blow" end of the battered canister-style Electrolux, he tore off the rug brush, stuck the metal nozzle into the tube, and taped in into place. THEN he reached for the joint, which came to him immediately, for right of the genius in charge.

He mouthed it and motioned for a light. Twenty flames flicked and the business end of the super-reefer was inflames, then creeping embers, then a nimbus of fragrant smoke. At his nod, I picked up the tube and he thrust the fuming joint into it, fire end first. And stomped on the switch to cut in the Electrolux. Immediately a column of smoke erupted from the other end of the tube, a four inch pillar as beckoning as any the Israelites every followed. Holding the tube waist-high like a shotgun, I stepped over to the couch and mowed down three cute girls who had taken it over. The breathed easy, shall we say. I pointed it into the face of Baby Hughie, one of our intended downliners, and just hosed him down. He took full advantage and ended up falling over backwards into the bounteous laps on the sofa.

They came at me like attacking redskins, but I held my ground and smoked them up. For over a half hour I was a chimney of peace, bypassing all understanding. I fumigated those fuckers. And they loved me for it.

A nice anecdote that goes back to the existence of the paper in the first place, the only ones ever made, a legacy of the Doper Gods, Cheech and Chong.

I told them about it and they cracked up. But I got the feeling they'd heard more stories about those papers. Then I mentioned I had some nice hash they might want to try. Cheech whipped out a pipe. Not shockingly, the coolest pipe I ever saw. It was a little block of fine, dark wood with brass accoutrements, and when twisted it shifted around into a different configuration; an elegant tropical hardwood hashpipe with a brass-lined bowl and brass stanchions supporting the angle. I admired it and figured it was a one-of-a-kind item.

He passed it to me with a flourish and I pulled out my carry stash, green-gold lumps of *indica* hashish secreted in a tubular case made of two solid brass shotgun shells, one 10 gauge, one 12, that slipped inside each other for a friction fit. He and Chong admired the ballistic cache. I shaved off a bowlful with my ever-handy Buck folder, passed the Art Pipe to Cheech and flicked a Bic.

The stuff was nice, possibly the best stuff Chuck and I had ever sold, and the pair nodded politely. "Good shit," was the verdict. Then the inevitable, "Here, try some of mine."

Which turned out to be a small brick, about the size and shape of a Snickers bar, of what looked like yellow sandstone. It was granular, not sticky, a type I'd never seen before. I figured it for NearEastern, very kifish. Polleny. I flicked by Buck open and handed it over and Tommy shaved the brick into the bowl. It erupted, beyond off under the blade, like grains of blonde sand falling into the black pit. I felt like I was peeking into some sort of doper major leagues. Our status as the wildest dealers around suddenly looking like Little League, or possibly clutch softball, in comparison. And that was before I even smoked it.

It was the second time in my life when I just got ambushed and overwhelmed by cannabis. The first time was the first joint of Nam weed I ever tried. Crazy oblivion, in no what predictable by any stoning I'd done before. And this sandstorm of Chong's was the same sort of quantum leap. One deep pull and I was blasted. By the time the bowl was emptied, I was gibbering. I had no idea where I was or what was up. No idea about anything, actually. I preferred to gibber. Fortunately, I didn't have to say much. They both smiled at me, having a pretty good idea of the wreckage going in my brainpan. They conversed politely, then started working on a routine, honing a new bit for their show. It was something about dogs. Or possibly international petrochemical politics or theological hermeneutics. I wasn't really around.

Finally it was time to go to the show, over at the runcible old civic auditorium right across from the civic police station. How's that for promoters thinking things out? Not that I could say anything about it. I was having trouble thinking out where the car keys were, or what to do with them once I found them sneakily tucked away in my right pants pocket. It has been an hour since smoking one measly bowl and the Blitz was still on. These maniacs were going to let them drive them somewhere. Ha.

Just as we hit the door to the room, Tommy gave me a very knowing smile and said, "Know what's the best thing about being us?"

I could have made a list. Starting with the cool pipe. But he didn't drag my fried brain out any. "People just come up and give us the best dope in the world." He said. "It beats full medical."

So at that point I was "baked" as they say these days, out of what was left of my mind, stunted by proper perspective, and blatantly incapable of the simple task of driving these guys to the show. And the evening hadn't even officially begun.

Well, I did manage to drive the headliners six blocks to the venue, as it turned out. Relying on what brain-benders have fallen back on for so many decades, auto-pilot. It's a really Zen thing, even for neurophobes: you forget about the car, forget about the destination, just keep up a line of distracting chatter and let your body go about all that mundane crap as your mindless servomechanism. The first time I ran into it was the first time I tried to drive on acid. I was sitting in my VW van, peaking out, and staring at an inexplicable array of levers and little clocks that had no significance whatsoever. I grasped the wheel, fumbled around, lost my way, lost the battle... but not the war.

My wife cleverly engaged me in a conversation, probably about quantum physics as seen in European literature, as I often gassed about in those days. Or possibly the upcoming Raiders playoff game, right across the bay. God only knows. I'm always up for conversation, and gabbed right along like a hero. At some point she just kind of pointed in a forwardly direction and I almost slapped my head at forgetting the task at hand. Then, still jabbering away like an idiot, I keyed the ignition, fired up the little cylinders back there, slapped the springy gearshift lever where it wanted to be, pulled out into traffic, and drove through San Francisco (including a couple of double-clutch hills) and across the Golden Gate to our house. Nothing to it. You have to capitalize the Nothing for it to really add up.

So it was relative child's play to navigate a few blocks of flat-as-piss-on-a-plate C. Springs, arrive at the back door of the Aud, and deliver my charges to the Green Room. They quickly gave the whole Green Room concept a deeper dye. The whole way over they been continuing to whet their new bit of dogs sniffing other's butts. I felt privileged to be present, like sitting around the studio while Picasso or Dvorak whittled an idea down into reality. Near as I can recall.

As so frequently, I remember approximately jack shit about the concert. As so frequently in those halcyon days. I remember the dog number. It was pretty funny even after I'd watched it rehearsed and reformed. Oh, and Cheech singing a song in a redneck accent, including the line, "Gonna tie my pecker to a tree, to a tree, gonna tie my pecker to a tree." Great stuff. I laughed myself sick, but not straight. That Afghan sand had staying power, bro.

The post-show greenroom scene was different from what I was used to. Instead of ravishing young babes trying to bestow themselves on the stars, it was also bunch of totally mashed dopers thrilled senseless to be in the presence, a couple of FM jocks getting scraps of interview on their little recorders, and, yep, people giving great dope to the two guys in the world who least needed it.

But the evening was still young, as it turned out. Once back in the Barracuda, the Kannabis Kids wanted to see the town. Such as it was.

The only thing I could think of (and thinking wasn't exactly my strong suit at the time) was a new disco out on the east end of town. An early incursion of Saturday Night Fever into Catterattle Springs. I think it used to be a roller rink, but now it had checkerboard floors of colored Plexiglas with lights going on and off underneath them. It was a 3.2 joint for some reason—meaning the age of entry was 18, not 21, but only 3.2 percent Coors was served. I hadn't been there. But should have figured that Cheech and Chong would see it as a total piece of crap. Looking back on it, I can see that it was a cheap symbol of the end of their era, replacing Man and Sister Mary Elephant with John Travolta and the BeeGees, ragtag with vested suits, scraggly hair with vaselined pompadours. It was seen as the death of Rock (and I stood in the Seattle Coliseum and heard Ted Nugent, clad only in a fur loincloth, lead 5000 people in screaming "Disco Sucks!") as the death of Live, the death of Hip, of pot, of vans, of dogs, of trippin'. And I was driving them there in a beat-up Barracuda.

But to get to the highway I took a couple of blocks of Nevada Avenue and passed The Cotton Club. Now there was a Springs anomaly. Started by red-hot mama Fannie Mae Bragg Duncan back in the Forties, it was a pretty genuine road company version of the chitlin clubs back east. A determined Black venue that had weathered several eras, shown a lot of music highly incompatible with the Springs' history of Sons of the Pioneers running up through the Ventures. The top names in jazz played there over the years and used to sneak in during my high school years. It was a juke, a joint, a crib, a woodpile. Always solvent from a trickle of black guys from the area's largest employer, and one that had no racial restrictions: the Military. Soldiers from Ft. Carson, airmen from Peterson Field and Ent Airbase, mixed bag from NORAD and ARADCOM, even some cleancut Air Academy cadets. Young blood. I fact, Flip Wilson did his first stage standup there, while he was an airman at Pete Field. And of course, Tommy took one look at the lurid neon sign and decayed brick façade and knew it was for him. That's where he wanted to go, no mistake.

Trouble was at that particular time I viewed the Cotton Club as a major danger, if not flatout combat zone. A couple of my high school buds were cops at that point and we played ball together despite radically different lifestyle choices, and they had kept me up to date on the kind of squeals and arrests went down at the Cotton, and the word was "No rabbits."

Yeah, the racism against whitey. Because the current crop of young Black G.I. tended to be a post-Nam kind of guy and virulent racism against black boys had been in fashion even when I was in uniform. I saw it as an excellent place to walk in and get fucked up. I told Chong that, but he wasn't having it. No problem, he told me, if you know the rap. And maybe he was right. Maybe just being him would have made it OK. Maybe them not being white would have made it OK. But I was high, and I didn't like the looks of it, including some gangbust guys I saw snubbing in, giving the Cuda dirty looks. But he was determined. So I pulled to a curb and took a breath. Then pulled my 38 snub-nosed out from under the seat and tucked it into the small of my back under my jacket. I looked at him brightly and said, "OK. Ready to rock."

Cheech had been ambivalent about the Cotton jaunt, and had said maybe I knew best what it was like in there. At that point, he froze up completely and leaned back in his seat. Chong looked at me in a different way. Both of them looked at me differently from then on. I had already been through the "post Sixties" thing: Chucky and I weren't hippie pot dealers, we were armed punkass criminals. Wearing our old army jackets with the patches ripped off. Shaven. Mean assholes, on the business side of things. Nothing Woodstock about it.

So, totally blasted, and armed, I drove Cheech and Chong away from a cool Black club to a shitty disco. Not a memorable evening from that point on. Nobody had any fun. How the hell can you be rolling with Cheech and Chong and not having fun? It's a gift.

But there was one even I remember from the evening. It was totally dark by then, which is significant when you recall that the Barracuda was equipped with one of the biggest automobile industry screwups of all time: the typewriter gearshift. No stick, just a little panel with buttons on it: DRNL. You push a button and some idiotic relay shifts the gears. What was Iacocca thinking? And, as I think often happened, the little lights behind the buttons had burned out. So I couldn't see to shift. Didn't know whether to shift or go blind.

Which came into play when I turned into the frontage that led to the disco. The car stalled and had a little trouble starting. No big deal. We were essentially sitting on a quarter mile of paving that was a city street at one end, where a traffic light held up a line of cars, and I-25 at the other. And I couldn't get it into gear. I was leaning over trying to read the letters off the STUPID little buttons and Cheech and Chong were just loving it. I'm sure you can hear the infection on, "Hey, man, are you ALL right?" Laughs and cheers as I punched at the dash. Then the light changed and all those cars started accelerating toward us as I sat across the right lane hoping to get into the disco's parking lot. Both of them glanced over their shoulders a bit now, as the white lights speeded up toward us. Suddenly the chuckles got an edge on them. And Chong blurted out, in a normal, whiteboy schooled voice, "Hey man! Are you all RIGHT?" Well, not really. But I did get the right keypad combo to dump the Cuda into gear and blow into the lot without getting run over by a stampede of steel. OK, I'm an asshole, but I did get a little lift out of that note of fear in his voice. It's not all tie-dye and giggles, brother, you've got your heavy metal out here. And that's about as good a segue out of the Sixties as I can think of. Hump to Metal.

I look back on that night and wonder how it would have been if I'd brought a couple of teeny-boppers along, gone into the Cotton Club for a wide-eyed tour of Harlem West with the ruling kings of doper chic, had a blast with Cheech and Chong. But it didn't head that way.

And neither, I realize, did the entire Sixties. At least not for me. Maybe I'm not the only one. Cheech Marin was a TV cop for awhile, a foul-mouthed barker pimp for vampires in a Tarrantino movie. Tommy Chong was a federal prison, sharing a cell with stock scammer Jordan Belfort. Most iconically and ironically, they were a fixture on a "That 70's Show".

The times just keep on changing.