Rowdy Yates, Oswin Baker

From Johnny B. to Ebenezer: Goode times on the dance floor

If you're looking for an explanation for drug use, you can't go far wrong by starting with culture. And the culture of the last 30 years has been led by the amp, the guitar and the drum kit. From the psychedelic tripping of the Beatles, the Stones and the Who, through the frantic polydrug cocktail of the Sex Pistols, all the way to Madchester, acid house and beyond, drugs have been integral to Britain's music scene – and vice versa. If the sex don't get you, the drugs will

1968 was a year of paradox. While trippy "human be-ins" continued under the influence of Ken Kesey and Jerry Garcia in San Francisco, half way across the world, speeding Parisian students were hurling stones at the riot police. In the same year that The Incredible String Band issued their double album *Wee Tam: Big Huge*, full of psychedelic imagery, the soundtrack for *The Sound of Music* became the world's biggest ever selling album. Meanwhile, Syd Barrett, the driving force behind Pink Floyd, was leaving the band, his brain seriously addled by acid. Somehow, amphetamines and LSD had dropped through the legal, cultural and treatment nets.

The reason was not hard to find. In 1964, newspaper reports of London's heroin scene had led the government to reconvene its Interdepartmental Committee under the chairmanship of Lord Brain. At his insistence, the terms of reference were made deliberately narrow: to review "the advice they gave in 1961 in relation to the prescribing of addictive drugs by doctors". This meant that the Second Brain Report virtually ignored the emerging patterns of drug use outside London and, in particular, the use of amphetamines. This narrow focus continued a tradition set in the 1920s by Rolleston and paved the way for the establishment of a British drug treatment service network which has concentrated, almost exclusively, on opioid injectors for the past 30 years.

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Anno Domini

But heroin – like jazz – though highly influential, has never been a mainstream choice for Britain's army of drug users, an army recruited through cultural rather than pharmacological propaganda. And that culture has a very precise date of

birth: 1956, the year of rock'n'roll.

It all started with Bill Haley and the Comets. An aging, overweight jazz combo bandleader was an unlikely rebel hero, but *Rock Around the Clock* (and how exactly are you going to do that?) caught the imagination of British teenagers.

Haley, however, was but a flash in the pan when compared to the real revelations of the year. Elvis Presley streaked through 1956, with six top twenty hits including *Heartbreak Hotel* and his first film, *Love Me Tender*, and Chuck Berry set black America alight with a string of off-the-peg three minute wonders all about sex and fast cars.

But Elvis and Chuck were soloists, usually backed by session musicians. When it comes to homegrown influences, then, it was Lonnie Donegan who pioneered the basic four-piece 'group' which was to become the hallmark of the British beat boom. In 1956, Donegan scored a considerable success on both sides of the Atlantic with *Rock Island Line*, but it was the second hit – the UK number one *Cumberland Gap* – that really launched the skiffle craze in Britain.

Both the washboard and the tea-chest bass were quickly abandoned in favour of more orthodox equivalents (Broadway offered a *Kat* snare-and-cymbal set for £10.4s) but the essentially homemade nature of the craze remained. Like punk 20 years later, skiffle was a short-lived but highly influential episode spawning a myriad of sub-genres and offshoots.

The links between skiffle and jazz were to remain strong (Lonnie had begun his climb to fame as a banjo player with the Crane River Jazz Band) and many skifflers returned to the fold, sparking a trad jazz Indian Summer in the early sixties, bringing top ten fame if not fortune to the likes of Acker Bilk and Kenny Ball.

Many of these veteran British jazzmen had picked up their love of jazz from American servicemen during the war. And this was not all they picked up. They returned home with their heads filled with riffs from Woody Herman and Duke Ellington and their bodies filled with the amphetamines which they had been plied with to combat fatigue during military service.

Venue-led, drug-fuelled

As the beat-boom grew out of jazz, skiffle and rock'n'roll in the early 1960s, the need for venues which allowed room for dancing saw a move away from the short-lived coffee bars with their jukeboxes and espresso machines to the dance hall and, paradoxically, back to the jazz club.

Booking a 'beat group' as support for a jazz headliner was common fare and, gradually, the 'beat' took over. The Rolling Stones' Brian Jones once played alto sax with the Cheltenham Jazzmen; Eric Burdon of The Animals, almost unbelievably, had played trombone with the Pagan Jazzmen – and it is no surprise to find that bands of this ilk first came to the public's attention through their performances at erstwhile jazz festivals.

But jazz was ceding ground. London's Safari and 2i Clubs (run by former wrestler, Dr Death) began life as jazz joints, while in Manchester, the 2Js changed its name to the Oasis and for a time rivalled Liverpool's famous Cavern Club. And a little-known beatnik bar transformed itself into the legendary Twisted Wheel.

Twisting the night away

In 1963, The Twisted Wheel began offering all-night dance sessions to augment its standard beat night offerings of the usual two live groups. It was an inspired move. Other clubs had been offering all-night sessions for some time but the Twisted Wheel All-Nighters ("dance your socks of for 6s.0d") caught the public imagination. At least in part, this was due to the policy of concentrating on hard-edged soul and R&B.

The mood was infectious. Soon, all-nighters were springing up everywhere: the Torch in Stoke, the Highland Room in Blackpool and a host of other imitators. When in 1973 Russ Winstanley, a sometime DJ at the Twisted Wheel, took his considerable collection of obscure soul and R&B records to the Empress Ballroom in Wigan, the Northern Soul legend was fully formed.

Within weeks, the Wigan Casino became *the* venue for soul all-nighters. By the mid-seventies, the Casino boasted a 100,000 strong membership and even an average night would bring 2000 dancers from all over the country. The dancing was frenetic,

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often showy and usually non-stop. Dancers brought towels and a change of clothing and the whole was topped off with a liberal supply of amphetamine. Ring any bells?

The phenomenon was virtually ignored by the mainstream music press and few of the records (many of which were changing hands for three-figure sums) ever found their way into the charts. But Northern Soul was not simply an outlet for obscure items from the Motown catalogue. The watchword was 'dance' and tastes remained surprisingly eclectic. Not so with the drugs. Speed was the only show in town.

The heart of the sun . . .

While working-class northerners were sweating it out with amphetamines, elsewhere in the mid-1960s the increasing interest in so-called 'psychedelic' drugs (a term coined by the Scottish psychiatrist, Humphrey Osmond) was leading a shift towards a more mellow, more introspective – and in hindsight pretty pretentious – style of music. In San Francisco, The Grateful Dead were collaborating with author Ken Kesey in the Kool Aid Acid Test, a mass experiment with LSD, 'trippy' music and light shows. While in London, Pink Floyd's LSD-inspired music was accompanied by light shows organised by Joel and Toni Brown of Timothy Leary's Millbrook Institute.

But all this was still very much on the fringes. *Sergeant Pepper's* changed all that, the pinnacle of a spate of London-bred psychedelia which was to include The Rolling Stones' copycat *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, The Who's *Sell Out* and even Jimi Hendrix's *Are You Experienced?*

Suddenly, psychedelics were hip and speed was uncool. In 1968, when Dr John Petro (the archetypal junkie's friend) responded to the new restrictions on heroin and cocaine by prescribing large amounts of methedrine, the new British 'underground' countered with a *Speed Kills* campaign in the *Oz* and *IT* magazines.

But psychedelia and the so-called 'counter-culture' of the late sixties was essentially the product of a burgeoning middle class and had little to do with the everyday life of ordinary working teenagers. As Willie McBride, formerly of Crew 2000 once remarked, "If you weren't in a university town, the sixties didn't happen".

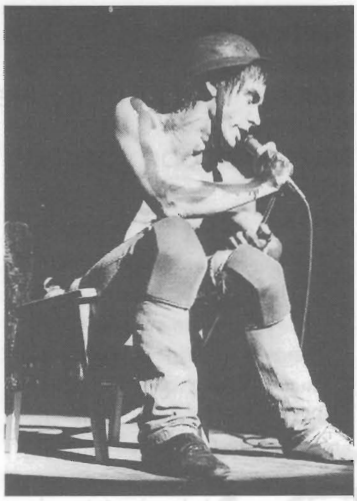
The working class demand for loud, raucous, music to dance to – and for the amphetamines to drive it – remained. The bizarre glam-rock embarrassments and prog-rock noodlings of Bowie, Genesis *et al* in the early 1970s were a million miles away from the stances of a Slade or Led Zeppelin. And it was from *such* roots that the first truly working class and drug-fuelled musical genre since the early days of rock'n'roll was born: heavy metal.

Like a bat out of hell

To some extent, the basic ingredients of heavy metal had been present from the very beginning. Link Wray, a Native American guitarist of the mid-1950s, had a smash hit with a pounding guitar solo called *Rumble*, banned in New York and elsewhere because of its brooding street-gang menace. The 'menace' was mainly due to the fuzz-box effect Wray had produced by jabbing a pencil repeatedly into his amplifier speaker.

By the late sixties, a new wave of American 'garage bands' was appearing. Steppenwolf take the credit for the first musical mention of heavy metal in their rebel anthem *Born To Be Wild* ("I like smokin' lightnin', heavy metal thunder") although the original phrase can be traced to William Burroughs' classic drug novel, *Naked Lunch*. MC5 were one of the original right-wing bands, providing the template for later British NF bands like Spanner. The Stooges (with Iggy Pop at the mike) produced some of the bleakest fuzz-box fury in a long time – much of which would segue effortlessly into punk – while Blue Cheer, hailed by some as the first heavy metal band, claimed to be so hard they could "churn the air into cottage cheese".

Meanwhile in Britain, a number of blues-based bands were teetering on the edge of the heavy metal precipice. When the Yardbirds broke up in 1967, Jimmy Page, the guitarist who had replaced Jeff Beck, bought the rights to the name and took the New Yardbirds on a tour of Scandinavia. He could have saved his money – after that tour, he never used the name again, stung into action by a chance remark from The Who's Keith Moon that the new band would "go down like a lead zeppelin" . . .



Like the Stones before them, the rechristened Led Zeppelin toyed with black magic imagery both on stage and on vinyl, and Page went so far as to buy Aleister Crowley's former home near Inverness. But they also took blues that one step further over the edge into metal superstardom. Other 'blues' bands followed. Birmingham-based Earth changed their name to Black Sabbath after the novel by occult writer, Dennis Wheatley, and Ozzie Osbourne never looked back.

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The music press hated the new genre with a vengeance (when Uriah Heep released their album *Very 'Eavy, Very 'Umble*, one critic remarked, "If this group makes it, I'll have to commit suicide") but the fans and the money rolled in. Motorhead's *Ace of Spades* is still one of the biggest selling singles of its time, and in 1991, Metallica's eponymous album went multi-platinum despite almost no airplay and only grudging acknowledgement from the mainstream music press.

As for the drugs, the metal of Motorhead and Metallica wouldn't exist without speed. In Britain, heavy

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metal is a predominantly northern affair, closely linked to the speed scenes of both Scotland and Northern England. In Scandinavia, Belgium and Germany – where the genre is closely tied to the neo-Nazi right – the amphetamine link is even stronger, with much of the trade in the drug (and increasingly in other injected drugs) controlled by the biker community.

The great rock'n'roll swindle

As with skiffle and rock, it was but a short step from metal to punk, and a step that many metal bands took. But what really characterised punk was its shattering of the mono-drug cultures of previous musical genres.

Amphetamine, cocaine, heroin, alcohol and solvents all went in the mix, helping to create the buzz of the Buzzcocks, the wail of Siouxsie and the Banshees and the shambles of Sham 69. It was perhaps the only time in the previous quarter of a century that one musical form was able to accommodate a polydrug culture, and as such, it was hardly surprising that in a few short years, the drugs had burnt the heart out of the music.

In the aftermath, musical identities splintered. Heroin goth span off into a cul-de-sac, grunge was road-tested by the mid-1980s 'grebo' craze led by Gaye Bykers on Acid, and metal re-emerged as speed-driven thrash. But the best was yet to come.

Aceeeeeeeeeeeeeeed!

In the summer of 1987, four British DJs (two of them stalwarts of the Northern Soul scene at the 100 Club) took a busman's holiday to Ibiza and invented 'acid house'. Johnny Walker, Danny Rampling, Nicky Holloway and Paul Oakenfield partied till dawn playing an eclectic mix of soul standards, Chicago house, hip-hop, British 'indie' music and even Beatles tracks. The whole was driven by liberal supplies of ecstasy.

The drug itself was not new. It had enjoyed a brief moment of fame in the late sixties when both Michael Hollinshead and RD Laing tried it. In 1981, Marc Almond's Soft Cell 'rediscovered' it in New York's gay clubs and built their debut album, *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret*, around it. They followed up with a remix collection, *Non-Stop Ecstatic Dancing*, which included the track *Memorabilia*, pop's first uncredited ecstasy anthem.

Significantly, because acid house was essentially an electronic medium, the emphasis on the band as focal point all but disappeared. The early DJs, mixing discs and drugs with equal dexterity, were almost invisible behind a bank of sound equipment, leaving the audience to turn in on itself. The dance itself and the dancers became part of the spectacle, part of the experience – and rave was born.

By the summer of 1988, aficionados were proclaiming the 'second summer of love'. Rave culture developed its own code and language ('loved-up' and 'chilled out') to distinguish the *cognoscenti* from the outsiders, but there was only so much it could do to retain exclusivity. In 1992, the Shamen had a hit number one single with *Ebenezer Goode*, which included the refrain, "Eezer Goode, Eezer Goode, he's Ebenezer Goode". Rave culture was fast becoming a mass culture.

As with the first summer of love, the innocence and euphoria may well have been short-lived, but that was to be expected, as the music of both times was built around the drug experience. In two major respects, though, acid house differed markedly. Firstly, words and psychedelic imagery were eschewed for mantra-like chants and a basic 4/4 ('four to the floor') melodic structure designed to create a hypnotic background for the ecstasy experience.

Secondly, the spiritual idyll of 1960s psychedelia was not present in the early manifestations of acid house. This was a worldly summer of physical love, though as rave culture began to be influenced by other drugs and musical genres, some early devotees have turned to 'Goan trance', a development which echoes some of the back to nature/mother earth flim-flam of the 1960s.

But ecstasy's double life – part amphetamine, part hallucinogen – did mean that there was some room for productive cross-pollination, no more so than in the chill-out room. The chill-out directly led to ambient music, and The Orb's *Fluffy Little Clouds* is an unmistakable homage to Pink Floyd's *Astronomy Domine*.

But, at the end of the day, rave is about dancing not chilling out, and dancing is about amphetamines. Despite the media's obsession with ecstasy, survey after survey shows that, cannabis apart, amphetamine remains the most widely used clubbing drug. This should come as no surprise. Speed and dance and dance and speed have been together for a long time and they're not about to give up on each other now ■

This article is based upon a more extensive report by Rowdy Yates, due to be published next year in *Magazine Itaca: The Journal of the European Society of Professionals Working with Drug Dependencies*