

DRUGS AND ROCK

IN THE WAKE of the Boy George revelations, both Baroness Trumpington — Under Secretary at the DHSS — and Conservative Party chairman Norman Tebbit, have railed against 'junkie' pop stars setting a bad example for the youth of the nation. Mr Tebbit raised the question of whether known drug using stars should be banned by the BBC, saying "20 or 30 years ago people were perhaps too permissive" (*Oxford Mail*, 5 July 1986). Not necessarily so: 20 years ago, when pop stars first made the headlines, the *News of the World* ran a "startling exposé" of pop's drug-addled aristocracy. A reader wrote in saying "pop stars should be subjected to a system of tests — like horses and greyhounds — before they go on stage" (*News of the World*, 26 February 1967).

Before rock and pop, jazz was the target of public deprecation. The context may have been different but the logic of moral outrage remained the same. 'Right thinking' citizens — the clergy, doctors, police, politicians and the press — conveniently combined entrenched racism and lamentations for a 'lost' generation by blaming black jazz musicians for the ills of society.

The question of a pop musician's social responsibility has become enshrined in the judicial *pas de deux* played out when a star comes to court. Mr/Ms Pop Star is humble and contrite, says they now realise the evils of drugs, and promises to be good, to which His Honour replies along the lines spoken to Donovan in 1966:

"I would like you to bear in mind that you have a great influence on young people and it behoves you to behave yourself."

In calling the veracity of this general premise into question, it might be sufficient to point out that Paul McCartney was admonished in similar fashion in 1984 — then a 42 year old with a wife and children, whose remaining influence on young people must have been minimal.

Pop stars like to think they are influential and, as far as drug use is concerned, it seems to be an unchallenged perception that this is the case. In an Audience Selection poll for the *News of the World* in 1985, two-thirds of a sample of 1000 in the 16-34 age group agreed that: "Pop and showbiz artists contribute to greater drug abuse". But, at the very least, for the young to take drugs because their idols do, they would have to *know* what is going on.

To take one example. In the mid-seventies, David Bowie was as popular as ever. His concerts sold out, audiences were dotted with Bowie look-alikes, records sold by the truck load and his face adorned a million bedroom walls. But how many, outside the business, knew his "Thin White Duke" persona of that time reflected a cocaine-fuelled existence in Los Angeles, a

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Politicians say they should set an example, but are rock and pop stars good, bad or indifferent in their influence on drugtaking among young admirers? Harry Shapiro surveys the myths and the facts, and asks — who gains from associating popular music with the nation's drug problem?

Harry Shapiro

fact revealed only recently in the flurry of Bowie biographies and by the singer himself (*Daily Mirror*, 18 March 1986).

This highlights a key point — that pop star revelations about drugs usually occur *after* the event. This can happen in several ways, including self revelation ("I was a slave to drugs": the torment of top rock star Bryan Ferry", *News of the World*, 3 October 1982) and so-called 'kiss and tell' stories by disgruntled groupies, ditched girlfriends, ex-employees or former band members like John Coghlan of Status Quo ("The Wild Side of Rock", *Daily Star*, 20 January 1986).

Alternatively, revelations might follow a death — as with Phil Lynott — or a heavily publicised arrest. There have been cases where the press collude with the police by passing on information to obtain an exclusive story, the Rolling Stone case in 1967 being the most famous example. Musicians do not go out of their way to get arrested by snorting cocaine on stage or smoking marijuana in the streets, however much above the law some of them think they are. The reason why they nevertheless do get 'busted' has much to do with the need to sell papers under the guise of 'public responsibility' and possibly the need on the part of the police to make headlines with a 'celebrity bust'. But for these 'needs', the drug doings of the rich and famous might go largely unreported.

There is, of course, an old adage in the entertainment industry that asserts there is no such thing as bad publicity. One could certainly take a cynical view of the intense publicity exposing Boy George's drug problems and subsequent recovery. Here was a world famous pop star who had 'over-exposed' himself to the media, had a flop record after a string of hits, and then disappeared from the public eye — yet his first 'post-drug' single went to 'number one'. Boy George did not become addicted for publicity purposes, but tasty headlines like "Junkie George Has 8 Weeks To Live" (*Sun*, 3 July 1986) didn't exactly harm his prospects.

"If I smoke, will I get caught? Only if you're stupid, unlucky or a pop superstar."

— Richard Neville, *Playpower*, 1971.

"When I wasn't high, I was in court . . . it was a game, nothing to do with justice or law."

— Keith Richards, *New Musical Express*, 22 February 1986.

Or how about Duran Duran? Revelations about cocaine in 1984 appeared to coincide with their attempt to break out of the pre-adolescent singles market, into the adult world of albums and acceptance as 'pukka' musicians.

Bad news

However, for the musician, a drug problem revealed or an appearance in court is usually bad news. Musicians with a serious drug problem often become notoriously unreliable. They can find it difficult to stay in work because nobody will take the risk of hiring them or joining them in a band. Concert promoters and record companies may be similarly wary. This of itself can worsen a serious situation.

Occasionally the desire to cover up a drug problem can have tragic consequences. Tommy Bolin of Deep Purple was discovered unconscious in his motel room and put back to bed in the hope that everything would be all right. It wasn't, and he died.

Once convicted, the international rock musician can lose out on lucrative tours because neither American nor Japanese immigration officials will grant visas to those with a drug conviction. Defence lawyers use this penalty in pleas for leniency in the courts. In 1980, former Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page was arrested on a cocaine possession charge. By the time the case came to trial in October 1982, his new band was being

Newsweek: You've described America as "upbeat, optimistic" — why are drugs such a problem now?

President Reagan: For one thing . . . the music world . . . has . . . made it sound as if it's right there and the thing to do, and rock-and-roll concerts and so forth. Musicians that young people like . . . make no secret of the fact that they are users.

— Extract from an interview with President Reagan, *Newsweek*, 11 August 1986, p.18.

"We also believe that those in the entertainment world have a responsibility to young people in setting a good example in making them aware of the dangers of drugtaking."

— Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Drugs Problem in the Member States of the Community, *European Parliament*, 1986.

launched with projected tours in both America and Japan. The defence argued that Page stood to lose millions if convicted. Presumably moved by this plea on behalf of Britain's invisible exports, the judge conditionally discharged Page for twelve months.

Of course, musicians can be their own worst enemies. On account of two previous marijuana convictions, Paul McCartney had been denied a Japanese visa. However, under pressure from music promoters anxious to book Wings, Japanese immigration officials relented, and in January 1980, McCartney flew into Tokyo Airport. Japanese Customs are legendary for their close scrutiny of incoming musicians: McCartney was bound to be a special target. Lying neatly on top of his luggage was about seven and a half ounces of marijuana. Nine days later in a flurry of international publicity he was deported with the loss of the whole tour, plus £200,000 to compensate the promoters and a further £100,000 in lawyers' fees — about £5000 per joint, excluding lost ticket sales.

Not all bad

The sixties were awash with songs like *Hole in my shoe* by Traffic — "I looked in the sky where an elephant's eye was looking at me from a bubblegum tree" — which prompted Julie Burchill to comment: "Really, you may as well write a letter to the drug squad: 'I use illegal hallucinogenic drugs, please arrest me'". And what about songs like *Lucy in the sky with diamonds* and *Purple haze*? Surely this is all the proof that is needed about the role of pop stars in glorifying and encouraging drug use among young people?

Certainly the argument seems very persuasive. Here you have the most popular rock musicians of all time singing, favourably it seems, about the psychedelic experience, at a time of increasing drug use among young people. So convinced were the US government of the baleful influence of such songs, that in the early '70s a campaign was waged by the Federal Communication Commission against radio stations playing records with an alleged drug content. Several have been banned here under the same premise, including *A day in the life* and *Puff the magic dragon*.

In 1977-1978 a study was conducted of America's 'Woodstock Generation' who grew up in the '60s, to discover facts about their drug use ten years previously.¹ Forty-three per cent of the 1000-person sample believed that much of the music of the '60s could only really be understood by those who had gone through the drug experience. In many cases, music had formed the backdrop to that first 'joint', in college 'dorms' listening to the Stones or Dylan.

But what needs to be established here is a direct 'rock-leads-to-drugs' causal link, and this really is not proven. Halluci-

Keith Richards, famous rock musician and infamous drug user, waits (patiently?) for baggage to be checked at US Customs during the Rolling Stones' mid-'70s tour. Stars such as Richards are obvious targets in the war against drugs: 'celebrity busts' make sensational headlines and help demonstrate that nobody is above the law.



nogenic drugs are said to make music sound more meaningful, so it might be just as valid to say drugtaking encourages an interest in rock music!

In reality, the relationship between listening to music and taking drugs is likely to be more complex than any 'one causes the other' theory could encompass. John Auld² has described how the suspension of normal communication in cannabis smoking groups, and the redirection of attention to anticipated inner changes, created a 'space' for introspective concentration on the music in a way that would otherwise be seen as bad manners. In return the music provided a focus and rationale for this silent introspection, saving the smoker the embarrassment of sitting in strained silence with a group of other smokers, none of whom were sure what they were supposed to be doing, or how they appeared under the 'X-ray' vision of the other participants' supposedly drug-sharpened sensitivities.

Another fault in the argument that rock leads to drugs is the assumption that all rock songs about drugs project a favourable image. A study by Schwartz *et al*³ examined the lyrics of 129 songs and classified them as pro- or anti-drug, purely descriptive, or conjectural, which meant there were no explicit drug references, but a drug-related interpretation had been imposed on the song (see table). They concluded: "there is no empirical evidence to indicate that hearing a pro-drug use message . . . will cause those who listen to use drugs illegally".

And if pop stars are supposed to be so influential, what about all those anti-drug

songs that have been heard by just as many young people, like *Amphetamine Annie* and *The pusher*? Of necessity, the pro-drug message, where it existed, had to be deciphered, but the anti-drug songs left listeners in no doubt about the meaning. Why should these songs have any less impact than the others? — unless, of course, none of them make any difference to the prevalence of drug use.

THIS TAKES US to the final point. In her speech to a Gloucester seminar on drugs, Baroness Trumpington said: "I would like to see pop and sport personalities coming forward and saying how much they despise drugs" (*Gloucestershire Echo*, 10 July 1986). Which, of course, they have. Pete Townshend started pop's anti-drug campaign rolling. Since then there have been any number of benefit concerts, charity records and public pronouncements, involving many of today's top names. Despite the widespread use of cocaine in the business, there has been a perceptible anti-drugs strain since the early '80s, and some band leaders like Bruce Springsteen have always taken a hard line on drugs within their organisations.

But in an era of general public concern over drug use, pop stars are an obvious target, handy folk devils for the new moral panic. In the hands of Fleet Street and those out to score easy political points, outrage at the drug using musician becomes symbolic of the fight against drugs — perhaps in default of any tangible success in reducing the number of people with drug problems. □

THE MESSAGE OF 129 DRUG-ORIENTED SONGS

	PRO	ANTI	DESCRIPTIVE	CONJECTURAL
Marijuana	43	7	29	21
Heroin	0	67	23	10
Cocaine	11	50	35	4
LSD	16	16	34	33
Amphetamine	13	60	30	—

— calculated from: Schwartz E.S., et al, "Popular music and drug lyrics: analysis of a scapegoat", 1973. (Full reference at footnote 3.)

1. Stillman D. and Weiner R. *Woodstock census*. Viking Press, 1979.

2. Auld J. *Marijuana use and social control*. London: Academic Press, 1981.

3. Schwartz E.S., Feinglass S.J. and Drucker C. "Popular music and drug lyrics: analysis of a scapegoat". In: US National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse. *Drug use in America: problem in perspective*, vol. II. USGPO, 1973, p718-746.