

Music and drugs (part 1)

A long history
full of beats and trips

NEWSLETTER

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“Music is the strongest drug of all” (Steven Tyler – lead singer of Aerosmith)

It’s the same for everyone. You hear your favourite music playing and you become filled with a feeling of happiness. This is caused by the neurotransmitter dopamine (often called “the happy hormone”). Dopamine is produced when people are enjoying music or drugs. Both can spark creative flights of fancy in musical artists and can induce a trance-like state in listeners. Different drugs are associated with different musical styles. In the past, drugs have been at times embraced and at other times condemned. But were the hippies of the 1960s responsible for introducing drugs to the music scene and were they actually the biggest drug abusers?

Berlioz. His “symphonie fantastique” tells of the heartache of the protagonist, who, believing that his love is unrequited, turns to opium and falls into a deep sleep filled with wild visions – including a march to his own execution. In 1969, Leonard Bernstein called this work the first psychedelic symphony in history, the first musical description of a drug-induced state of intoxication – written in 1830, or 130 years before The Beatles.¹ This offers clear proof that music and drugs go hand in hand – and have done for quite some time!

Hippie vibes and harsh realities

Up until the mid 1960s, drugs tended to receive dishonourable mentions only in the jazz and blues genres. However, with the advent of The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, the influence of drugs on the world of music quickly became undeniable. LSD in particular shone through many song lyrics as a mind-expanding wonder drug. One unforgettable high point of the hippie era was the legendary Woodstock Festival of 1969, at which Jefferson Airplane’s song “White Rabbit” became a hymn to love, peace and LSD.

The Rolling Stones took a different approach, however. In their song “Mother’s Little Helper”, they delivered a sharp critique of the way in which valium was being covertly used by many women to help them be “the perfect housewife”. At that time, psychotropic drugs were already being prescribed as a quick fix for mental health problems. Even today, “mother’s little helper” is used as a synonym for any type of tranquillizer.



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Berlioz – the original hippie of classical music?

In the nineteenth century, many people consumed opium for recreational purposes – including the composer Hector



From mind expansion to self-destruction

In the 1970s, heroin and cocaine entered the limelight – especially in the rock and punk scenes. And with them they brought self-destructive drug use. Lou Reed’s song “Heroin” vividly evokes the flight from reality that soon transforms into dependency and a life consumed by the thought of how to get the next shot into the veins.

Rap music in hip-hop culture

In the 1970s, the slums of New York were also awash with heroin. It was from this hotbed that rap was born. This genre, together with other elements like breakdance, is at the heart of hip-hop culture, which is the most dominant youth culture in the world today. Back then, rap was a desperate but peaceful cry for help against social injustice and street violence. Over time, the scene expanded and subgenres developed, which, to this day, provide insights into drug use from different perspectives.

Marijuana is very much in the spotlight in many songs, and its consumption is often depicted as a natural lifestyle choice. For example, Snoop Dogg delivers the following lyrics in his distinctive laid-back style in “Young, Wild and Free”: “So what we smoke weed? We’re just having fun; we don’t care who sees ...”. The production and sale of drugs is the second most popular theme, as in “Feeling Myself” by Nicki Minaj: “Cookin’ up the base, lookin’ like a kilo”. Many songs also reference other well-established drugs like cocaine, crack and the party drug ecstasy (MDMA).²

The wild 21st century

By today’s standards, the hippies were almost well-behaved – current musical artists tend to get straight to the point! One US study found that song lyrics in the 21st century contain 5 times more drug references than before! The findings were based on “Top 40” song charts since 1960.³

Music festivals – a challenge and an opportunity

While music festivals represent a genuine public security challenge, they also offer a valuable insight into the current drug landscape. For example, one Australian study indicated that MDMA was the most frequently detected substance in drug-related deaths at festivals between 2000 and 2019.⁴

In 2022, Ireland launched a pilot project called “Safer Nightlife”, a pioneering step aimed at enabling more effective management of the ever-changing risks associated with the sale of illegal drugs. Various authorities collaborated closely on the initiative to enable early detection of new trends and an early warning system for emerging risks. The project proved successful within the year of its launch, when a large amount of data on drugs in circulation was gathered at Ireland’s largest annual music festival, “The Electric Picnic”. Thanks to a rapid communication campaign, festivalgoers were warned in time about particularly potent MDMA pills. In addition, three substances were identified that had never been detected in Ireland up to that point: 3-CMC, 5-MAPB and 4-HO-MiPT.⁵



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References:

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