

They smoke pot, drink booze and consider themselves sober

People like Grammy nominee Jelly Roll are redefining what it means to be sober. Is the wagon big enough for them?

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By [Shane O'Neill](#)

November 6, 2024 at 5:00 a.m. EST

In January, country singer Jason DeFord, better known as Jelly Roll, testified before Congress about the dangers of fentanyl.

“I have firsthand witnessed this in a way most people have not,” he [said](#), referring to his past as a convicted drug dealer and addict and to the impact addiction has had on his family’s life.

Today, Jelly Roll is sober. Sort of.

Jelly Roll — who declined through a representative to participate in this story — abstains from cocaine and opiates, which wreaked havoc on his life and landed him in prison.

But he smokes weed. “Marijuana has kept me sober,” he [said in an interview](#) with the website Taste of Country.

And he drinks alcohol. In August, he [told](#) the New York Times that he’ll “have a cocktail every now and then” but that Alcoholics Anonymous meetings help him steer clear of harder drugs.

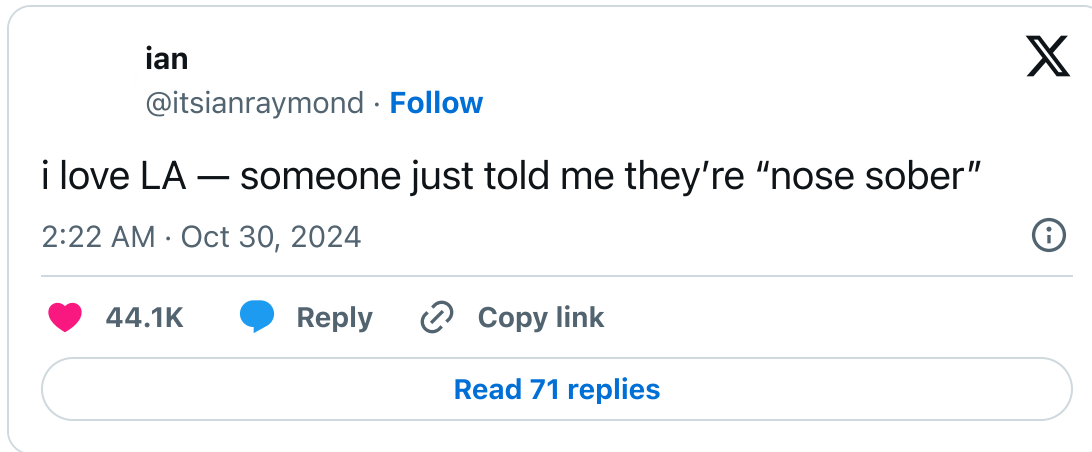
Maybe call it “Jelly Roll sober”? You could add it to a list of new definitions of “sober” that have popped up in the past few years.

There’s “California sober,” a term popularized by the musician [Billy Strings](#) and Demi Lovato for people who abstain from alcohol but still use cannabis (although Lovato now identifies as “sober” without an adjectival qualifier).

There’s “sober-curious” for people interested in temporary temperance, with events in honor of “[Sober October](#),” “Dry January” and its less stringent cousin, “[Damp January](#).”

People joke about being “Northern California sober” (mushrooms only), “Bushwick sober” (ketamine only) and “Florida sober” (meth only). The Washington Post reported on young people going “boy sober” in response to a toxic dating culture.

One X user posted that he overheard someone at the Silverlake Lounge in Los Angeles describe themselves as “nose sober,” meaning that they only abstain from snorted drugs.



“We have evolved in our vision of what healing from an addiction or a substance use disorder is,” said Bill Stauffer, the executive director of Pennsylvania Recovery Organization Alliance. He cited an update to the DSM-V in 2013 that combined substance abuse and substance dependence into substance use disorder, which could range from mild to severe.

“There’s a spectrum of substance use disorders,” Stauffer said. “There’s a spectrum of healing. We don’t understand either of them totally yet.”

He has seen people with substance use problems who are able to use cannabis without harm following counseling. And he has seen people who need to fully abstain to be functional — Stauffer counts himself among them.

“I don’t think the science is far enough along to fully identify who’s who in which category, but I think by having discussions around this issue that we will begin to move in that direction,” Stauffer said.

In the meantime, he acknowledges that all these new definitions of “sober” can get “confusing to people.”

Chris Black said, “It’s just not what the word means.” He has previously expressed misgivings about Jelly Roll’s approach to recovery on his podcast “How Long Gone.”

Black had used marijuana to help stop using oxycontin, but he didn’t consider himself sober until he began fully abstaining from all drugs and alcohol and started attending Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

“He’s a role model, and I think overall what he’s doing is great,” Black said, referring to Jelly Roll’s extensive outreach to incarcerated people and to communities struggling with addiction. “I just think there’s some confusion with the nomenclature.”

Spike Einbinder, a New York City-based comedian, grew up in what he described as “an AA household.” He remembers that his parents, the “Saturday Night Live” cast member Laraine Newman and the actor and writer Chad Einbinder, kept 12-step literature in every room of their house.

Spike Einbinder started using drugs as a teenager and struggled with addiction for years. After kicking hard drugs and alcohol, he attempted “California sobriety” — “smoking from the moment I was awake until the moment I went to sleep,” as he described it. After a few years, he realized that weed was taking a toll on his mental and physical health.

Today, he is free from all psychoactive substances. But he still struggled with how to describe himself.

“It was hard to consider myself sober without AA because of how I was raised, even though I’m so sober that I don’t even consume caffeine,” Einbinder said. He specifically resents the term “white-knuckling,” a phrase used to describe abstinence without 12-step recovery.

By most measures, AA is the most robust and accessible program dedicated to helping people stop drinking. There are meetings happening across the world around-the-clock, full of people sharing personal stories and offering a battery of slogans and tips that have helped millions of people change their relationship to alcohol.

But it doesn’t work for everyone.

“I’m not against 12-step [programs], but I cannot ignore the lack of cultural and social competence of some of those people in those meetings,” said Khadi A. Oluwatoyin, an attorney based in Tulsa.

Oluwatoyin recalled one AA meeting at which a White speaker described her “rock bottom” as living in a predominantly Black part of Staten Island. It was the neighborhood where Oluwatoyin was living at the time.

Experiences like that spurred Oluwatoyin to start the “Sober Black Girls Club” peer-to-peer support group, which hosts meetings several times a week. She said that the majority, though not all, of Sober Black Girls Club members are part of a 12-step group.



Sober Black Girls Club



A safe space that provides resources and support to Black girls, women, femmes, and nonconforming folks practicing sobriety, in recovery, or considering it.



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🌟 Shoutout to the Sober Black Girls Club! 🌟

Founded by Khadi A. Oluwatoyin, this incredible organization provides resources and support to Black girls, women, femmes, and nonconforming folks practicing sobriety, in recovery, or considering it.

Sober Black Girls Club is a safe space that centers on the unique intersection of sobriety and the Black experience, offering community, understanding, and empowerment. Check out more @soberblackgirlsclub 💕

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#SoberBlackGirlsClub #SobrietySupport #BlackGirlsMagic #Empowerment #Community
#RecoveryJourney #BlackExcellence #StrongerTogether

“AA and 12-step is where we all usually start, and I think it’s a good start,” Oluwatoyin said. “But we don’t all finish there.”

Pete Rubinas, the executive director of SMART recovery, thinks the language used in traditional 12-step recovery can be limiting. At the recovery meetings he runs, he says the word “sober” doesn’t come up frequently.

“We talk about, ‘I had a problematic relationship with alcohol,’ ‘I ended my relationship with alcohol,’ ‘I struggle with alcohol,’” Rubinas said. “There’s very little all-or-nothing, black-and-white language that we use.”

SMART recovery touts itself as “a secular and evidence-informed alternative to the widespread 12-step addiction recovery program.” It started in 1994 but has surged in popularity in the past five years. Today there are more than 2,500 SMART recovery meetings worldwide.

Its approach aligns with a body of research that supports incorporating harm reduction — cutting back drinking, for instance — into addiction treatment. In 2023, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism published an [article](#) that pointed to the efficacy of treating Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD) with more than just abstinence protocols.

“Today, although abstinence is the safest course for certain subgroups, harm reduction strategies that are non-abstinence based have become an important part of the discussion around AUD treatment and the recovery process,” the researchers wrote.

Those who attempt “California sobriety” have had mixed success, according to research conducted by Meenakshi S. Subbaraman, a program director and biostatistician at the Public Health Institute in Oakland, California.

One study she conducted found “very strong, consistent associations between cannabis use and alcohol and other drug use” among 557 participants residing in sober-living facilities. But she also acknowledged that other research found some individuals drink less and have fewer alcohol binge episodes on days that they use cannabis.

“It works for some people, it doesn’t work for others, and we’re still trying to figure out what distinguishes those two groups,” Subbaraman said. Subbaraman herself hasn’t had a drink in five years but uses marijuana.

A boom of interest and research into the use of [psychedelics](#) such as [ketamine](#), [psilocybin](#) and [MDMA](#) to treat mental health disorders has also led some to question what role these substances could play in addiction treatment. The founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, known as Bill W., was himself interested in LSD as a [potential treatment](#) for alcoholism.

Max F., who spoke on the condition his last name be withheld in accordance with the 12-step principle of anonymity, sees danger in broadening sobriety to include such substances.

“The way my addiction speaks to me is, ‘You could probably do acid or mushrooms once a year camping and you’ll be fine, you won’t relapse,’” he said. “But I have to be careful about my brain because it’s a really dangerous spot for me.” For people like Max F. who have struggled with opiates, an attempt to use moderately could easily lead to an accidental fentanyl overdose.

Max F. runs an Instagram account called [junkie.memez](#) that pokes fun at the various factions in recovery. One of his memes [shows](#) a tweed golf cap labeled “AA,” a trucker hat with a skull labeled “NA” for Narcotics Anonymous, and a propeller cap labeled “SMART recovery.”

His account also lampoons self-identified [sober people who smoke weed](#) and former heroin users on [suboxone](#) as maintenance therapy. But Max F. stresses that his account is meant to be a good-natured troll of recovery communities, not a critique of individual choices.

“How I behave as a member of Narcotics Anonymous and the content that I post are two separate things,” he said. “In my actual real-life recovery, I don’t judge other people’s journeys.”

For Max F., it doesn’t matter whether your path to sobriety looks like his or Demi Lovato’s or Jelly Roll’s. “At the end of the day, the only requirement for membership in a 12-step fellowship is the desire to stop using,” he said. “That’s all we care about: If you have a desire to stop, then you are welcome here.”