

Opinion: A Cheech Thanksgiving

By Joe Mathews

This week, California should give thanks for Cheech.

Richard Anthony Marin deserves our gratitude not just because his new autobiography, “Cheech Is Not My Real Name ... But Don’t Call Me Chong,” is the best California book of the year. Or because he provides hope that short, bald men still can be stars.



Joe Mathews

The biggest reason to thank Cheech now is that his life embodies Thanksgiving itself: a big, robust meal that includes many different flavors but is ultimately for everyone. This California entertainer reminds us, happily, that our state’s cultural mainstream is so much more interesting and inclusive than we acknowledge.

Indeed, Cheech is evidence of a California paradox: To stay in the mainstream here, it helps to start as an outsider. And Cheech is most often identified as a “cult” figure—one-half of the stoner comedy team, Cheech and Chong, that made the 1978 film “Up in Smoke.” But his career has been much bigger and more mainstream than that.

Indeed, the dirty secret of Cheech’s life, as he tells it, is

just how much of a square he's been. Marin was a middle-class kid who spent his early years in African-American South Central Los Angeles. His father was an LAPD officer; his mother was president of the PTA. But by his teens, the family had relocated to a white neighborhood in the San Fernando Valley.

Racially and ethnically, he was an outsider in both places, so he fit in as much as he could. The future stoner actor-musician-writer-comedian was a Cub Scout, a Boy Scout, an altar boy, and "a little wiseass who got straight A's" first at Catholic schools and later at San Fernando Valley State College (now Cal State Northridge). He even worked in the signature L.A. industry—aerospace—during college, manufacturing airplane galleys at Nordskog.

The book's signature moment—recounted by Cheech as the Apostle Paul might have recalled his trip to Damascus—is when he smoked marijuana for the first time, and found that the allegedly mind-rotting substance expanded his perspective. He thought: "What else have they been lying about?"

And with that, he discovered art, awakened politically, dodged the draft, met Tommy Chong and began playing shows all over the world. The rest is California history. He bought a house in Malibu, and even practiced transcendental meditation, as taught by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

Cheech proudly identifies as Chicano and Latino, but sees his heritage as bridge, not niche. The glory of being Latino, in his telling, is that you are part of a diverse demographic that contains multitudes. "My face has some kind of international malleability to it. Add your own preferences or prejudice to it, and I could be anything," he writes.

But narrow-minded Hollywood types couldn't see his natural breadth at first. Marin countered by writing his own material, most successfully in the 1987 film "Born in East L.A." The

movie is quintessential Cheech—a comedy framing the Mexican-American story as fundamentally American, and demonstrating the absurdities of putting people in boxes.

Marin's other strategy was to find roles in the most middle-of-the-road TV and movie productions and make them his own. He did a spin-off of the "Golden Girls," and co-starred with Don Johnson on the middlebrow but high-ratings police procedural "Nash Bridges," set and filmed in San Francisco. While living there, he appeared in the premiere of a Sam Shepard play, "The Late Henry Moss", at San Francisco's Theatre On The Square. And he turned himself into a regular voice in the animated films of Emeryville-based Pixar films, most notably as Ramone in the "Cars" films.

Marin is unapologetic about mainstream success. His book includes an entire chapter on how he became champion of "Celebrity Jeopardy." By his account, his old partner, Tommy Chong, floundered because he was not willing to evolve to reach audiences.

Marin has made news more recently as a noted collector of Chicano art. The city of Riverside wants to turn over its main library for the Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art, Culture and Industry. Marin, ever mainstream, emphasizes that, "Chicano art is American art."

Despite his cult status, it's hard to call Cheech countercultural now. The man who performed his most recent marriage, Antonio Villaraigosa, is a leading candidate for California governor. In January, recreational marijuana will become legal in his home state.

Now that Cheech is an institution, maybe it's time to honor him as one. Perhaps California could create its own version of Mt. Rushmore; the natural place would be the Granite Mountains, in the Mojave Desert.

There would be many great candidates for this pantheon. But

why not start by carving the old stoner in stone?

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.