

The gay club scene has a reputation as a trend-setter for new chemical highs and for heavy drug use.

**Mark White** on how a powerful brew of sex, hedonism and liberation has combined to push the boundaries of how the world dances with drugs

# For tomorrow we die

**“Why do I take so many drugs? Because they’re always free”**

Paul, 23, London, gay

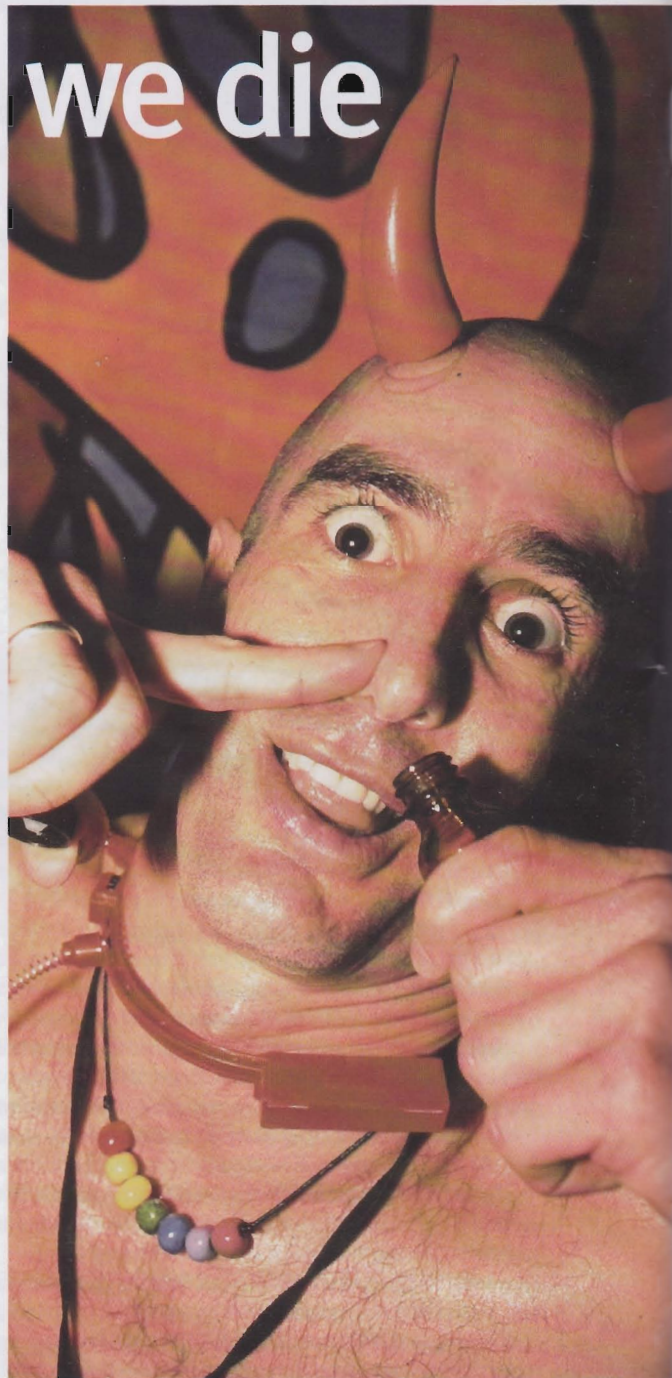
**E**VER since the first glitter ball descended from on high, gay men and drugs have gone together like cheese and biscuits. Even before then the bohemians of the 50s and 60s smoked weed and dropped acid and turned each other on, and gay clubs at the fag end of the 60s played northern soul and clubbers guzzled pharmaceutical speed.

But the real dawn came in the 70s with its sparkling nocturnal hedonism of disco and gay liberation. It was a fantasy playground where you could be and do and have whatever you wanted: if you could smudge out your weekly life and bad thoughts and make the good times better and last longer with a stimulant cocktail, then even better. Work out, get a buff body and weekend friends, and escape dreary homophobic reality, immersing yourself in a world where you were an object of desire, finally able to relax and have some fun.

## ESCAPISM

And this is still the case today – there’s always a party somewhere with cute guys living hard and fast as if this is the last night of their lives. There is even a bigger choice of narcotics to guzzle than ever before: ecstasy, acid, ketamine, crystal, speed, coke, weed, GHB, any variety of ecstasy-variants, and the old favourites, alcohol and tobacco. The presence of women in the straight clubbing scene acts as a part-way civilising influence. In gay male clubs there’s more testosterone, less inhibitions and more issues, and, as survey after survey confirms, much more drug use.

When you grow up as gay it takes a strong soul to withstand all the homophobia that’s thrown at you. But the gay scene’s opposition to the rest of the world – its space is defined by what it isn’t – leads to the pack mentality rules of a subculture which is a peculiarly sexual one. The gay scene is based round the social setting of bars and clubs, alcohol and party drugs. The emphasis is on being attractive and wanted and pure live-for-the-night hedonism, bonding with good-looking men and feeling better about yourself, and



always smiling and enjoying yourself. Drugs help that. Feeling insecure? Well, have a slug of this or a line of that and you’ll be able to talk to that honey over there, or dance without feeling like a fool.

Patrick Lilley, promoter of London’s Queer Nation club, and who has been involved in the capital’s club scene for 30 years, says: “The gay drug scene has been a major link in the growth in popularity of party drugs. In general terms in the last 20 years the whole explosion of recreational drug use within society,

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particularly ecstasy and cocaine, has trickled down from the world of fashion designers and models, to the gay club scene and finally to that of bricklayers and social workers."

### CHEMICAL WORLD

So the gay scene's drug taking set a benchmark for the rest of society to follow. Psychological studies suggest that early adopters of trends also exhibit impulsive, risk taking behaviour. The gay scene is a heady cocktail made of a hedonistic environment, the pressure to conform and a desire to escape from a world that condemns you for being who you are and to never say no to more of anything. Last but certainly not least, it is shaped by 24 years of an epidemic that teaches you, as you grow up, that sex can be death and one moment of misguided intimacy will completely change your life. It is not everyone who wakes up in the morning to find the new pope is calling you an agent "of intrinsic moral evil".

The history of gay drug use is one where polydrug use has become more widespread. For most people, the 70s was about poppers (amyl nitrate), spiced up with the occasional line of coke or MDA to a thumping disco beat. The early 80s saw 'bathtub' speed grow in popularity alongside Hi-nrg dance music, to be supplemented in 1987 by MDMA or ecstasy, taken up first in Manchester and London acid house clubs, and which then spread like a gospel to gay clubs in both cities.

Gay clubs became known as the best clubs with the best music and atmosphere; you could argue that was the ceaseless quest for something new transferred into fashion, music and style. Club culture went overground and the price of ecstasy slid from £25 to £1 a pill – take ten in a night! – and then replaced by a blizzard of cocaine. And still the alphabet soup of new drugs came: uppers like crystal, snorted or smoked, made people dance and have sex for days, while downers like ketamine helped dissociate users from their surroundings. Some ecstasy users found that sex on drugs was great but left them impotent. The introduction of Viagra solved that problem and created new recreational demand. The pressure to look a certain way – subcultures have their own demands, and if you don't like the outside world, you'll fit in at any cost – has created an army of lean, toned, wide shouldered and narrow-waisted gay men. This has been fuelled by an increase in illegal steroid use, with one in seven gym goers at central London premises admitting they take them. These days you can pick'n'mix about the way you want to feel and look and react, and a natural high is as far away as bedtime.

### CRYSTAL FEARS

As Patrick Lilley notes: "Perhaps drug use is more tolerated than is healthy because gay clubs have evolved

from an underground setting where the norms and constraints of society have possibly not applied." But you don't think about that kind of drug use as being healthy or not, you think of it as being fun, and if two pills and four lines of coke make you feel this good, then another two pills and some K and GHB and a tweak of crystal will make you feel even better. "You don't think about the consequences," says Nick, a 32-year-old from Cardiff. "You just want to carry on feeling fabulous."

The scale of drug use among club-going gay men is huge. In a survey published in the *American Journal of Public Health* in 2003, out of 3,492 15- to 22-year-old gay men, 59 per cent had used marijuana, 21 per cent coke, 20 per cent amphetamines and 29 per cent had used drugs once a week – confirming anecdotal UK reports that young gay men are big drug users. As crystal use took off in Melbourne, one shop went from selling 10 to 100 glass smoking pipes a week. Up to 21 percent of gay men in London have used crystal at least once in the previous year, something New York psychology professor Perry Halkitis likened to what happened in the States just before the use of the highly-addictive drug exploded. "What we are seeing is that these drugs cause people to take more risks, create an insatiable sexual desire and the tendency to have more extreme sex", he says.

A study from San Francisco public health official Grant Colfax in March 2005 found that recreational drug use was a big factor in contracting HIV. Using crystal increased the risk of unsafe sex by two to three times and the HIV risk by 60 per cent. It said drug use in gay men was reckoned at three times higher than straight men, and three times higher again in HIV+ gay men. Adverts in Sydney aimed at crystal users plead with them to practice sex with condoms and not get lost in the moment. But with the advent of triple combination therapy HIV is now seen as a chronic condition, rather than a death sentence. A new website lifeormeth.com has this to say about crystal: "America's crystal culture is the devastating manifestation of internalised homophobia taken to an extreme level of self-hate fuelled by disempowerment, fear and raging denial."

The mood has certainly shifted in clubs from a happy ecstasy vibe to a darker, grimmer crystal mood, one of instant gratification where desires are always granted but the need always remains. There are mental and public health issues around drug use on the gay scene, but in its highly-sexualised hedonistic dynamic, which you enter after years of repression and bigotry, people are greeted with an immediately satisfying hit of youth and beauty and endless partying. No one can measure up to that forever, and people usually end up dropping out through boredom or age, but for those who remain it only hurts when you hit the ground, and free falling is utterly exhilarating. ■

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