

Jude

Hit or miss?

“As an artist, it is almost impossible to limit oneself to the attainable” – *Julian Cope on Syd Barrett*

Are you inspired today? If not, what are you going to do about it? You could try to force it, control it, through sheer bloody-mindedness. Or do you think that you could take something to help release it?

Surely the pursuit of a greater truth by artificial means is a contradiction in terms? You could try to cite certain examples in an attempt to disarm what you have already guessed I am about to say. But I've probably heard them already; and I simply didn't buy it. If I had I wouldn't be writing this.

Let's explode the obvious one first. Acid is dead. It died when Syd Barrett woke up in 1968, a shadow of his former self. Barrett was not the only one, but he is perhaps the most famous British example in recent history. Whether you regard Barrett as a genius or a madcap, it is important to realise that, whilst he did take copious amounts of drugs, famously LSD, he was also very troubled man. His trouble began in earnest when he found himself responsible for a groundbreaking musical happening. With impending international stardom, and the potential for massive commercial success at his fingertips, he folded under the pressure. The drugs merely aggravated the problem.

Money, money, money...

Artists need to make a living. The demands of this are frequently at odds with the creative process. Pop is particularly bad in this regard, because it is such a moneyspinner. The contradiction can become abusive. It doesn't know how to look after its own. Society almost seems to be against art, yet we all want to live in a cultured environment. So artists live with this, and often suffer greatly because of it. They are, after all, only human. But usually they have to do it regardless of the consequences, possessing an uncontrollable need to answer the call of creativity, and charge headfirst into the jaws of an idea.

We all know that drugs and the arts do have a history. Sadly, this history is often dangerously misquoted.

Work as therapy

Byron, arguably one of the most important poets in the English language, is a case in point. He used opium for years, true. Ken Russell's movie Gothic portrayed Byron's vices as some kind of inner journey. But to judge him by his own work one can interpret this very differently. Byron

was a sensitive man, burdened with guilt at the inequality of the privileges afforded to a man of his social standing. He fled England, preferring to live in seclusion with his dogs rather than face up to the injustice of his peerage. I do not believe he would have cared for Ken Russell's appreciation of his situation. To Byron, work was therapy; and opium was his escape the rest of the time.

But idolatry prefers martyrs to survivors. They are perceived objects of purity and reverence, albeit dead ones. Self-destruction is the common price of genius, apparently for reasons unknown.

The actor Bela Lugosi was addicted to heroin in his later years. Lugosi was not a great actor, and much of his screen work was little more than mediocre. Yet there is a school of thought that he gave the greatest performance in the history of cinema when he played Count Dracula in Tod Browning's legendary film version of the tale. Lugosi became Dracula in the eyes of the public. But Lugosi knew that the true achievement belonged not to him, but to director Browning. Bela Lugosi spent the rest of his life trying to live up to the greatness that

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was never truly his to live up to. Dracula had been his moment of glory, and it was gone. He knew this, and was bothered by it. Drugs helped him to live the lie, when he was painfully aware of the truth. From Browning's masterpiece to Abbott and Costello's guest baddie could not have been a happy ride.

I have come to view my own story in a new light since cleaning up some four years ago. As my rehabilitation took the form of my entering a Twelve Step programme, part of it involved me examining my behaviour during my time as a drug user. I quickly found myself questioning many of my motives, and found that many of my reasons for using were not reasons at all: they were excuses.

Freedom is everything

As a recording artist I used to tell myself, indeed almost believed, that there was something in me that drugs could help me unlock – 'The Lost Chord', the perfect pop experiment, a new music, whatever. I thought that opiates levelled out my head as well as my emotions. But, of course, the fact was that I was oblivious and couldn't see what was perfectly obvious. I had been in pain, turmoil even, for a long time. This was fuelled to a new, unbearable level by the fact that I was dealing directly with people whom I knew somehow didn't really care about the work at all.

The fact that the music industry was just that, an industry; hurt me immeasurably. Yet I had to deal with it or fail myself hopelessly. The rigid structure of commerce was, I found, in total conflict with the notion of creative freedom. To the artist, creative freedom is everything, including personal liberty.

Drugs blocked out the conflict really quite well for a while. I wasn't having a party, but I was able to cope. What I encountered next was the most tragic irony. There were people who didn't mind at all that I might be killing myself. To them it was a potentially lucrative angle.

Then there were the double standards I mentioned earlier. Heroin means you are a dirty, worthless junkie. But cocaine meant you were surfing the social clique. In the biz, it was simple distinction. Smack is for losers, coke is for winners. Indeed, on

one occasion an executive in the publishing office of a major label you know well told that he didn't do deals with 'druggies' because they were unreliable. Yet, as he spoke without a trace of irony, he continued to offer up the booze and the nose candy, which his bosses provided daily so that the department could 'entertain' their clients.

The opportunity of a breakdown

To me cocaine magnified all those things I was trying to escape. I didn't want to get high, I just wanted to switch off so that I could handle the whole situation. It was absurd and the work suffered. My judgment was so impaired that I couldn't tell whether what I was doing was any good or not. And I was so paranoid that the truth about my using would adversely affect my career that I dared not get the help I badly needed. The short version was that I was headed for disaster. The breakdown that followed gave me a window of opportunity, and somehow I took it and am alive to write about it.

There are a couple of twists, important ones. I managed to stop because after years of trying to fight it, believing I could beat addiction, thinking I could lick it because it was beneath me, I finally admitted defeat. The grip loosened almost immediately. Also, before everything finally fell apart I met someone and fell in love. She was European, and didn't suffer from that often inhibited (and occasionally self-defeating) condition we call Englishness. She opened me up, and showed me that life and art are the same. And what do you think happened? I couldn't write. I couldn't work at all.

Much later, back in London, clean, and working again, I realised. I had needed those inhibitions all along, in order to work. When finally I found myself 'unlocked', I couldn't channel my creativity in any significant direction. It had all been a fallacy. I needed the walls, because my ideas needed somewhere to gestate so that they might be launched into the world fully formed. I realised that, maybe, this was why British music is widely regarded as the best in the world. Maybe our personal limitations dictate the extent to which our ideas explode outward, bigger than the sum of their parts.



Syd in 1971

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No compromise

Creativity demands that we indulge it rather than attempt to control it. When ideas don't come it's simply because they are not ready. When they do come they fly, escaping their creators so that we might move on to the next one. Creativity is our channel for the madness, anarchy and brilliance that would otherwise consume us. To sedate it or try to manipulate it is to compromise it. It doesn't need our help, it simply needs our full attention ■