



# HIGH ON FAME

## THE RISE OF CANNA-CELEBRITIES IN POST-PROHIBITION AMERICA

BY ZACH SOKOL

**A**BDULLAH Saeed lives the high life. To marijuana lovers, it's possibly the *dream life*. Every month, the California-based cannabis cultivation company ALAF Farms sends him at least a pound of his favorite strains of marijuana—often OG Kush, which he calls “the definitive Cali weed,” or specialties such as the indica-dominant Zkittlez.

When Saeed attends a cannabis conference or expo, he has to bring an empty duffle bag in order to fit all the free swag attendees go out of their way to gift him. If he has a meeting with his William Morris Endeavor agents, they come to his home in the Hollywood Hills, where he'll puff grass on his couch or by the pool while discussing potential opportunities with the suits. Recently, he's been casually fucking around in the booth with rapper Yung Gleesh, and was even photographed at a Diplo house party smoking doobies alongside restaurateur Eddie Huang.

And those are just the trappings of his success. His career is so desirable that at one point he considered starting a podcast called *How to Get My Job*.

Saeed has been flippantly described as a “professional stoner”—which is true to a degree—though a more fitting term might be “canna-celebrity” or “canna-entertainer.”

As the host of VICELAND's cooking show *Bong Appétit* and brainchild of the VICE column-turned-TV-show *Weediquette*, Saeed is one of the most prominent faces associated with cannabis culture, and it's offered him the freedom to get paid to do what he loves most.

On *Bong Appétit*, which wrapped its second season in November and is one of the channel's most-watched programs, Saeed serves as a dinner party host alongside cannabis expert Ry Prichard and culinary wizard/edibles entrepreneur Vanessa Lavorato. Together, they invite notable chefs and cannabis figures to collaborate on over-the-top experimental dishes they prepare with weed before all the guests sit down at a table and get stoned in the most epicurean way possible.

In one episode, Saeed goes to Denver and teams with the owner of Rosenberg's Bagels to make a “multicourse stony and schmaltz-laden Shabbat dinner,” featuring medicated matzo ball soup, noodle kugel, and Scandinavian sambuca-cured canna gravlax. In another, he works with the chefs at the California-based Indian restaurant Badmaash to cook tandoori chicken smoked in cannabis flower, barramundi basted in canna-butter and sitting on moilee curry, and naan with full-size pot leaves baked in.

“The intersection of both food porn and weed porn is what really makes the show tick,” a reviewer wrote glowingly in *The Cannabist*, the cannabis vertical for the *Denver Post*. Its headline called *Bong Appétit* “the only reality show about weed you need to see.”

And it's Saeed who ties the culinary adventures together, guiding guests through the titillating (sometimes intimidating) infused feasts with infinite charisma and natural raconteur skills—all while he consumes harrowing amounts of THC in a way that “makes it look easy.”

On top of hosting *Bong Appétit*, Saeed has been involved with much of VICE's other weed-related content. For more than two years, he wrote the weekly “Weediquette” column (journalist Krishna Andavolu hosts the VICELAND version). In the column, Saeed used the nom de plume T. Kid and waxed poetic about smoking with his Pakistani relatives, broke down his contentious relationship with alcohol, and predicted how corporate America will influence the cannabis community after legalization.

Saeed has also hosted documentaries on ketamine infusion therapy, visited Nepal's Annapurna mountains to sample psychoactive honey, and made a number of short-form tutorials called “Smokeables” in which he teaches viewers how to roll cross joints and carve a pipe out of a banana. Plus, he hosted one of VICE's first podcasts, *Tea Time With T. Kid*, where guests would come by at 4:20 to smoke weed, drink tea, and talk shit. (Full disclosure: I previously worked at VICE for several years and sometimes collaborated with Saeed, including on the podcast.)

In 2016, he cohosted one of the original VICELAND shows, *VICE Does America*, but it wasn't a ratings success. Soon, though, he got the cooking show, which was a hit, and it led Saeed to appearances on *The Nightly Show With Larry Wilmore*, “verified” blue checks on Twitter and Instagram, and his acquiring a manager, agent, and lawyer—all for being a gregarious dude with an inimitable penchant for pot.

But what sets Saeed apart from tokers like Snoop Dogg, Tommy Chong, or Willie Nelson is that he's built an audience and name for himself both inside and outside the cannabis industry based specifically on his enthusiasm and expertise about all things dank nug. He's not a rapper who also happens to love weed. He isn't a stand-up known for stoner jokes, like Doug Benson of *Super High Me* fame. He's a personality, an advocate, and “the fucking mascot of this shit,” to quote Saeed—someone putting his likeness at the forefront of a movement in America that's 80-plus years in the making, one currently experiencing a groundswell like never before. And Saeed is just one of many cannabis connoisseurs

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Canna-celebrity Abdullah Saeed

who's forged a pot personality career.

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AS of January 1, 2018, a total of eight states plus Washington, D.C., will have legalized recreational weed, and 30 states and the District of Columbia will have robust medical marijuana programs. While cannabis is still a Schedule I narcotic in the eyes of the federal government, more and more states are beginning to push for legalization. And why wouldn't they? The global market for cannabis is expected to top \$30 billion a year by 2021, and as states like Colorado have illustrated, the potential tax revenue from cannabis sales is too enormous to ignore. In 2016 alone, Colorado sold over \$1 billion of legal cannabis and collected over \$200 million from marijuana tax, license, and fee revenue—money which will go toward supporting public schools and local infrastructure, among other projects.

As cannabis legalization continues to spread like, well, a grass fire, all aspects of the plant are becoming subject to the so-called "Green Rush," with new players hopping on the bandwagon, entering the industry, and hoping to make lots of green off another type of green. Silicon Valley veterans are leaving tech jobs for the cannabis industry.

Corporate institutions like alcohol magnate Constellation Brands are investing in the space. A number of TV shows about toking, including Netflix's *Disjointed*, Amazon's pilot *Budding Prospects*, and HBO's *High Maintenance*, have sprung up in the past couple years.

In February, an online content platform called 420TV is launching, one that describes itself as the "first and only fully ad-supported VOD network devoted to the wonderful and complex world of cannabis." Everyone and their mother is talking about weed. Hell, there's even an Instagram account called @Dabbing\_Granny that boasts half a million followers.

The legal market is swelling, and countless people want a piece of the THC-infused pie. Similar to other underground cultures bubbling up to the mainstream—like skateboarding did in the nineties—there is a need for cannabis companies to have avatars, figureheads, and personalities. In theory, they can help businesses hawk their wares, offer insider cred, and help establish legitimacy, as well as influence the public's perception of something that is still stigmatized and considered taboo. Think of a weed version of Tony Hawk.

Simultaneously, there are kush aficionados with particular social media identities who are organically and independently building





large audiences and even turning hazy online presences into full-on careers—like millennial, marijuana-loving Bam Margeras. In our vast and ever-budding cannabis zeitgeist, there's a demand to put a face to flower, and canna-celebrities, weed-focused social media stars, and other 420 influencers are beginning to emerge as the ambassadors of this verdant sea change.

ABDULLAH Saeed might be the most impactful of the bunch. The 33-year-old comes from a journalism background, though he's hesitant to use the term in relation to weed because he's "incapable of talking about cannabis without advocating for it," and therefore can't be objective. "Krishna, who hosts the TV version of *Weediquette*, is an unbiased journalist going at it, which is just one approach

earshot if he could make an intern hit it, and when someone said no, he asked the staff if anyone wanted to volunteer. Saeed, who's been smoking weed heavily since he was 14, raised his hand. At the time, he had hair down to his elbows, a full beard, and typically rocked a Philadelphia Eagles jersey.

"I looked very stereotypically like a stoner then," recalled Saeed.

He told me this origin story while whipping up lunch at his house in Los Angeles, which more or less functions as T. Kid HQ. The meal we ate in his dining room was more modest than the canna-culinary delights the perma-blazed host indulges in on television, but Saeed is a pretty modest guy. Sure, he can spin a yarn or go on a truly epic rant like it's his job (which it kind of is), and people have been telling him he should try stand-up since he was puffing on mids out of apple



**"I'M RUNNING AHEAD, CARRYING THE TORCH, AND BEING THAT AGITATOR, AND BEHIND ME I'M LEAVING FLAT, EVEN GROUND FOR ALL THESE MOTHERFUCKERS TO COME TRAMPLING ON."**

to getting people to think about [cannabis] differently," Saeed told me. Born in New Hampshire but raised in Thailand before moving back to the states, the Pakistani-American describes himself as an "international kid, but I'm also a little bit third-world hood."

He got his start writing music reviews for Philadelphia alt-weeklies before creating "Adventures in Pork," a food blog detailing his first culinary experiences with the meat he wasn't allowed to eat growing up in a Muslim household. In his mid-twenties, he moved to New York City for a post at MTV, which led to his first job at VICE as a writer-editor at the now-defunct vertical The Creators Project.

Saeed still remembers the moment it became clear that he'd be *the guy* for anything pertaining to pot under the VICE brand. It was 2012, before the company was valued in the billions and had a nightly show on HBO, and Rocco Castoro, then editor in chief, received a gas mask bong in the mail. He asked everyone within

pipes. And not to mention the fact that he can and has outsmoked noted rappers. But part of his magic, his special something, stems from his relatability, his realness.

People say the definition of charisma is when you consistently act like *yourself* no matter who you're around—while still charming them. "100" emojis practically emanate from Abdullah's bloodshot eyes. The dude who made me a turkey sandwich on a croissant at his home is the same magnetic canna-personality I've watched eat CBD pakoras with *Top Chef*'s Fatima Ali on a plasma screen. Unlike getting high, set and setting does not apply when it comes enjoying T. Kid's infectious vibes.

We munched on our sandwiches (pretty tasty, actually!) and continued burning Saeed's favorite OG Kush. After some inevitable tangents, he finished the gas mask bong story.

"I remember pretty distinctly that Rocco tried to over-puff me or

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something, like he was trying to get me to cough,” Saeed told me. “But you can’t fuck with the kid. I mean, please. *That’s my shit*.” Afterwards, he went back to work as if it were no big deal, despite the whole office reeking. “That attitude got my attention going there,” he said. Everyone at VICE already knew he loved weed, but “there was some residual effect, like, ‘Oh, that brown kid with the long hair hit the bong.’ I feel like that moment eased the rest of my career there.”

Fast-forward five years, 15 web episodes of *Bong Appétit*, two seasons and another 20 episodes of the same show on VICELAND, plus a couple dozen other video and production projects (“Smokeables” garnered 30 million Facebook views for the banana pipe clip alone). *Bong Appétit* was now a crossover success outside VICE’s typical 18-24 male demographic. Saeed wanted the show’s audience to be “people who live on the edge of the acceptance of cannabis,” as compared to those already interested in pot culture, and he often asserts that “my battle is social, not political.” He aimed for *Bong Appétit* to be “a tool to say, ‘Look Mom, look Dad, look Steve, or whatever, there are normal people who do normal things with cannabis, and I get that. I want you to see this and get that, too.’ And the crazy thing is that it’s worked.”

A memorable NPR write-up started with the reviewer detailing how her 65-year-old mother first hipped her to the online version. Saeed’s work with VICE also established him as one of the earliest OG media presences of the modern cannabis era to embrace his passion for the herb on camera. “When I started owning the phrase ‘cannabis journalist,’” Saeed told me, “I really was the guy to coin that shit in terms of the post-legalization context. I was kind of on the *I’m so future* tip, like, ‘You guys don’t even get this yet.’”

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IN November, Saeed announced that he’d no longer be collaborating with VICE after several employees were accused of sexual misconduct. (He was not one of them.) In a press release in response to the allegations, the company used *Bong Appétit* as an example of why it has staff sign a “non-traditional workplace agreement.” The series was called “provocative” and described as an exploration of “drug culture,” which Saeed did not take kindly to.

“My purpose is to explore cannabis and spread knowledge about substances that enlighten us, and I’ll continue that journey with like-minded entities,” he posted on social media. “Additionally, I don’t believe cannabis is a drug, nor would I characterize its study and advocacy as provocative.”

And though he’s leaving an undeniably massive platform where he cut his teeth, the canna-celeb already has big moves in the pipeline, including a role on the second season of HBO’s weed comedy *High Maintenance*. He’s also developing a new documentary project that he believes will be his “weed opus,” as well as writing a memoir that will likely sell itself.

“What am I going to call my fucking memoir? *Weed, The Kid*. I’m that thing personified,” he chuckled. However, Saeed feels he’s already accomplished a lot by initiating a precedent for cannabis personalities.

“If the whole cannabis activist world, and that whole shade of journalism, is behind me, and I’m the midpoint,” Saeed reflected, “then the future ahead of me is this whole ‘Instagram stars of weed’ thing. I’m running ahead, carrying the torch, and being that

agitator, and behind me I’m leaving flat, even ground for all these motherfuckers to come trampling on.”

■ ■ ■

ONE such “motherfucker” is Thomas Araujo, aka Dope as Yola. For the past five years, the 28-year-old has built a reputation as a social media weed star and entrepreneur—a weedfluencer, if you will.

I met Araujo and his girlfriend/collaborator Rosie Ruyz (@stoner\_dottie) at Hitman Coffee, a members-only pipe gallery, café, and coworking space based in downtown L.A. In the backyard, where members are allowed to BYOC (bring your own cannabis), the content creator packed a glass bong and explained how he went from illegally selling weed in bumfuck Merced, California, to creating an Instagram account that’s followed by Rihanna and endorsed by enough companies that he was able to quit his day job and relocate.

Araujo was an early adopter of the app, and “started uploading content at the very beginning of Instagram, when the thought of posting photos of yourself with weed online was fucking ridiculous,” as he put it, due to privacy and legal risks. He had no prior experience taking photos or video, but he’s always been a self-described movie buff with a unique sense of humor. The couple began posting photos of movie scenes recreated using nugs of weed, sometimes with Araujo Photoshopped in. “It was all pictures that I thought would make you stop, look twice, and go, ‘Oh my God, it’s fucking weed!’”

One post from his social media salad days involved a nug tied with a hemp wick to a mini wooden chair bought at a dollhouse supply store. In subsequent images, another bud cuts the imprisoned nug’s “ear” off in a nod to the infamous torture scene in *Reservoir Dogs*. Less than a year after he created his Instagram handle, Araujo’s images were getting shared on popular meme accounts like @Weedstagram, reposted by celebrities, and featured on the Instagram “Explore” page.

“We were some of the first people to really fuck with weed on Instagram,” Araujo said in between bong rips at Hitman Coffee. But even if he wasn’t a pot pioneer on social media, it’s likely the weed memer would have still found an audience. His creations have a distinct voice—sort of like a fusion between a CollegeHumor sketch and a Michel Gondry music video, but caked with the playful braggadocio of a part-time weed dealer—and the sensibility blazes through to IRL conversation.

Every anecdote he told me came equipped with an excess of hand gestures, and he packed in movie references and pop culture analogies wherever he could. Other Hitman Coffee patrons immediately noticed him talking up a storm in the space’s backyard, and several regulars interrupted our conversation to say hey and pay respect. Maybe it was the weed, but I lost my shit after Araujo detailed how he often measures valuables in “units of used Hondas”—a metric that only a former pot peddler could have conceived. “That’s a nice Mercedes you’re smoking out of!” he said while describing an expensive glass dab rig.

Once Instagram added video, Araujo increased his output and also began uploading “video memes and skits,” scoring several viral hits in the process. Around the same time, he and Ruyz started a 420-friendly apparel brand called Push Trees, and the first limited-edition run sold out within 24 hours.

@\_Dope\_as\_Yola\_ was racking up followers, too, at one point

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accruing close to 400,000 before his account was shut down (something that's happened to him nearly a dozen times since). These successes led to a number of brands in the cannabis space reaching out and offering endorsement deals and creative consulting opportunities, including rolling paper giant Raw. At one point, he told me, a major seltzer company—which has no formal ties to marijuana—even got in touch to talk about possible collaborations.

"Back then, I had no idea that people got paid for this shit," Araujo continued, then added, in a tone of disbelief: "Now I'm on contract and it's like, *Fuck! I'm making more money than my parents!*"

Raw pays him to use its papers in @\_Dope\_as\_Yola\_ content, something he was already doing. And though the contract stipulates that Araujo must exclusively use Raw, he retains total creative control.

"There was no guideline, it was just, 'Hey, keep doing what you're doing, and here's money,'" Araujo said. After all, the @\_Dope\_as\_Yola\_ Instagram bio used to state, "I want to make weed commercials" (though he's quick to add in person that he never wants his work to actually feel like ads). Not only did the dream come true, but Araujo's since grown his brand outside Instagram, including video host gigs

for dispensaries like Urban Treez and marijuana publications like *Merry Jane*. [Editor's note: Full disclosure, the author is currently an editor at *Merry Jane*, though he has not directly collaborated with Araujo.] He even has hard-core fans, and has counted upwards of 25 people who have tattoos of the Push Trees logo—his mom even has ink that says "Dope as Yola."

"If you think about it, it's really the only time in life where you can literally blow your brand up off of a video or image you made on your phone," Araujo remarked. "You can get famous off one baby thing, one little video. We live in the luckiest time. It's crazy—ten years ago brands wouldn't have got big off a funny picture posted online or on Reddit."

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GREEN Street Agency agrees with Araujo's observation, and the company's existence is a testament to this emerging canna-celeb business within the larger cannabis industry. The full-service creative agency focuses on marketing, advertising, client services, and brand development "all dedicated to the [cannabis] space."

On top of facilitating brand partnerships—such as Snoop Dogg's



Thomas Araujo, aka Dope as Yola

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deal with G Pen vaporizers—Green Street helps influencers and personalities turn their clout into a career. Saeed hippped me to the company, and described them as trustworthy insiders who know how to navigate the corporate world without green-washing the image of their cannabis clients.

Founded by lawyer Josh Shelton and former record label exec Rama Mayo in 2013, Green Street is gearing up to be the go-to ad firm for weed. They currently work with mainstream weed-friendly celebrities, including Snoop Dogg, The Game, Melissa Etheridge, and 2 Chainz, but they're also teaming with up-and-coming cannabis personalities from the social media space, such as vlogger CustomGrow420 (1.4 million subscribers on YouTube) and Adam III (aka "The Highest Host" and "The Kosher Stoner").

In addition, Green Street is opening a 50,000 square foot office in Los Angeles this year to house both the agency and other cannabis-facing companies. They imagine the space as a We(ed)Work of sorts—a "foundation for the community" with a talent agency vibe.

"That's our plan," said Mayo. "We want to build the Makers for weed. Let's harness the YouTube-verse and turn that into the platform."

Green Street is focused on the long tail, and the founders know their business is a bit premature given the precarious status of widespread legalization.

"The digital age of marketing really doesn't exist in the cannabis industry yet," Mayo told me at their original office in the historic Wilshire Tower, where they also host cannabis-related events and parties. (Not by coincidence, they shared the building with the West Coast office of *High Times*). Due to federal regulations, Mayo pointed out, including restrictions on advertising, "We are handcuffed a little bit on how we can market."

That said, Green Street has noticed that "there's this white space for someone who has a following to then lead that following back to a cannabis-related company"—a business opportunity they are experts at catalyzing. In other words, if an independent personality has organically built a sizable audience and has an original voice, Green Street can help that canna-entertainer monetize whatever it is they do. By the time recreational legalization is a reality in more states, the company is poised to streamline the process and take on countless more clients.

■■■

A CANNABIS creative agency is "a sign of the times," said Brian Vicente, cofounder of premier marijuana law firm Vicente Sederberg LLC. Vicente was one of the main authors of Amendment 64, the landmark measure that legalized recreational marijuana use for adults in Colorado, and his firm employs over 50 staffers with offices in the Centennial State, Massachusetts, Nevada, and California. The team's L.A. office is currently two blocks away from Green Street, and Vicente Sederberg LLC will also occupy a section of the creative agency's impending mega-office.

Like Thomas Araujo did when we met, Vicente underscored how modern the nascent canna-celebrity profession is within legal weed: "We live in this incredible moment when there's a confluence of a massive social change—after 80 years, suddenly marijuana legalization is here. It's sort of intersecting with this unique moment in time when people can promote

themselves online, become celebrities, and also make a living. It's pretty phenomenal."

The law firm works with clients from all facets of the marijuana industry, from dispensaries that need help acquiring licenses, to "bigger-name celebrities" launching weed products. Increasingly, Vicente Sederberg LLC advises individuals in the canna-entertainer and social media space who seek to legitimize their hustles and profit from them. In a phone interview, Vicente explained that his staff does "a fair amount of work advising these up-and-coming celebrities who are self-made, trying to figure out what is their niche and how can they promote themselves and find a career in this space without running afoul of the law."

For example, Vicente said he's helped at least 400 clients—both direct marijuana businesses and ancillary ones—with banking, which "is *frequently* an issue." Banks are often regulated by the feds, and therefore will restrict individuals and businesses from taking out loans, applying for mortgages, and even depositing cash if they work with, or are adjacent to, ganja.

"You need to understand the state and federal laws that govern that," said Vicente. "We walk people through a lot of that."

There are a multitude of other hurdles cannabis entrepreneurs must navigate, regardless of what state they live in. Business owners are often prohibited from using PayPal or having their

apps appear in the Apple Store, and social media weed stars regularly have their accounts taken down by Facebook and Instagram for promoting what the federal government still considers to be an illegal narcotic.

"We try to work with these larger corporations and convince them to allow our clients access to their platforms," Vicente explained. "Sometimes they let us and sometimes they don't."

The attorney continued, "You have very little recourse to fight that, so you can see how frustrating that

could be to someone who's built a solid network on Instagram or Facebook and has then had that torn down."

■■■

THIS is exactly what happened to Dope as Yola, whose Instagram bio in late 2017 stated "Deleted at 343k & 99k" [followers]. Players in the marijuana space are liable to threats that are fully out of their control—vulnerabilities they're very much aware of but cannot safeguard. If your weed career depends on social media, your entire livelihood could be cut off without warning, even if you didn't break any laws.

"A lot of the people who used to be on Instagram don't do Instagram anymore because they keep getting deleted and they gave the fuck up," Araujo told me.

Hiring a lawyer from Vicente Sederberg LLC is a shield, but admittedly a porous one until marijuana is federally descheduled. Therefore, some in the weed game are hesitant to make social media their only source of promotion or income, and others are intent on creating entirely new platforms for pot.

Dr. Dina has worked in cannabis full-time since 2003, but it took a full decade before she became a bona fide canna-celeb known outside the direct community.

"There was a time when I was afraid to tell people what I did for a living. It wasn't the same then," said the dispensary owner, who

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is widely considered to be the inspiration for Nancy Botwin on Showtime's *Weeds*. Dr. Dina isn't actually a doctor—Snoop Dogg, a longtime friend, gave her the nickname—but she's considered an authority on the plant and cannabis culture nonetheless.

For years, she stayed under the radar and did not associate her name with her medical marijuana business, but a 2013 *GQ* piece outed her as the pot plug for Snoop. After that, Dr. Dina decided to own her narrative and use the attention to “just talk about cannabis.” In a lengthy phone interview, she explained her initial goals as a marijuana advocate in the spotlight. “I said, ‘I don’t want talk about myself, but I’ll talk about weed and why it should be legal!’”

Described by the press as the “Queen of Cannabis,” the “Mona Lisa of Mary Jane,” and “Pot Doc to the Stars,” Dr. Dina is one of Hollywood’s most in-demand cannabis consultants, and has advised on shows such as *Sons of Anarchy* and Netflix’s pot shop sitcom *Disjointed*, starring Kathy Bates. And while she imagined herself as a behind-the-scenes figure in the space, times have changed and she is evolving with the THC-laden zeitgeist. Social media has proven to be unstable—the pot doc even referenced Dope as Yola’s troubles with Instagram during our interview—but she’s found a new soapbox to share her story and proselytize to the masses about marijuana.

420TV, the aforementioned digital network for on-demand cannabis content, debuts in late February, and Dr. Dina will be hosting *Top Shelf*, one of the online channel’s tentpole programs. In the ten-episode documentary series, the canna-celeb travels across the country on the “ultimate cannabis road trip,” touring pot farms, dispensaries, and other green businesses. “I’m hoping to turn it into the *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown* of weed,” she said.

Why commit to an untested network when she’s already consulting on *Disjointed* at the Warner Bros. studio? “420TV is fighting against the corporate-controlled social media platforms by accepting our culture,” Dr. Dina pointed out, “and offering a new space to lead the conversation about cannabis without arbitrary restrictions.”

Not everyone is convinced that ganja-specific content platforms will be the solution for sidestepping marijuana media limitations and establishing mainstream legitimacy, though.

“There have been a handful of media platforms that have been trying to get their arms around the cannabis industry,” Green Street’s Josh Shelton told me. “There’s going to be a hundred of those. It’s going to be a ton of noise for at least the next couple of years...where people are regretful of the investments they made and the influencers or projects and wheels spinning that come crashing down.”

And veteran figures from the community are skeptical, too—not just about new ways to showcase weed personalities, but about weed personalities as a commodity in general.

“There was no ‘famous for being famous’ in cannabis until very recently,” said David Bienenstock, a seasoned cannabis journalist and producer, former *High Times* editor, and the author of seminal toking tome *How to Smoke Pot (Properly)*. Over the phone, he told me that “the people who’ve brought you bad entertainment for the past 40 years are going to continue making

bad entertainment, and have been. Dreck is coming from the top and from the bottom of [cannabis culture].”

The bigger issue to lifers like Bienenstock, who was dedicated to legalizing grass eons before adult-use legislation was on the horizon, is whether these content creators and public-facing personalities “exude a real responsibility to get things right, educate themselves, and be a good representation of the culture. That’s a mark of real delineation between coming up out of the culture and parachuting in.”

As for Dr. Dina, she told me that one of her long-term goals outside nationwide legalization is to carefully consider how this era’s cannabis figures, herself included, influence the next. In the words of this cannabis mainstay: “Do you have a legacy left behind that is so powerful that it continues to inspire people on a daily basis?”

Her involvement with 420TV is an optimistic sign, but it remains to be seen if the platform and its other programming will satisfy both the “converted and the curious,” as it slogan attests.

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ABDULLAH Saeed, ever the zen master, is less concerned with how his peers typify marijuana enthusiasts. Hours after we ate lunch at his place in Hollywood Hills, we posted up in his room and continued smoking joints while talking about the phenomenon of canna-celebrities and what future iterations might look like. Next to his bed were a thousand Bic lighters with PLEASE RETURN TO ABDULLAH SAEED engraved on them. “You can’t control their intentions, all you can do is pass the torch,” he said once again.

When Saeed thinks about big-picture plans, he shares a vision of cannabis focused on its social benefits. In response to what’s happening legally and economically with pot, he said, “My thinking on it is a little bit more radical. I don’t think you should be able to buy and sell weed; I think you should only be

able to grow it and give it away. I’m skeptical about the capitalist approach to legalization as opposed to the justice approach.”

Moreover, his plans don’t end with weed. Puffing on his OG Kush and wearing a shirt patterned with the words FUCK IT, he laid out the end goal—one he reiterated several times over the course of our marathon smoke sesh. “Advocating for cannabis,” Saeed said, “is a stepping stone for advocating for psychedelics. I want to get more people to use cannabis so they’re more amenable to using psychedelics, because *that* will make the world a better place.”

And regardless of his idealism, he knows he can’t sway what will happen when Big Weed comes knocking. Instead, he plans to keep on keeping on, doing his thing like he always has. “If I can have an impact on the world by doing what I love and pursuing what I think is right,” Saeed told me, “and the world accepts that, so be it. I’m not going to *not* try because they might not accept it. I didn’t make a fucking career not offending people. I just want to change people’s minds, man.” ☯

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**"MY THINKING ON IT  
IS A LITTLE BIT MORE  
RADICAL. I DON'T THINK  
YOU SHOULD BE ABLE  
TO BUY AND SELL WEED;  
I THINK YOU SHOULD ONLY  
BE ABLE TO GROW IT  
AND GIVE IT AWAY."**





# BIGMIKE ON THE BUSINESS OF MARIJUANA

By Zach Sokol

THOUGH certain canna-celebs are brands in and of themselves, some weed personalities use their notoriety to complement or enhance their other cannabis enterprises. Take BigMike, for example. Born Michael Straumietis in Portland, Oregon, the six-foot-seven marijuana titan is the CEO of Advanced Nutrients, a fertilizer and nutrient manufacturer serving hydroponic growers and cultivators.

The company distributes its products to nearly 100 countries, and expects 2017 revenue to approach \$105 million. Advanced Nutrients offers a vital service intersecting with many aspects of the cannabis industry, but fertilizer is admittedly not the sexiest facet of weed culture. Therefore, BigMike took to Instagram, where he built a massive following showcasing his high-roller lifestyle while subtly promoting his business, too.

"In today's day and age, social media is paramount," BigMike told me at his Hollywood Hills mansion, standing on a gargantuan deck overlooking the city. "If you're not on social media in a strong way, you're going to be dead fast."

BigMike started Advanced Nutrients 18 years ago, and he's never been shy about putting his face in front of flower. "From day one," the CEO continued, "I said we're for cannabis. I never hid it. I never hid behind a fucking tomato vine my whole life."

In the early days, he occasionally uploaded photos of weed and women to the internet, but once Instagram and Facebook were omnipresent, the entrepreneur upped the ante. Now, he regularly posts photos of himself alongside luscious bud, luscious models, and luscious models smoking luscious bud. Boasting an Instagram account with 1.4 million followers, BigMike has been called "The Great Gatsby of Ganja" and "The Dan Bilzerian of Weed," though he personally rejects the nicknames in favor of the "Marijuana Don," his onetime Instagram handle.

"A company is just a benign object. Once you attach a face to it, and it's a likable face, that's power," BigMike explained. "People don't want to do business with a boring brand. They want to have fun, and the best brands in the world have CEOs who are entertaining."

More importantly, he's able to slip in some cannabis education and Advanced Nutrients promotion among the international playboy-friendly content.

"You have to put sugar around the medicine," he joked. "That's how I get their attention so that I can give them the message I want. We're using [our social media clout] to not only build the brand, but as we're building that brand, we're educating everyone out there, too."

He also works to forge relationships that could give him "a seat at

the table with the big boys," as he put it, when it comes to cannabis legislation. For example, a few hours before the start of his annual Halloween mega-party, BigMike held a fund-raiser for Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom, a pro-legalization advocate running for governor of California in 2018.

And while Advanced Nutrients is fully compliant with the law, and doesn't even touch the plant, BigMike's prominent social media presence has led to its own complications. When I asked him how he planned to document his costume party, he said, "In this case, we listen to City Hall. They told us, 'No social media.' When I handle big bags of weed at a party [and post photos], they get too many fucking phone calls. The board lights up, and they don't want that."

The Halloween bash was over-the-top, to put it lightly. When guests arrived (via mandatory, comped Ubers, to prevent drugged driving) at BigMike's gated home, they were greeted with a spectacle not unlike an invite-only cannabis Coachella. The redecorated mansion was swarming with actors portraying zombies and other ghoulish characters. Along with an open bar featuring a woman swinging from a hula hoop-size ring, there was a weed bar where guests chose the strain they wanted, with budtenders ready to roll them thumb-size joints. A swank buffet included lobster, oysters, sushi, and a medley of infused edibles.

One of the estate's several decks was transformed into a temporary stage and dance floor. The Grammy-winning band Everlast played earlier that day during the Newsom fund-raiser, but now it was occupied by a hazy sea of costumed guests, including MMA superstar Chuck Liddell. BigMike himself, dressed as the King of Hearts, was accompanied by an entourage of gorgeous women as he schmoozed with extremely stoned partygoers throughout his sprawling property.

A few hours into the party, however, a helicopter spotlight shone down on the festivities. Shortly after, a horde of police officers appeared in the yard. The immediate response was mellow; I even heard one guest say to the cops, without a speck of irony, "Sick costumes, *duuuudes*." But soon enough, the five-0 shut down the party, even though no laws were broken.

Maybe a noise complaint led to the party's demise. Or maybe BigMike is just on the cops' shit list as a result of celebrating his vibrant relationship with pot on social media. Regardless, it seemed to underscore the limitations of weed fame. Even with legalization taking root, the Cannabis King of Instagram isn't free from the LAPD cramping his high style. ☯—



BigMike, CEO of Advanced Nutrients