

# A life on drugs

Rick Rutkowski on the bad joke-cracking, Arsenal-loving, Cream-obsessed human drug-info bank that is Harry Shapiro, as he celebrates 30 years as the information guru at DrugScope



PHOTO: CARLITA MCKNIGHT



The drugs field has seen its fair share of characters over the years, some wonderfully altruistic, and some darkly infamous ones too. Some people that come to the field fall passionately in love with all its contradictions, vagaries and shape-shifting, others, sadly, fall by the wayside burned and bruised by the heavy workloads and demanding imperatives.

But, throughout 30 years of what can best be described as 'a long strange trip', there has been one man quietly working in the backroom of this great enterprise that we know and love as the 'drugs business'. Like a mysterious prophet he has brought us the news of what is to come, what's happening now and has chronicled and illuminated the past for those not fortunate enough to have witnessed it themselves. I speak of course of Harry Shapiro, former editor of *Druglink*, now Director of Communications and Information at DrugScope.

I have had the pleasure of knowing Harry since around 1986 when I first began to use the library at the Institute for the Study of Drug Dependence (ISDD), which went on to form DrugScope. Soon I discovered the warm, knowledgeable and passionate personality behind the

books, articles and publications. He has a knack of asking penetrating questions that make individuals question their own ideas, values and practice and can see the absurdity of much that we in the field are required to swallow whole. Harry is a highly astute man, with a wry sense of humour and an easy eloquence in front of the TV cameras. If you can get him to sit down for more than a minute to talk, he will present you with insights about our work that will give you cause to re-examine your perceptions.

But Harry is so much more than a just a bearded font of knowledge on drugs. Those lucky enough to spend a rare evening with him in a comfortable bar that stocks Jack Daniels may expect to listen to a treatise on Eric Clapton or hear humorous anecdotes about some of the more eccentric personalities in the rock world.

Prone, on occasions, to beat the shit out of a drum kit at international harm reduction shindigs, Harry has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the music business and has authored some unmissable books on the subject, not the least being *Jimi Hendrix: Electric Gypsy* and *Waiting For the Man*.

For a short time I had the opportunity

of working with Harry at DrugScope and it was a fun time (come on, some of it was, honest). DrugScope was funded to put on harm reduction seminars around the country and Harry and I were part of the road show.

I have a lasting memory of standing in the reception of a listed building conference centre in one of the cities (Newcastle maybe) at about 8.30am on a chilly morning when suddenly one of the small screws holding Harry's glasses together popped out onto the carpet. It must have been a sight to see, two myopic elder statesmen of DrugScope on hands and knees scrabbling around on the carpet as delegates began to arrive. I guess you had to be there.

So, we should all celebrate having the good fortune to still have Harry commentating on the state of the drugs field – and long may he reign. Thanks for all the highly intelligent, unbiased and incisive reportage that has been the hall mark for three decades and I for one look forward to heading into dotage in such illustrious company.

Keep on rocking Harry!

■ Rick Rutkowski is Director Operations of Mainliners

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