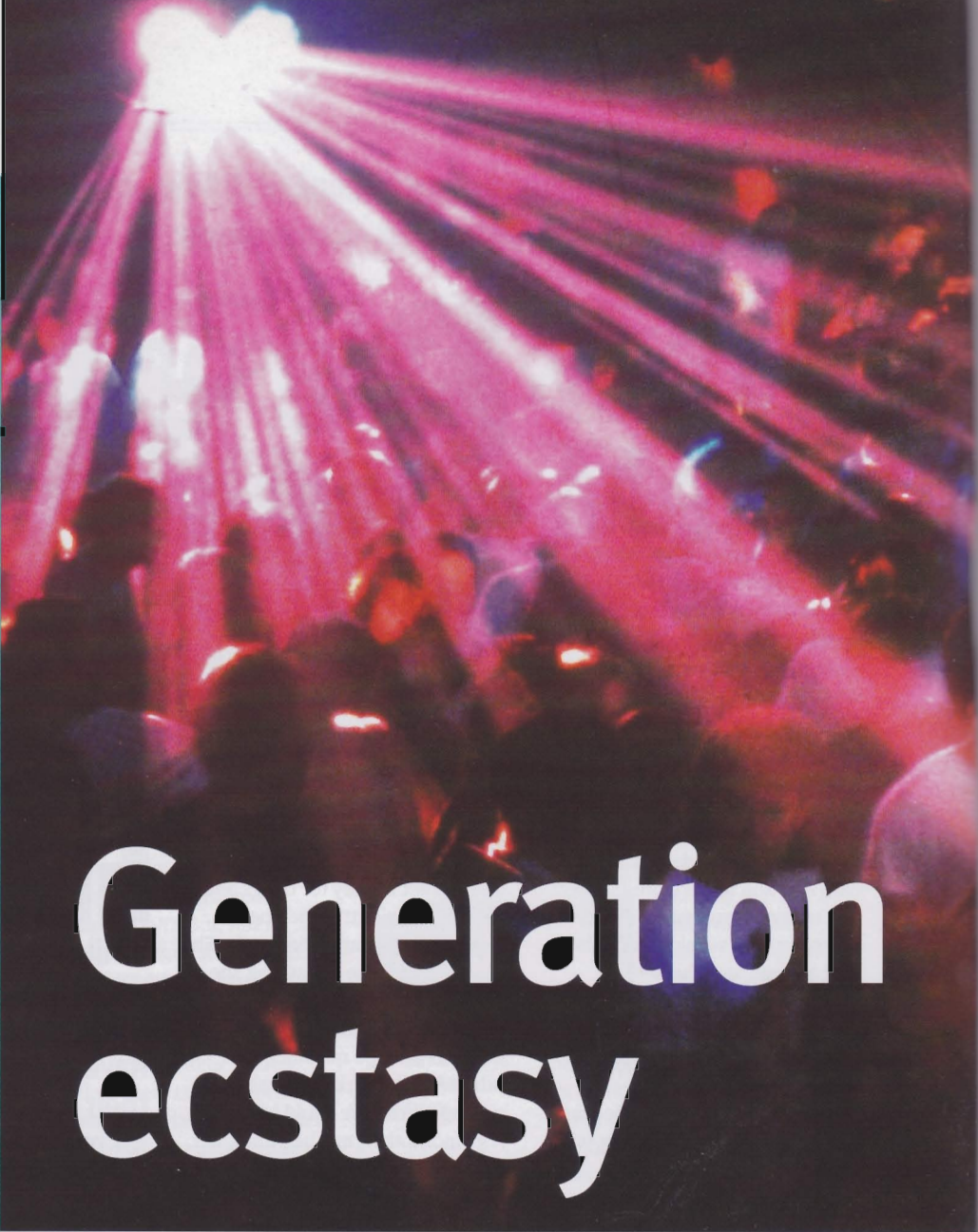


Twenty years ago *The Face* published the first UK article on a little known drug called ecstasy. Ten years ago Leah Betts died. Now ecstasy is being taken by the dozen on street corners for 50p a pop. **Andrea Wren** tracks the life of a pill which changed the face of drug use in Britain



# Generation ecstasy

**E**CSTASY's lifespan over the last 20 years resembles that of a has-been pop celebrity. A starring role for many years, its limelight days are now few. There are some die-hard followers and new groupies that weren't around in the beginning, but ecstasy's image is now a little jaded, with only an occasional few column inches when there is occasion to make another appearance. It's still a drug being used by hundreds of thousands of people each weekend, with usage rates remaining consistent, but like any clapped out star, it's less choosy about where it likes to hang out.

There are a couple of prominent anniversaries this year which are worth noting in ecstasy's UK history. The tragedy of Leah Betts, one of the most infamous drug-related deaths in history, occurred ten years ago, in November 1995. A decade previously, the first article on ecstasy was published by now-defunct urban-culture magazine *The Face* in October 1985. Ecstasy has blazed an indelible path across modern British media, culture, music, law enforcement and medicine.

## ENTRANCE

Otherwise known as 3, 4-methylenedioxymethylamphetamine (MDMA), E first emerged on the UK club scene from across the Atlantic in the mid-80s. Extremely

popular in US gay clubs, it could be bought legally until 1985. First synthesised in 1912 then patented in 1914 as an appetite suppressant by German firm Merck Pharmaceuticals, it had a long stint on the therapists' couch before the first signs of recreational use in 1981. Ecstasy soon came under the gaze of the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), which laid down an emergency ruling to criminalise it in July 1985. In Britain, the drug had been controlled since 1977 as a Class A drug, although it could be argued that its chemical construction means that it should have been a Class B drug alongside other amphetamine-type drugs, rather than being treated as a hallucinogen.

Like any new pop icon, the entrance of ecstasy caused a stir in the lives of young people. It wasn't just any drug: one clubber likened it to "finding a new religion". It made people smile, hug, talk to strangers, and dance incessantly.

E didn't cross the ocean as a lone voyager. Heading towards the north west of England it brought along the House and Garage sounds of Chicago and New York, mingling with the acid house scene. Smiley faces, floppy hats, and big fat ecstasy tablets stamped with doves symbolise the era that transcended into rave and then finally dance music, with warehouse parties, outdoor raves and 'Madchester' providing the party context within which ecstasy was used.

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The late 80s to 90s saw the rise of superclubs and top-name DJs, attracting crowds as substantial as any pop diva would. This was further influenced by the Ibiza scene, with 'Balearic beats' from the island being tried out in London clubs by DJs who'd spent their summers there. Manchester DJ Dave Haslam, who played the famous Factory-owned Hacienda two nights a week in 1988, says: "I can remember the arrival of ecstasy in the Hacienda virtually to the month, around February 1988. There was a distinct change in the atmosphere. The use of the drug broke down barriers and we could see different types of people coming into the club and getting on. The music

**Bitter pill: the image of Leah Betts was one of the most memorable of the 90s**



changed, with more rhythmic, house type records being played."

UK clubland had a new lease of life. The superclub Cream, a template for many imitators, opened in Liverpool in October 1992. E was the conduit through which club-goers shared their experience together. At around £15–20 each though, the cost of pills was verging on extortionate and users tended to limit their intake to one or two, though reputedly, MDMA content was higher.

#### **MEDIA FRENZY**

Initially, the press reaction to acid house and rave culture was favourable. *The Sun* newspaper was selling smiley face t-shirts in 1988 and were raving about, well, rave, printing a glossary of acid house terminology. Just seven days after promoting the smiley brigade, the *Sun*, closely followed by the rest of the tabloid press, was calling ecstasy 'evil'. Headlines such as 'The child-killing drug available on every street corner' or the *Daily Star's* claim that users were 'Dicing with a cocktail of death' did nothing to reduce parental panic or look at the real risks that the drug posed.

There were a number of deaths reported by the time Leah Betts died on her 18th birthday, yet the incident marks a landmark point in the history of the drug. Her parents allowed a picture of her young, tube-filled face to



be printed by newspapers, shown on TV and billboards. It was headline news and Leah's face became the focal point of the anti-ecstasy 'Sorted' campaign, with the slogan 'Just one ecstasy tablet took Leah Betts'.

### MIXED MESSAGES

Yet the media frenzy muddled the facts. It wasn't ecstasy poisoning that killed Leah. "She died from water intoxication," says John Corkery, Programme Manager for the National Programme on Substance Abuse Deaths. "She was actually trying to counter the effects of the drug." Possibly confused about the harm reduction messages surrounding the drug, Leah drank more water than her body needed and combined with the effect that ecstasy has on the body of preventing urination, she died.

Users can die from drinking too much fluid or through dehydration or heatstroke. Sometimes, fatalities occur because the user has not excreted fluids effectively, or through heart failure following the significant rise in blood pressure and heart rate. Very rarely does MDMA cause the kind of lethal 'allergic reactions' much touted by the media.

The number of deaths related to taking ecstasy in people aged 15 to 24 between 1995 and 1996 – the period in which Betts died – was 18. Since then there has been a steady increase in ecstasy related deaths. A total of 202 people died from 1996 to 2002, with a high of 72 occurring between 2001 and 2002. First time users have a one in 2000 chance of death compared to one in 50,000 for experienced users.

Whether long-term use of MDMA causes brain damage is open to debate. But inconsistent, inadequate or flawed research has not helped to present an accurate case. One study published in *Science* magazine in 2002 stated that a single tablet of ecstasy could induce Parkinson's disease. This had to be retracted as it was shown the monkeys in the experiment had been given the wrong drug. An

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analysis published in early 2004 suggested regular ecstasy use poses a risk to long-term memory and there have been other links to long-term depression. But it would take a properly conducted longitudinal study to better determine what the longer-term risks to mental health might be.

### THE END OF THE PARTY?

Such attention to ecstasy through the 90s meant that law enforcement agencies had no choice but to intervene and increasingly, through a number of changes in the law, raves were driven underground and became illegal. A controversial amendment to the Criminal Justice Act 1994, under which 'a gathering on land in the open air of 100 persons or more...at which amplified music is played during the night...likely to cause distress to the inhabitants of the locality', criminalised raves and signalled the start of a series of confrontations between party organisers, ravers and police.

Similarly, the mid-90s saw the demise of Manchester clubland, which collapsed under the burden of gang and dealer control. The infamous shooting at the Hacienda marked its downfall, but it was 'dead' before that in club terms. Says Haslam: "The honeymoon period after ecstasy first entered the club lasted about a year. By the end of 1989, a rougher element could be seen, some nights erupted into gang-related violence. I left in October 1990 and moved on."

By the turn of the millennium, dance culture had lost its edge. Cream closed in 2003 and Gatecrasher in Sheffield switched its weekly hardcore house night to a monthly gig instead. Some dance clubs still exist, but clubbers who did the 1989/1990 circuit will tell you they are not like they used to be. Ecstasy use has also changed, along with prices and levels of MDMA content in pills.

The scene in 2005 is that ecstasy can be bought for as little as 50p, with average costs of around £3–5. Increasingly, use is occurring out of the party context.

People use at festivals, in bars and in mainstream clubs that don't have the dance 'ethos'. Drug services are reporting that young people who previously couldn't afford ecstasy can now buy pills in considerable quantities, consuming them in the same places they would normally drink alcohol, like parks and street corners and taking amounts such as 10–20 pills a day.

Whilst the actual number of users has remained fairly steady, the amount of pills taken per person has increased, which may explain the increase in death rate. Ecstasy is still doing a roaring trade, with an estimated 500,000 to one million tablets consumed over any weekend throughout Britain. Like the has-been celebrity doing holiday camps instead of stadiums, it's still finding a way to get an audience. ■

### E-channels

**E**CTASY is a Class A drug, which means it is categorised alongside drugs like heroin, cocaine and crack. The active ingredient MDMA is produced from a raw material called piperonyl methylketone (PMK). This comes from oil extracted from the sassasfras tree bark, mainly originating in China (for the perfume industry, reputedly).

US Drug Enforcement officials signed a resolution with the European Union in 2001 to crack down on PMK shipments, but Triad gangs have created front companies to disguise their operations and transport it to factories across the world, including European countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium and the UK. Each kilogram of PMK costs between £1000–4000 and dealers buy pills for £20,000–40,000 per kilogram.

Ecstasy laboratories do not need complicated equipment. Heaters, distillation flasks and funnels are the basics required to churn out a few thousand tablets a week from about £4000 of apparatus. Although millions of tablets are smuggled into Britain from across the channel through means such as speedboats, day trippers and concealed assignments, some of it is produced here, and one of the problems for authorities is that as the drug is often consumed where it is produced, there is less opportunity to intervene.

Though ecstasy smuggling and the operations of illegal gangs may be a serious concern for customs, in terms of the use in clubs, one undisclosed source from Greater Manchester Police said: "Ecstasy is not a major priority for the police; we see it as a drug that's normally confined to recreational use within clubs. We are much more concerned with hard drugs like crack and heroin."

This echoes the view of Commander Brian Paddock, who in 2002 as head of Lambeth police, called for ecstasy to be downgraded from Class A to Class B, and who felt that looking for E dealers was a waste of police resources. He was reported to have said: "I would say there are far more important things which cause real harm to the community."