

film



UNSUNG HEROES: According to fungiphiles, mushrooms can lower your blood pressure, improve your memory and save the planet

The mushroom people find a friend

Ron Mann's new documentary sheds light on a literal subculture and its cultish devotees

BY BRIAN D. JOHNSON • There's a mushroom that, when nibbled by an ant, will take over the insect's nervous system, direct it to travel to a prime location for spreading spores, then kill it by growing a long tuber that snakes out of its head. There are oyster mushrooms that can be used to dress up a pasta sauce—or clean up an oil spill. Certain species of fungi are thought to lower blood pressure, boost immunity, and fend off cancer and diabetes. Some make you hallucinate, others make you horny, and a few are deadly. Fungi are pretty weird. And so are the folks obsessed with them, from mushroom experts (mycologists) to mushroom freaks (fungiphiles). There are even those who believe mushrooms are sentient beings—and possibly evolutionary hosts to an alien life form that came from outer space and provided the magic nutrient for human consciousness.

That's just a taste of the wild lore in *Know Your Mushrooms*, a new documentary from Canadian filmmaker Ron Mann (who, I should declare, is a friend of mine and executive producer of a short film I directed). Over the past three decades, Mann has excavated the roots of pop culture with docs about poetry, jazz, comic books, the twist, pot prohibition, and a hemp-fueled bus crusade led by Woody Harrelson. Now he sheds light on a literal subculture—the underground web of fungal growth that envelops the earth—and on the cultish devotees who believe the mushroom is maligned and misunderstood.

In Mann, they've found a natural ally. With projects mushrooming around him, this hippie entrepreneur is a compulsive catalyst of alternative culture. He's the only director in the country who has his own distribution company (Films We Like). Aside from *Know*

Your Mushrooms, he has another doc opening in theatres this month—Astra Taylor's *Examined Life*, a showcase of “rock star philosophers” that he executive-produced. And this spring, Toronto's Hot Docs festival will honour him with a retrospective of his career as dean of the dissident documentary.

When I met up with him in a restaurant after his yoga class last week, Mann devoured an oyster mushroom salad while raving about his new passion for fungi. He said he pops daily supplements of medicinal mushrooms. One is reishi, or ling zhi, which has been used for 2,000 years in Asia as an immunity booster and liver cleanser. He also takes lion's mane, a mushroom said to improve memory—perhaps not a bad idea for a 50-year-old who has consumed his share of mind-altering substances. But like the fungiphiles in his film, Mann also regards mushrooms as ecology's unsung heroes. Plants get all the glory, but fungi serve as nature's underworld recycling bin and detoxifier. “Mushrooms are the fruit of the mycelium,” says Mann, “and this subterranean network is the real worldwide web. It's all around us. We just don't notice it.”

Filmmaker Jim Jarmusch (*Broken Flowers*), an ardent fungiphile, prompted Mann to make the movie, introducing him to Colorado's annual Telluride Mushroom Festival. And in this mycological mecca, he found his

film's characters, and field guides. In one scene, holding up a toxic specimen with a “library paste” aroma, mushroom guru Larry Evans says, “This is one you would *not* want to eat. If you did, you would pass water through every opening on your body, including your ears.” But Evans and his colleagues stress that only a few species are poisonous, and are easily identified. Unlike Europeans, who have a tradition of picking mushrooms, North Americans tend to fear them. Mann's film strives to bury that phobia, while unleashing spores of bizarre trivia—we learn that the world's largest living organism is a honey mushroom in Oregon that measures 5.5 sq. km, and that bioluminescent mushrooms attract insects like “a bug disco.” Mycologists also argue that fungi can save the planet by cleansing toxic land and serving as clean pesticides.

Then there are the fun fungi. A quarter of the film is devoted to psilocybin or “magic” mushrooms, which clearly play a recreational role in the Telluride festival. Evans, the Indiana Jones of mycologists, spends his life chasing the rain from Alaska to Bolivia; he used to chase the Grateful Dead. Another expert, Gary Linkoff, gives a vivid account of his 'shroom-fuelled astral trip to the Andromeda galaxy. And in a clip, the late “psychonaut” Terence McKenna speculates that psilocybin helped primitive man evolve by enhancing his visual and mental acuity. “It's a cult,” concludes Mann, laughing. “And I'm part of it. I'm ready to drink the Kool-Aid.” M



WE'RE STALKING... HALLE BERRY

A star has to put up with a lot of things, but an escalator that tries to eat your dress is a bit much. Berry boarded the stairs in Washington when she was on her way to the Western Ball to commemorate President Obama's inauguration. When the dress caught in the escalator she started “screaming frantically,” a witness says. Quick-thinking security guards shut it down, Berry's gown was pulled free and she went to the ball, shaken but unharmed.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM PIANKENY