

Drugs, demons and blue suede shoes

RECENT COMMENTS BY Chief Constable Keith Hellawell raise once again the spectre of pop stars exerting a baleful influence on the behaviour of young people. To be fair, it is a common sense view. The most popular bands ship records by the truckload, their concerts sell out within hours of tickets going on sale and millions are generated through merchandising. The media-friendly utterances of musicians therefore inevitably get splashed across the front page – especially when drugs are concerned. Surely young people look up to these ne'er-do-wells and ape the worst indulgences of stardom?

And some pop stars *are* 'bad'. Arguably, the likes of Noel or Liam Gallagher, Johnny Rotten, Keith Richard or Janis Joplin are blank slates on which young people inscribe a multitude of tantalising vicarious experiences. It's almost part of the pop star job description to be bad on our behalf, so that we can carry on as normal when the show is over. That's partly why so many of those with the worst reputations don't survive; they transfer those audience expectations into their own private lives and play out their own mythology. But whether this means that their lyrics encourage drug-taking or whether those messages are acted on, is another thing entirely.

There is nothing new under the sun, and Hellawell's attack has a mighty pedigree. In the 1930s, American newspapers bemoaned the advent of the new dance music as a worse seducer of adolescents than opium and cocaine. But the most formal attack on the alleged impact of song lyrics came in the late 1960s. The American Federal Communications Commission which issues licenses to radio stations, published a list of songs that would be 'unadvisable' for stations to play –

including some which a later study of drug-related songs categorised as either 'anti-drug' or 'neutral'. One of the more ludicrous allegations of 'drug conspiracy' was the US Senate denouncement of that children's favourite *Puff the Magic Dragon*, as "a secret psychedelic marching song", an allegation which prompted a ban by the BBC.

The analysis behind the most recent attacks on pop songs is just as unsophisticated as its predecessors. One of only two contemporary songs ever singled out in this debate is Pulp's *Sorted for E's and Wizz*. Undoubtedly it was ill-advised to picture an amphetamine wrap on the CD cover (even if all this amounted to was nothing more than three line drawings on how to fold a piece of paper). But it gave the Daily Mirror the opportunity for an outraged *Ban this Sick Stunt* headline (20th September 1995). Yet was the song itself a clarion call to chemical excess? Judge for yourself.

*I lost my friends, I dance alone
It's six o'clock, I wanna go home
But it's 'no way', 'not today' makes
you wonder what it meant.
And this hollow feeling grows and
grows and grows and grows.
And you want to phone mother and say,
'Mother, I can never come home again
Cos I seem to have left an important
part of my brain
Somewhere in a field in Hampshire'.*

The next point is whether – however 'right' it might feel – there is evidence to support the notion that listening to drug songs encourages drug taking, sub-

liminally or otherwise. The answer, of course, has to be 'no'. Every study of young people's drug use points to the same litany of locally-focussed personal and social factors that might prompt experimentation – not the drug habits of remote pop stars.

In truth, shaking the stick at the odd pop lyric misses the whole point that the real meeting ground for drugs and music is on the dance floor where, since the late 1980s, the E-generation has been marching to the relentless 4/4 thud of largely *instrumental* music. And as an undeniable symbiotic relationship exists between 'wide awake' drugs and all night dance cultures, the next logical step would have to be the imposition of a complete ban on dancing.

What we're really faced with here is 'blame culture', a line of thought which has underpinned so much social, political and moral thinking around drugs since the 1920s, when the criminal laws against non-medical drug use in the West were first put in place. The perennial inability of governments to 'stamp out' drug use has meant that many (often disadvantaged) sectors in society both here and in America have been singled out for approbrium – Chinese and Mexican immigrants, West Indian and African communities, seductive black jazzmen, radical students, communists, lone mothers and absent fathers, along with whole countries which won't toe the line on American foreign policy.

While they don't exactly help themselves in this respect, pop stars are the current easy targets. Even so, railing against the habits of the rich and famous does nothing other than to deflect attention away from where the real problems lie – not in the backbeat of some transitory pop song, but in the back alleys and squats of too many of our towns and cities.

by

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