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High Expectations: Marketers Hope for Buzz on 4/20

Marijuana Fans Celebrate April 20, but Some Hazy on Why; Movie Promos

By RACHEL EMMA SILVERMAN And RACHEL DODES

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April 20 marks a high holiday for marijuana enthusiasts, who have long used "420" as code for cannabis and who celebrate the date's appearance on the calendar—on April 20, or 4/20—with concerts, stoner-film marathons and controlled substances.

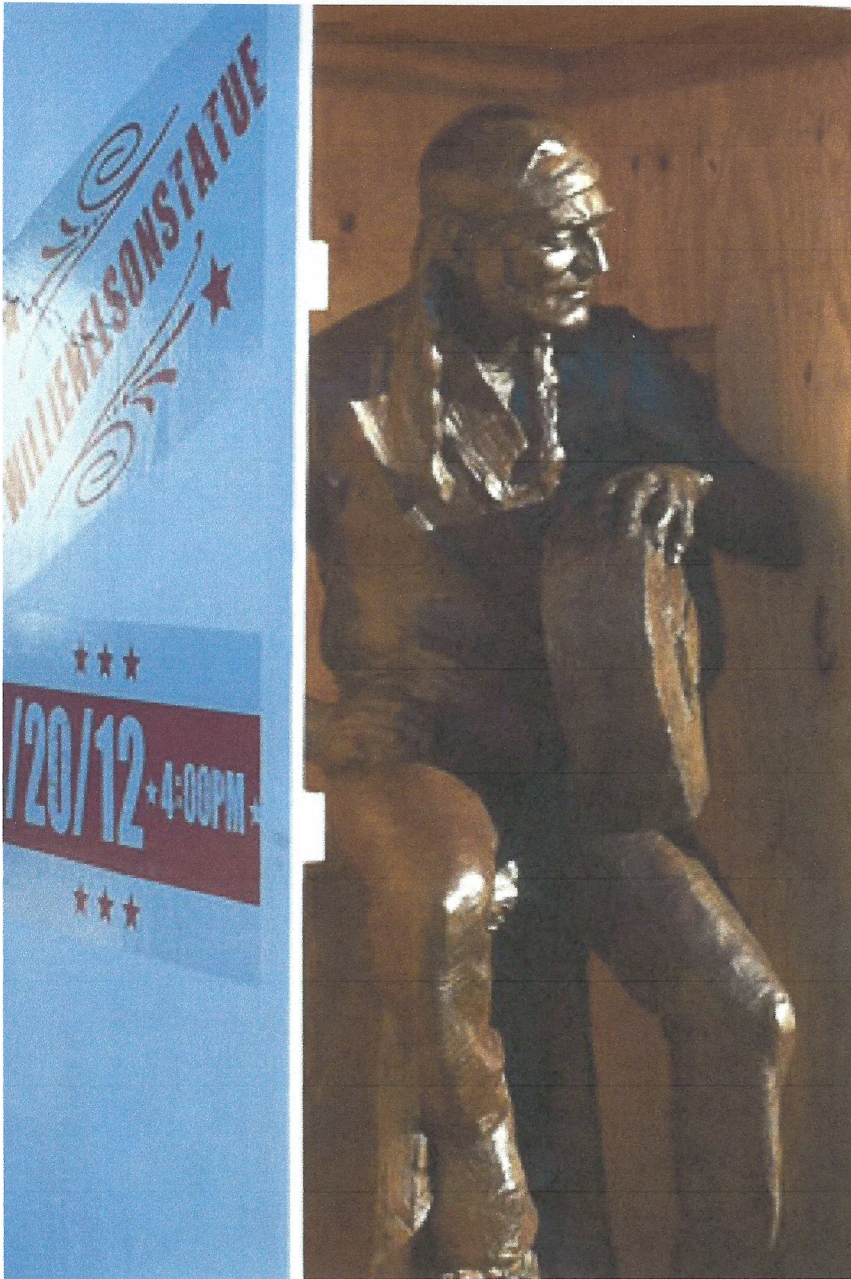
This year, with the date falling on a Friday, marketers are trying to get in on the buzz.

Marijuana advocates say the commercialization just proves that pot is gaining mainstream acceptance; there were some 17.4 million users in 2010, up from 14.4 million in 2007, according to government data. But many are foggy on the date's origins.

Film studios hope to capitalize on the day with pot-themed film releases, while television networks and small businesses are running promotions. In Austin, Texas, a local nonprofit will unveil an 8-foot bronze statue of country musician and avowed cannabis fan Willie Nelson around 4:20 p.m. Friday.

Mr. Nelson, 78 years old, who has called for the creation of a "Teapot" party, with the rallying cry "Tax it, regulate it and legalize it!" says it wasn't his idea to unveil the statue on this date, but seems amused at the timing. "Someone else was sharp," he adds.

The unveiling date and time were actually a coincidence, event organizers say, chosen because the singer had a performance in Austin that night. Mr. Nelson's coming album



features a track titled "Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die."

The surge in 420-themed marketing comes as legalization of marijuana has become an increasingly polarizing issue. Some 16 states plus the District of Columbia have enacted laws to legalize marijuana for medical purposes. Others, including New York, have pending legislation to legalize it. For most of the country, however, pot remains illegal.

Magnolia Pictures is releasing "Marley," a documentary about the life of Rastafarian crossover star Bob Marley. The film's poster shows the numerals "4.20.12" over an image of the Jamaican flag. The film is being released Friday, in theaters and on demand. "It

was an obvious choice," says Magnolia's president, Eamonn Bowles.

Production company Anchor Bay Entertainment is using the day to spark interest in "High School," which stars Oscar winner Adrien Brody as a pot dealer named Psycho Ed. He gets robbed by students intent on using his stash to sabotage a bake sale.

Ahead of the film's June 1 release, Anchor Bay invited press to a Friday morning screening in New York featuring "REEFreshments." Brownies served at the screening won't contain any real marijuana, the film's publicist says. Select "tastemakers" designated by the studio will receive packages containing brownies and a bag of oregano, a frequent stand-in for pot in movies and television. The film's trailer will go online at midnight on 4/20.

One of the original Waldos, financial executive Steve Capper. *STEVE CAPPER*

Comedy Central is airing Cheech & Chong's "Still Smokin" on Friday, and Showtime is doing promotions for "Weeds"—a series that stars Mary-Louise Parker as a pot-dealing mom—including a board on the social-media site Pinterest called "Weeds 4/20 Munchies!" featuring pictures of various snacks.

NotMYkid.org, a nonprofit seeking to prevent teen drug use, this year launched a parent-awareness campaign focusing on "420 culture."

"I'm very saddened to see this kind of marketing exists," says Debbie Moak, founder of NotMYkid.org, who adds that a lot of 420-related images reach



teens and children. The group says April 20 is also known as "National Get High Day," when kids may try a variety of drugs for the first time. The Scottsdale, Ariz.-based group distributed thousands of free home drug tests around the country on Thursday.

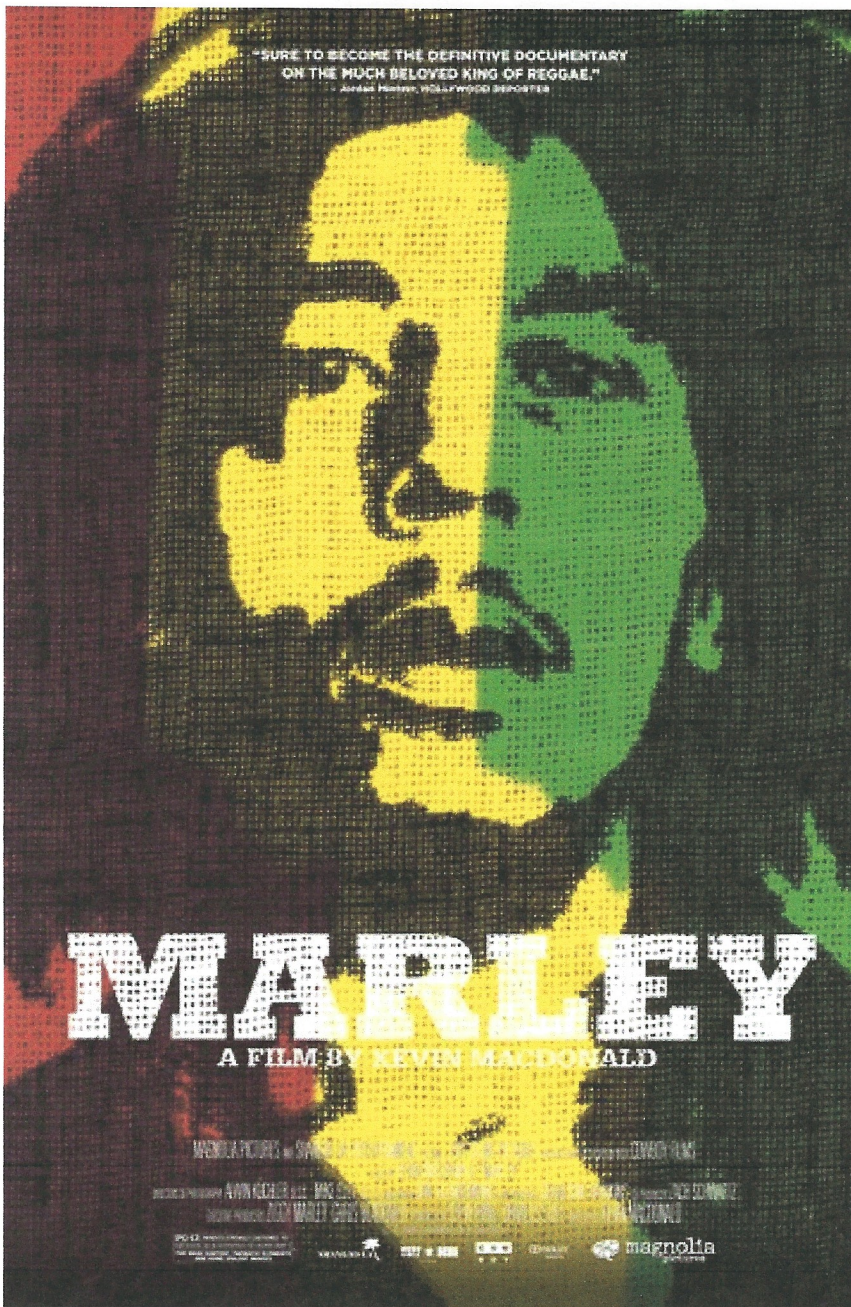
The origins of 420 are hazy, and theories range from paranoid speculation about California Highway Patrol codes for violations to the number of chemical compounds in cannabis.

The persistence of alternate theories is a downer for Steve Hager, editor emeritus of High Times magazine, who considers himself an expert on the holiday's roots.

After hosting 420-themed events—such as ceremonies at the Cannabis Cup convention

in Amsterdam at 4:20 p.m.—Mr. Hager was contacted by a man named Steve Capper who claimed to have been one of the founders of the 420 tradition in the 1970s with a group of high-school buddies in California, known as the Waldos.

Mr. Hager agreed to investigate their claims. He met with five of the Waldos—and examined their letters referencing 420 that dated to the early 1970s. He subsequently published a story about his findings in the magazine.



A poster for the documentary 'Marley,' which opens April 20 **MAGNOLIA PICTURES**

According to Mr. Hager and Mr. Capper, the first time the Waldos met at 4:20 was to investigate a map from a friend with information about a plot of cannabis plants. They set the time to accommodate some Waldos' football practice and extracurriculars.

Mr. Capper, now 57 and the chief executive of a San Francisco financial-services company, says that the Waldos were hardly slackers. "We're not talking Spicoli at 'Fast Times at Ridgemont High' or Cheech & Chong," he says. He adds: "We were all fit, driven, intelligent guys." Mr. Capper plans to spend Friday at a business conference.

Mr. Capper says some of the Waldos' families knew members of the Grateful

Dead, and the 420 term took hold among the band's numerous followers.

SweetWater Brewing Co. of Atlanta offers a 420 Extra Pale Ale and hosts a large 420 Fest musical concert every April. The beer's name came about because it was first brewed on April 20, in 1997. "It was dumb luck," says Steve Farace, the brewery's director of marketing. The number's other connotations, he adds, have "never been something we've promoted or been a part of, but we do get a ton of conversation out of it."

Mike MacLeod, owner of the 420 Spot, an Austin retailer of smoking accessories that will sponsor a reggae concert Friday, says he named his store 420 because the numerical signal is low-key.

At the University of Colorado in Boulder—where a large group, both students and others, have gathered in a quad to smoke pot for the past several years on April 20—school officials this year will close the quad entirely, spreading a malodorous fish-based fertilizer in the area to deter would-be smokers. Campus access will be restricted to students, faculty and staff Friday, university officials say.



An opposition group calling itself "Occupy Boulder" says it will host a "Take Back 420" march.

Allen St. Pierre, executive director of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, or NORML, says the advocacy group's Web traffic increases five or sixfold every April 20 and the group has discounted its membership fee from \$25 to \$4.20 on the date.

"For us, 4/20 has definitely been momentous," he says. "We absolutely revel in how popular the day has become culturally and commercially."

Statue notwithstanding, for Willie Nelson, April 20 will be like any other day. "I won't be doing anything different," he says.

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