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Ecstasy: A synthetic history of MDMA

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Biography:

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Introduction

In 1990, posters which delivered a stark warning about drugs started appearing across England. A black and white photo depicted a ghostly pale young man, attended by health professionals and laid prostrate on a hospital bed, while white text on a red background cautioned potential users that 'sometimes the after effects never wear off' [Figure 1].[1] While its message and appearance were very much of a piece with the 'scaremongering approach' (Wibberly and Whitelaw, 1990) employed by mid-1980s campaigns on heroin and crack cocaine, the intoxicant that the government-backed anti-drugs campaign was primarily concerned with was relatively new: 3,4-Methylene-dioxy-meth-amphetamine, MDMA, or more commonly, "ecstasy".

[Insert Figure 1, accompanying caption: Central Office of Information "Drugs: sometimes the after effects never wear off", 1990. Licensed under Crown copyright, image courtesy of US National Library of Medicine http://resource.nlm.nih.gov/101449661]

First patented by Merck in the early 20th century, and reinvented by the Californian chemist Alexander Shulgin (amongst others) in the 1960s and 1970s, MDMA had, from the summer of 1988 onwards, become inextricably linked with the nascent 'rave' scene in the UK. As author Sarah Champion has suggested, 'Chicago's house music and the drug ecstasy became

a double-act like fish and chips' (Champion, 1997: xiii). The psychoactive properties of the substance, which include reports of euphoria, mild hallucinogenic effects and increased energy, were seemingly a perfect foil for the new house and techno music sweeping through British nightlife. Capitalising on this preference for north American dance music, a travelling New York DJ, Leonardo Didesiderio aka Lenny Dee, was struck by the lurid imagery of the billboard campaign:

> I was in a very strange place, experiencing ecstasy for the first time … This poster and billboard was all over the United Kingdom. Needless to say, I thought it was fuckin' great, as I was totally into X [ecstasy]. (Major Problems, nd)

Didesiderio was in fact so taken by the poster that he decided to appropriate it wholesale for the label art of his next 12-inch under the moniker Major Problems. With track titles such as 'Flashback' and 'Overdose (The Final Trip)', the record gleefully parodied the shroud-waving tendencies of the government-sponsored *The Effects Can Last Forever* campaign in pursuit of hedonistic abandon.

The poster then, and its transatlantic response, are illustrative of the tension at the heart of many 'cultures of intoxication' (Withington, 2014) in the modern era; the possible cost to one's health balanced with the escape from the mundane. At one extremity, the puritanical tendencies of the medical establishment, warning ecstasy users that they were engaging in a 'dance of death' (Henry, 1992); at the other, the user whose lifetime consumption reportedly exceeded 40,000 pills (Kouimtsidis et al, 2006). These poles, illustrated in broader culture on the one hand by widely recirculated tabloid headlines in the *Sun* newspaper, and on the other by the nostalgic, celebratory film of *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* by Turner Prize winner Mark Leckey and Jeremy Deller's more recent *Everybody In the Place*, have been understood using Stanley Cohen's pliable phrase 'moral panic' (Speed, 2019; Clark, 2019).[2] Originally applied to the 'mods and rockers' subcultures of 1960s Britain, Cohen's sociological classic explained how something new and fashionable from youth culture can be deemed dangerous and a threat to wider society; a 'folk devil' that attracts widespread criticism and censorship from 'respectable' society (Cohen, 1972).

Cohen's typology has offered a convenient analytical framework to explain firstly Ecstasy and raves' appeal to youth culture, and secondly its condemnation by the establishment and older generations (Redhead, 1993; Thornton, 1995: 119-120). This criticism was in part predicated on colourful accounts of the handful of deaths attributed to the novel psychoactive substance, and the uncertainty around ecstasy's short and long-term effects. But it was also ecstasy's associated cultural trappings – the repetitive, insistent music, the baggy clothes distinct from the buttoned-up power-dressing of the 1980s, and the huge raves deemed a threat to public order – that made it disruptive to the prevailing culture. The flipside of this 'moral panic' is the transgression and deviancy of the 'folk devil' in the first place, whose insurgent allure helps to explain rave's continuing attraction as a topic for contemporary art practice, amongst other audiences.

This chapter suggests that historians and other critical drugs researchers might look beyond these binaries of harm and hedonism to develop more nuanced perspectives on ecstasy. Ecstasy has too easily been characterised as a good-time party drug with a dark side, connected in contemporary parlance with EDM (Electronic Dance Music) mega-raves and the sometimes lethal consequences of over-consumption. In doing so, this chapter also provides an intervention on academic discourses that have echoed the rhetoric of house music (such as lyrics that reference 'the House Nation' or 'Peace Love Unity and Respect') and popular histories – such as Simon Reynolds' *Energy Flash* or Matthew Collin's *Altered State* – in highlighting ecstasy's universalising affect, and that of club drugs more generally (Reynolds, 1998; Collin, 1997).[3] For example, in their article in the *Past & Present* special issue on 'cultures of intoxication', Karen Joe-Laidler and colleagues compare the experiences of users of MDMA and ketamine in disparate global cities in the early 2000s. They argue that

> the pleasure derived from intoxication involves not only a physiological reaction but also an opportunity to transcend normal everyday routines. In this process of stepping outside of oneself, one may develop a spiritual awareness—a heightened sense of self, of others, and of oneness with the collective … [this] spirituality lies at the core of the experiences of young people in both San Francisco and Hong Kong (Joe-Laidler et al, 2014: 66).

Joe-Laidler et al therefore make the case for a sort of chemically-assisted "glocalisation", in which cultural specificities are acknowledged but ultimately downplayed in order to highlight their interviewees' transcendent and semi-mystical experiences of MDMA. Clearly these processes were to a certain extent evident in the early years of rave, with American DJ Lenny Dee's delighted reaction to British anti-drug billboards. Furthermore, such contentions are supported by ecstasy's contemporary position as an intoxicant of global popularity, a quotidian adjunct to young people's nightlife. But while the collective joy apparently provided by Ecstasy should be taken seriously – and Joe-Laider and colleagues rightly assert that 'this pleasure imperative has received relatively little attention from academics' (Joe-Laidler et al, 2014: 62) – I want to instead follow musician, artist and queer theorist Terre Thaemlitz's lead, and in her words 'keep sight of the things that we are trying to escape from' (Thaemlitz, 2008).[4] As Thaemlitz argues in his consideration of New York Deep House and drag ball culture in the early 1990s:

> The House Nation likes to pretend clubs are an oasis from suffering, but suffering is in here with us … House is not universal. House is hyper-specific (Thaemlitz, 2008)[.]

Although Thaemlitz's personal position could probably be crudely characterised as anti-drugs, his approach is instructive (Saulwick, 2015). Ecstasy emerged into widespread popularity from very specific subcultures, and in highlighting the supposed universalising affect of ecstasy there is a danger in neglecting the principles that have more readily been applied to other psychoactive substances. In common with other intoxicants, ecstasy can mean very different things in different temporal and spatial settings, and in different cultural contexts. As Thaemlitz suggests, '[h]ouse isn't so much a sound as a situation' (Thaemlitz, 2008), and similar principles should apply to our consideration of house music's most commonly accompanying intoxicant. In short, this chapter argues that ecstasy, like other psychedelic substances, needs to be considered in terms of 'set and setting' (Zinberg, 1984).

Ecstasy: a synthetic history of MDMA

Ecstasy has meant different things to different people at different points in different locations. This chapter moves beyond existing work which focuses either on the moral panics periodically associated with ecstasy, or the apparently universalising affect that its consumers report. This brief, synthetic and inevitably partial history of the drug and its consumption, following its first synthesis in Germany to its widespread use in Britain, will illustrate this argument.

"Adam": Ecstasy before the rave, 1912 – 1985.

MDMA was first synthesized in the laboratories of Merck, the Darmstadt, Germany based pharmaceutical corporation in 1912, not as an appetite suppressant as some accounts suggest, but as a haemostatic agent (i.e. to aid blood-clotting and prevent bleeding). Initially referred to as 'Methylsafrylamin', it was patented that same year, but only mentioned occasionally in internal company documents up until the 1950s (Freudenmann et al, 2006). Despite these inauspicious beginnings, the patent also contained a clue to one of its further usages, with an allusion to its potential use 'as an intermediate in the production of therapeutic compounds' (Pentney, 2001: 214). The chemically similar and historically-linked substance MDA (3,4 methylenedioxyamphetamine) had been used by the US military as a potential 'truth serum' in the 1950s, as well as for selected medical indications by pharmaceutical companies including as a cough remedy and appetite suppressant (Pentney, 2001: 214). Its hallucinogenic properties had been noted, and it started to find its way into recreational uses, 'quickly develop[ing] a reputation for producing a sensual, easily manageable euphoria, thus its nick-name "The Love Drug"' (Passie and Benzenhöfer, 2016: 68; Naranjo, 1983).

MDMA was synthesized around the same time – the Californian chemist Alexander Shulgin claimed to do so in the mid-1960s – and some histories suggest that it was considered less toxic than MDA (Pentney, 2001: 214; Benzenhöfer and Passie, 2010: 1357). Although Shulgin was unlikely to be the first to do so, he is widely accepted as being responsible for its introduction into clinical usage, via his friendship with psychologist and psychotherapist Leo Zeff. Zeff had been tipped off about MDMA by a chemist friend, and almost immediately became an enthusiastic proponent, postponing his retirement to proselytise

about a substance that he viewed as potentially transformative for many of his patients. Zeff was also insistent that those dispensing MDMA should also have personal experience, to ensure that they 'know the effects of any such drugs in themselves, before giving them to anyone else.' (Stolaroff, 2004: 18) MDMA was used in 'hundreds of [psychotherapeutic] sessions' by Zeff and other associates, but it was also beginning to be recognised for its potential as an intoxicant (Pentney, 2001: 214-215; Richert, 2019: 142-146). Indeed, Shulgin himself would refer to MDMA as his 'low-calorie martini', an understated description which belied the bacchanalian reputation it would later attain (Shulgin and Shulgin, 1991: 73).[5]

The emergence of MDMA from an object of laboratory experimentation and biomedical inquiry can therefore be traced to the mid-1970s, with unconfirmed reports of its first usage as an intoxicant in the late 1960s (Siegel, 1986). Street drug samples were seized by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in various locations across the United States, but most particularly in the mid-West, between 1970 and 1974 (Passie and Benzenhöfer, 2016: 71). By the mid-1980s, the DEA estimated that MDMA was available in 21 states across the US and Canada. This availability was concentrated on the east and west coasts – New York, California, Florida – with one significant exception: the southern state of Texas (Siegel, 1986: 349). According to some accounts of ecstasy lore, it was the nightspots of Dallas that would be the making of ecstasy's reputation as a drug perfect for dancing in nightclubs – but also its unmaking as a still legal high in the US.

But before attending to this legend, it is important to stop and note the shape-shifting that MDMA had already taken in its early years. Far from being the party drug of contemporary lore, MDMA held at this stage a much more sedate and cerebral reputation. Praised by psychotherapists for its ability to evoke 'honesty' and lucidity from its patient-users, it was also, perhaps inevitably, being sampled by curious psychonauts who had previously experimented extensively with mescaline and lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) (Richert, 2019: 144). For example, Timothy Leary first tried MDMA in 1978, and became an enthusiastic, if initially private, advocate (Leary, 1985). Indeed, in *Storming Heaven*, Jay Stevens' classic history of LSD, MDMA was discussed, alongside other 'new psychedelics' such as 2-CB, as a more sophisticated successor to acid. Stevens related an afternoon spent with 'an octogenarian former professor' who insisted that "Adam" (a common name for

MDMA at this point) was a ‘very intriguing drug … extremely useful’ (Stevens, 1987: 287). Upon sampling the drug himself, Stevens stated that ecstasy

> didn't create insights so much as remove barriers and eliminate the native fear of appearing emotionally clumsy and foolish. You were high, but you weren't high. There was none of LSD's powerful rush into the unconscious, no hallucinations or cosmic apercus; just a pleasant but emotionally draining communion. (Stevens, 1987: 289)

Indeed, researchers were at pains to distinguish MDMA from existing psychedelics, instead coining new descriptors. MDMA was an ‘entactogen’, or even an ‘empathogen’ although some researchers rejected the latter, suggesting it might be unattractive to putative psychiatric patients, and that anyway, ‘MDMA do[es] more than simply generate empathy’ (Nichols, 1986: 307; Adamson, 1985).

Writing in 1986, Jerome Beck and Patricia Morgan confirmed its multiple uses in the Lone Star State; ‘[o]ne reason for its popularity in Texas was undoubtedly the open sales of MDMA in well-patronized, mostly student-oriented bars and in gay bars’ (Beck and Morgan, 1986: 291). Consumers continued to ascribe MDMA a number of different properties; *Newsweek* reported that MDMA ‘has become popular over the last two years on college campuses, where it is considered an aphrodisiac’, while others ‘described it as a “yuppie psychedelic” whose popularity was spreading rapidly among educated professionals in their thirties and forties’ (Beck and Morgan, 1986: 292). Indeed, Beck and Morgan concluded that MDMA ‘seems to possess a multiple personality’ (Beck and Morgan, 1986: 290). And despite its growing popularity, not everyone in Texas was having a wholly enjoyable time on it either. The late musician and poet David Berman, a man not unaccustomed to a variety of intoxicants, recounted his experiences in Austin the summer before ecstasy’s criminalisation in 1985:

> I can honestly say I’m glad it was outlawed. After three months of its use I had lost all discretion and was prepared to trust just about anyone. Worse yet, it was turning me into a joiner. That’s not who I am. (Berman, 2002)

Beck and Morgan pointed out that, even at this juncture in the mid-1980s, ‘[a]lthough

MDMA has been described occasionally as a “party drug,” that is not its most common use pattern’ (Beck and Morgan, 1986: 293). They allowed however that Dallas was an exception, and its nightclubs, most especially the one designed by architect Phillip Starck, would anticipate ecstasy’s primary use over the coming decades. The Starck Club was notable not just for its chic design and high-profile guests, such as Grace Jones and Annie Lennox, but because the intoxicant of choice amongst its clientele was overwhelmingly ecstasy. “X” was available at the bar, in common with many other clubs in Dallas where ‘[y]ou would order a couple of cocktails and two hits of X and put it on your Master Card’ (Beck and Rosenbaum, 1994: 45). But at the Starck Club, the musical soundtrack was also significant, with the DJ’s selections of synth-pop and electro foreshadowing the close association that MDMA would develop with electronic music later in the decade (Gonsher, 2016; West, 1989).

But MDMA’s surging popularity in Texas was fast bringing it to the attention of the DEA and local politicians. Senator Lloyd Bentsen petitioned the DEA in 1984 to make ecstasy a Schedule 1 drug under the Controlled Substances Act, meaning that MDMA was now considered a drug that ‘has high abuse potential, no accepted medical use and no accepted safety for use’. The purported reason for this move was that MDA – MDMA’s close chemical analogue discussed earlier – had reportedly been shown to cause brain damage, and the DEA declared that ‘[a]ll of the evidence … received shows that MDMA abuse has become a nationwide problem and that it poses a serious health threat.’ (Associated Press, 1985) An emergency ban of MDMA took effect in June of 1985, and was made permanent the following year.

The criminalisation of MDMA had a number of ripple effects, some immediate, and some longer-lasting. For the Starck Club, this meant a raid from the DEA on 7 August 1986, and a temporary revoking of its dance license (Gonsher, 2016). In Dallas more widely, according to Beck and Rosenbaum, ‘Ecstasy had become “last year’s fad”’ (Beck and Rosenbaum, 1994: 46). But perhaps more significantly, an unintentional and long-term effect of the Schedule 1 designation was to push ecstasy firmly into the category of an intoxicant, now that medical and therapeutic research on the drug was no longer possible. No longer were psychiatrists able to use it as an adjunct to psychotherapy, and its reputation as a recreational drug was secured. While its criminalisation may have temporarily suppressed its use in Dallas, elsewhere it was only just taking off. Indeed, the pre-criminalisation scenes of hedonism at

the Starck Club had set a blueprint for ecstasy's use globally.

"E is for England": ecstasy and dance culture in the UK, 1986 – 2009

Ecstasy's first major coverage in the British press was in style magazine *The* Face with two articles over the space of year, which provide an insight into how its recent arrival in the UK was greeted. The first article, in October 1985 reported on its popularity in Texas, but sounded a sceptical note about its effects, drawing unfavourable parallels with LSD in the 1960s:

> Whatever it tells us of the times, its users generally agree MDMA is not "ecstasy". It can make you feel very close and empathetic – you might feel like hugging your friends – but the affection it inspires is unlikely to send anyone into the frenzied raptures common in the Haight/Ashbury district [of San Francisco] in 1967. Ecstasy is a misleading name; the drug is so-called more for reasons of promotion than revolution (Naysmyth, 1985: 91).

Journalist Peter Naysmyth's lukewarm tone was underlined by a DEA-affiliated chemist Ronald Siegel's affirmation that he had '"heard a report of someone locked in a foetal position for three days"', although Siegel also conceded that other '"people [have] loving, harmonious experiences."' There seemed little evidence of ecstasy successfully transitioning to British nightlife; Naysmyth quoted an 'anonymous member of [London's] Soho club-land' saying '"[p]ersonally I find it boring … I used to do it when it first came out a few years ago, but now I find cocaine a better buzz… and it's cheaper"'. Ecstasy's future in the UK seemed to be more likely to be in the clinic than club-land; radical psychiatrist R.D. Laing complained '"it's a shame it's been criminalised because it could have taken its place in the pharmacopoeia … It made me feel how all of us would like to think we are anyway"' (Naysmyth, 1985: 91-92). However, there was as little chance of MDMA being a therapeutic adjunct in the UK as there was in the US. Ecstasy had been a Class A drug in the UK since 1977, covered by an amendment to the generic provisions of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 for 'other ring-substituted phenylethylamines' (Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, 2009: 7).

Use in the UK was therefore very much set up to be on an illicit recreational basis, a theme that Peter Naysmyth would return to in *The Face* in October 1986, precisely a year after his original article. In this intervening period, 'use of the drug Ecstasy has increased tenfold'. Seemingly popular amongst the young and the fashionable, one 'X-head' interviewed estimated that 'of the main pop groups probably ten have tried it: five have liked it'. This ambivalence revealed a more complex picture than the unbridled enthusiasm that would seemingly later sweep Britain. For this same interviewee, who had tried it first in New York, it was 'simply the most brilliant thing I had ever taken … [but] the emphasis had shifted from the experience of the drug to the circumstances of its use'. In other words, set and setting were highly important; for Naysmyth, this provoked an unanswered question: 'what about the other five [pop] groups? If it's so magical why didn't they swallow it too?' (Naysmyth, 1986: 53-54)

Naysmyth's second article also addressed a persistent aspect of ecstasy's early coverage in Britain; its reputation as an aphrodisiac. A female 'model in her early twenties' was equivocal about her experiences on ecstasy in general, but stated that 'I think I only felt genuinely Ecstatic on it alone with my boyfriend … but it's better for touching than for actual sex' before Naysmyth reminded readers that '[i]t's a recognised medical fact that MDMA inhibits male orgasm.' (Naysmyth, 1986: 54) This 'fact' would not prevent ecstasy being reported as a 'sex drug' in many later newspaper stories about ecstasy and raves, as they traded on a classic tabloid combination of prurience and moral censoriousness. The most-quoted example of this tendency is The Sun's headline of 24 November 1988, 'Acid Fiends Spike Page Three Girl's Drink' but ecstasy was also described as a 'sexual stimulant' in early reporting by broadsheet newspapers (Anon, 1987; Redhead, 1990: 4; Rietveld, 1993: 46). Such lurid headlines were still very much in the future however, as Naysmyth concluded his article by noting that '[a]fter a year of Ecstasy in the UK, cynicism – that most persistent of British habits – still held the day.' (Naysmyth, 1986: 55)

Nonetheless, this traditional British reserve was soon to be swept away, seemingly by a visit to foreign shores and an imported Balearic culture. This at least, is the creation myth of raves and acid house; a holiday in Ibiza, a transformative experience with a potent mixture

of electronic music and powerful pills, and a desire to recreate some of that magic in London, at clubs such as Shoom, Future and Clink Street (Collin, 1997: 47-74; Reynolds, 1998: 58-66; Garratt, 1998: 87-117; Melville, 2020: 145-152). This metropole-centric tale has of course been disputed by other accounts, which draw attention to the nascent house music scenes in Manchester, Leeds or Sheffield (Anniss, 2020), but regardless of these origins, 'the histories of British House music and Ecstasy are inseparable' (Metcalfe, 1997: 166). Indeed, it was this pairing that took ecstasy from being a drug dabbled with by a fashionable minority to the globalised mass intoxicant that it is today. An hitherto unremarked aspect of ecstasy was the energy that it gave users over a trip of between four to six hours. This drive, and the apparently pleasurable combination of its euphoric effects with repetitive electronic music such as 'acid house', made it an intoxicant highly conducive to dancing.[6]

What started at small clubs in major cities was soon spilling out into rural and suburban areas, bringing acid house and its attendant intoxicant firmly into the public eye. Restrictive licensing laws meant that most clubs closed at 3 AM or earlier, and given how long it took for ecstasy's effects to wear off, this meant that alternative, unlicensed venues for parties without curfew needed to be found. In places like Blackburn, proximal to the clubs of Manchester, this meant the disused factories left by post-industrial decline (Hemment, 1998). Near London meanwhile, it meant improvised spaces off the M25, a major road that formed an 'orbital' around the capital:

> Over the course of 1989, promoters such as World Dance, Genesis, Helter Skelter, and Energy succeeded in setting acid house nights free of the urban core's constrictions, staging ever more elaborate Orbital parties in borrowed and rented fields, the odd warehouse, or some other similarly vacant megastructure. (Clover, 2009: 64)

Such megastructures famously included White Waltham airfield, near Maidenhead, where '11,000 youngsters [went] drug crazy at Britain's biggest-ever Acid party' in an 'Ecstasy Airport', according to the front page of *The Sun* newspaper (Kellaway and Hughes, 1989). The same tabloid had the previous year warned its readers of 'the evil of ecstasy' and 'the

danger drug that is sweeping discos and ruining lives' (Evison and Willis, 1988), while questions in the House of Commons were being raised about how the government aimed to respond to this 'acid house cult' (Written Answers (Commons): Home Department 'Acid House Cult', HC Deb 14 November 1988 vol 140 c392W).

A 'moral panic' similar to that which had greeted previous subcultures was therefore under way, with ecstasy and acid house as 'folk devils' in the minds of the British establishment and media (Cohen, 1972). But while no doubt much of the tabloid hysteria was confected, ecstasy had by the end of 1989 been implicated in the deaths of several young people, providing hard evidence of its dangers for those that sought it.[7] Governmental campaigns, such as the *The Effects Can Last Forever* posters mentioned in the introduction of this chapter therefore played up the potential lethality of ecstasy, while legislation introduced in 1990 by Conservative MP Graham Bright, 'commonly known as the acid house party Bill' attempted to curb the spread of illegal raves (Graham Bright, 'Increase of Penalties: England and Wales' HC Deb, 27 April 1990, c652).

But as the introduction also detailed, such actions did little to curtail enthusiasm for ecstasy consumption or raves. Popular culture was saturated with winking reference to the drug. The techno-pop group The Shamen mischievously sneaked a song with a chorus that sounded a lot like 'Es are good' onto *Top of the Pops* on BBC television (Garratt, 1998: 256), while comedian Keith Allen attempted to include the lines 'E is for England/England starts with an E' in New Order's "World in Motion", their official song for the English football [soccer] team at the 1990 World Cup (Russell, 2018). Organisers of raves would later assert that 'Ecstasy united black, white, yellow, and brown people as one … an across-the-board mixture of races holding hands and giving out total love and respect for one another.' (Anthony, 2002: 50) Further bold claims for the universalising affect and transformative effects of ecstasy included its role in ending football hooliganism, as members of rival 'firms' apparently abandoned hostilities after dancing together in clubs (Saunders, 1993: 35-38; Collin, 1997: 129-137). Even more improbably, some journalists suggested that ecstasy could play a part in halting sectarian violence in Northern Ireland (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999: 4; Hollywood, 1997). Others believed that the changes brought by ecstasy were on a more personal level:

> The freedom to behave as you want may not seem like a real revolution to fussy old Marxist men … To have the opportunity to forget classification by race, class or gender allows a close examination of what unites us rather than our differences. (Wright, 1998: 240)

The former comment by Mary Anna Wright might be read as a mild rebuke to her editor George McKay, who had elsewhere sceptically suggested that many of the freedoms attributed to rave and ecstasy were weak echoes of the sixties counterculture and just as likely to be co-opted and nullified by contemporary capitalism (McKay, 1996: 103-126). More recently, media scholar Caspar Melville has contended that 'we should treat such claims for the world-changing nature of acid house and rave with caution. They can burden club culture with a political and social significance that they are not able to support.' (Melville, 2020: 140) This slippage between 'ecstasy' and 'acid house and rave' reveals how intimately the two are intertwined in accounts of the period, but it is also important to note that contemporary observers also questioned both the cultural diversity and supposed radical nature of raves. Keir Starmer, at this time a young lawyer, would defend party organisers as part of his role with the National Council for Civil Liberties, but also argued that the notion 'that the "acid house" phenomenon should be seen as subversive is particularly bizarre. A car, a telephone and a fairly healthy bank account are essentials for the party-goer.' (Rose, 1989; Starmer, 1990: 4)

But even if pills were priced at an average of £18, a reported 500,000 people were continuing to take ecstasy in Britain in 1993 (Anon, 1993). Subversive or not, ecstasy was now firmly established in British nightlife; in 1995, *The Guardian* newspaper would comment that 'drug-taking has become an integral part of youth culture' (Anon, 1995). While clubs were still important venues for consumption, the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994 had, despite the efforts of a coalition of resistance and protests, effectively eradicated large-scale outdoor raves (Huq, 1999; Alwakeel, 2010). The highly publicised death of Leah Betts after celebrating her eighteenth birthday with a house party at which her parents were present in the village of Latchingdon, near Basildon, Essex in late 1995 brought home how quotidian ecstasy use had become, and how it had been

decoupled from the dance culture in which it emerged. This tragic incident of course also marked a revival of the moral panic around ecstasy, with widespread news coverage and billboards, echoing those used in *The Effects Can Last Forever* campaign, that warned '[j]ust one ecstasy tablet took Leah Betts' (Martin, 2005).

Whilst highly visible at the time and much referenced since, its questionable how much longer-term impact Betts' death had on public attitudes or private sensibilities (Anon, 1996; Gilbert and Pearson, 1999: 2). In 2000, four years after providing expert witness for Betts' inquest, and eight years after penning the article that warned users were engaged in a 'dance of death', leading toxicologist John Henry would state, on comedian Sacha Baron Cohen's *Da Ali G Show*, that 'some people can take two or three Es and [have] no problems' (Baron Cohen, 2000). Partly this was due to the declining MDMA content of pills (Cole, 2014: 47, but it was also an admission that the vast majority of users could do so relatively unproblematically.[8] A decline in MDMA content was also accompanied by a dramatic fall in street price, such that pills could be bought for under £3 in most parts of Britain (Measham, 2004: 314). Ecstasy by the latter half of the 1990s was therefore a cheap and accessible intoxicant that was widely used by a variety of people, many of whom were not at all connected with dance subcultures. Indeed, as this chapter has maintained, a focus on both the extreme harms of ecstasy, and its role in the so-called Second Summer of Love of 1988 has obscured the varied contexts and experiences of its use as an intoxicant.

One of the more unusual users and most vociferous advocates of ecstasy during the 1990s was a man in his fifties who had a strong distaste for raves and dance music, but who nevertheless became a cult figure for many young people. Nicholas Saunders, described as the 'Buddha of euphoria', was up until this point best-known as the author of counter-cultural guide *Alternative London*, and the hippie entrepreneur of Neal's Yard in Covent Garden, London (Bellos, 1995). After his first experience with ecstasy in 1988, in which he felt that the drug had cured his 'mild depression' and made him feel 'more positive and healthy', Saunders began to research the drug intensively (Saunders, 1993: 9). Dismayed at what he perceived to be the lack of accurate or balanced information on ecstasy, he self-published three books on ecstasy from 1993 onwards until his untimely death in a car accident in 1998. These books, included the first *E is for Ecstasy* which sold in the tens of

thousands, were an eclectic mix of the latest scientific evidence, ethnographic and sociological observations, information on safe usage and harm reduction, and advice on the potential physical and mental health impacts (Albery, 1998). Saunders' books also provided an indication of the wide range of users, exploring the personal experiences of people who had used it for 'problem solving', 'improving relationships', a 'mini vacation', 'artistic expression', and even spiritual purposes, citing a Benedictine monk who noted that it had facilitated his meditation (Saunders, 1993: 20, 88-93).

But while there were clearly a range of users, not all of whom were connected to dance cultures, clubbers remained ecstasy's primary consumer group. And although, as we can see from Henry's unguarded comments, the drug began to be seen as relatively safe even by those most initially alarmed by its popularity, it also began to decline in usage around the turn of the millennium. Moral panics shifted to other psychoactive substances used in clubs such as ketamine or 2-CB, and older intoxicants such as cocaine and alcohol returned to, or continued to rise in popularity (Measham, 2004). Indeed, supply problems, the result of seizures of safrole or sassafras oil (a chemical precursor commonly used in MDMA production) in Cambodia, brought an effective 'ecstasy drought' across Europe between 2008 and 2009)Kemprai et al, 2020; Power, 2013). 'Legal highs' such as mephedrone (4-methylmethcathinone) were used as alternative intoxicants, once again prompting tabloid newspapers to express alarm at another apparently new drug harming young lives (Fleming, 2010).

Conclusion

The first half of this chapter concentrated on the birth and reinvention of MDMA in Germany and the USA, while the second half has considered its arrival in Britain and entwinement with the 'rave' scene. But while raves were most visible in late 1980s Britain, comparable music and drug subcultures also developed in the two countries that might be considered MDMA's parents. In the US, ecstasy's surging popularity was addressed in 2001 by then Senator Joe Biden's Reducing Americans' Vulnerability to Ecstasy (RAVE) Act, which whilst not entering the legislature, paved the way for 2003's Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act (Anderson, 2014; Anderson, 2009). In Germany meanwhile, ecstasy played its part in the

vibrant techno culture which greeted the fall of the Wall in 1989, and the yearly Love Parade organised by DJ Dr Motte, which attracted up to a million attendees at its height (Borneman and Senders, 2000; Denk and von Thülen, 2012). Berlin's clubs remain an international destination for techno tourists (Rapp, 2009). These are of course just two examples of the global spread of dance cultures. As Matthew Collin states, 'from the nineties onwards, it became possible to find DJs playing almost any style in any major city – dubstep in Istanbul, psytrance in Shanghai, foot-work in Belgrade.' (Collin, 2018 : 6)

As Karen Joe-Laidler et al point out, accompanying these globalised dance cultures are globalised intoxicants; primarily ecstasy, but also ketamine, speed, and other novel substances clustered under the umbrella term of 'club drugs'. And as they also suggest, the language that young people use to express their feelings about their drug experiences is disarmingly similar across disparate locales (Joe-Laidler et al, 2014). The apparently universalising affect of ecstasy encourages a discourse that highlights this imagined connectivity, accentuating the similarities between ecstasy consumers whilst neglecting their (important) differences. As sociologist Maria Pini has argued, there is a tendency to 'write about ravers in terms of sexless, ageless, raceless and otherwise non-specific or unsituated generals' (Pini, 2001: 7). This chapter has however insisted that such impulses are resisted. It has argued, after Thaemlitz, that ecstasy is in fact 'hyper-specific'. As well as highlighting some of the different contexts in which ecstasy has been used, it has demonstrated that until the drug became so intimately associated with the early rave scene, the drug was described in many different ways by its consumers, even as 'boring'. Between the unfortunate fatalities and life-changing experiences of 'ecstasy evangelists' lay the vast majority of users, most of whom enjoyed the intoxicant, while some didn't (Shewan et al, 2000). Indeed, the point that this chapter has made is quite a simple one; that is, for ecstasy to be considered just like any other intoxicant, where historical, geographical, cultural and social context are important factors in its consumption.

This need for nuanced and critical historical research on ecstasy has arguably gained in urgency over the last few years, as ecstasy has returned to public consciousness and popular use in many countries in the Global North. In many ways, ecstasy users are better informed than ever before, with home testing kits for pills available to order online, dedicated

charities such as The Loop in the UK providing harm reduction advice, and qualitative and quantitative reviews of pills accessible from websites such as pillreports.com and at point of sale on the darkweb (Power, 2013). Nevertheless, there have been rising numbers of deaths associated with so-called 'super strength pills'; those that contain between 200mg and 300mg of MDMA, which provide a massive high but also increase the risk of overdose (Coldwell, 2017). While these pills are of palpable concern to public health authorities and harm reduction charities, their existence also invite historical reflection on the nature of intoxicants. It makes plain and obvious the point that this chapter has strived to explain; that taking a pill at a festival in 2019 was not the same as taking a pill in 1989 at a rave, or in 1999 at a "super-club", or even resorting to mephedrone during the 'ecstasy drought' of 2009. Even within the relatively culturally homogenous British context, these are all radically different historically and temporally contingent moments of intoxication. More histories exploring these complex and specific histories need to be written. 'Set' and 'setting' is as applicable to ecstasy as it has been to other intoxicants.

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[1] While in this chapter I use the terms MDMA and ecstasy more or less interchangeably, there is a literature that disputes their conflation (Edland-Gryta, Sandberg and Pedersen, 2017).
[2] Leckey's video artwork, which traces a continuity from the amphetamine-fuelled Northern Soul parties of the 1970s to the illegal raves of the late 1980s, is from 1999. Deller's film, originally produced for Frieze in 2018, received wider screening on BBC4 in 2019. Whilst placing rave in its cultural and political context, it was significant for its underplaying of the role of ecstasy.
[3] Reynolds' book was published under the title *Generation Ecstasy* for the US market.
[4] Thaemlitz's preferred pronouns are alternating 'she/he' and 'her/his'.
[5] *PiHKAL* also contains a fictionalised account of Shulgin's "rediscovery" of MDMA, as well as detailed information on the chemical composition and "tasting notes" of many other synthetic psychoactive substances.
[6] Acid house was so named because of the lysergic, trippy qualities of music made using the Roland TB-303 bass synthesizer, most notably Phuture's "Acid Trax", but also because LSD was the drug of choice at the gay, Black clubs of Chicago where house music originated (Salkind, 2019). 'Chicago house went hand in hand with stimulants and hallucinogens' (Reynolds, 1998: 26).
[7] The deaths of two young women - Janet Mayes, in October 1988, and Claire Leighton in July 1989 - received widespread media coverage, although they were in fact preceded by that of Ian Larcombe, 'who had swallowed a bag of eighteen tablets and suffered a fatal heart attack after being stopped by police on the way to a club in June [1988]' (Collin, 1997: 80).
[8] Mean MDMA content of ecstasy pills fell from 103mg in 1991 to 74mg in 2000.