

LSD AND THE AMERICAN COUNTERCULTURE

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The counterculture movement in the 1960s had a multitude of characteristics. There were key locations, a new genre of music known as acid rock, a variety of new literary magazines, and new social beliefs and lifestyles. One of the most prominent characteristics, though, was the widespread use of recreational drugs. Most of the aspects of the counterculture were based around the idea of taking drugs and the effects of drugs on the body, so without the emergence of a drug culture, the counterculture would have never occurred.

While LSD became popular among hipsters and hippies in the 1960s, it had been around for a couple decades prior. Created in 1938 by chemist Albert Hofmann in a laboratory in Basel, Switzerland, lysergic acid diethylamide, otherwise known as LSD-25, was found to have mind-altering properties. At first, reports showed that society and the government viewed LSD as a drug that emulated mental illness, producing hallucinations and anxiety.¹ While there were LSD tests and experiments happening during the 1940s and 1950s, many members of the public did not engage in the drug use.

Early proponents of drug use and drug culture included the Beats. In Jack Kerouac's novel, *On The Road*, he wrote about smoking marijuana and taking Benzedrine. He highlighted both the good and the bad; throughout his book Kerouac described how drugs opened up the mind, while also illustrating the addictive nature of narcotics.² Allen Ginsberg, too, mentioned drug use multiple times in his famous poem, *Howl*. His first few lines depicted a drug user, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix."³ Author Peter Whitmer argued that Ginsberg's "reading of *Howl*...had no doubt helped to pave the way for all that was to follow. In reading *Howl*, Ginsberg opened up a can of consciousness for which the world was not quite ready."⁴ Many literary figures and society as a whole were not necessarily ignoring drug usage before the 1960s, accounts of it appeared in many works that are considered influential in modern times, but it was just a small group of people who engaged in it

¹ Steven J Novak., "LSD before Leary: Sidney Cohen's Critique of 1950s Psychedelic Drug Research," *Isis* 88, no. 1 (March 1, 1997): 87-10.

² Jack Kerouac, *On The Road* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008)

³ Ginsberg, Allen, "Howl by Allen Ginsberg: The Poetry Foundation." Accessed December 16, 2014. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/179381>.

⁴ Whitmer, Peter, *Aquarius Revisted* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 161.

during the 1950s into the 1970s. Aldous Huxley, too, wrote about his experience with drugs. After taking mescaline, he was inspired to write *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell*; he “redefined taking mescaline and LSD as a mystical religious experience,” as Steven Novak illustrated.⁵ These popular figures broke through the literary blockades that were preventing more explicit writings to be released. Because these books became popular among early counterculture communities, the authors’ use of drugs influenced readers to mimic them.

Timothy Leary was one of the strongest advocates for recreational drug use. His first experience with recreational psychedelic drugs was when he took psilocybin mushrooms on a vacation in Mexico, which Leary regarded as a religious experience.⁶ Starting in 1960, Leary and Richard Alpert started the Harvard Psilocybin Project “to document [psilocybin’s] effects on human consciousness by administering it to volunteer subjects and recording their real-time descriptions of the experience.”⁷ During their time at Harvard, Leary and Alpert hosted well-known figures including Allen Ginsberg, who participated in the tests.⁸ In their experiments, Leary and Alpert found that out of the 400 volunteers, “73 percent of their subjects had a ‘very pleasant’ experience under the drug and that 95 percent said it had ‘changed their lives for the better,’”⁹ according to David Solomon. Leary and Alpert believed this occurred because of the setting around the test subjects, and in order to create a “beneficial consciousness-expanding experience,” one needed to be comfortable and relaxed with their surroundings.¹⁰ LSD was even able to create an atmosphere in the counterculture, the love and peace attitude known as “The Love Generation.” The ideas that came out of early experiments with LSD influenced the trends of the counterculture, in that members of the movement preached love, peace, and consciousness.

Unfortunately, Harvard eventually fired both Leary and Alpert,¹¹ but that did not end their psychedelic experiments. They

⁵ Novak, 93.

⁶ Goffman, Ken, *Counterculture Through the Ages: From Abraham to Acid House* (New York: Random House, 2004), 250.

⁷ “Harvard Psilocybin Project.” *Harvard Psychology Department*, n.d. http://www.isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k3007&panel=icb.pagecontent44003%3Ar%241%3Fname%3Dhistoricprofs.html&pageid=icb.page19708&pageContentId=icb.pagecontent44003&view=view.do&viewParam_name=learyandalpert.html.

⁸ Goffman, Ken, *Counterculture Through the Ages: From Abraham to Acid House* (New York: Random House, 2004), 250.

⁹ Solomon, David, *LSD-The Consciousness-Expanding Drug* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1964), 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ “Harvard Psilocybin Project.”

moved into a large estate known as Millbrook and continued their tests with a group of people also living at the estate. Leary, despite being fired, was still motivated to continue his LSD research. In an interview, Leary said, “we have dedicated men who manufacture LSD and other psychedelics and release them under controlled circumstances in given arenas to see what will happen.”¹² He discussed how there were over one million doses released in Haight-Ashbury,¹³ an area in San Francisco known as a countercultural haven for hippies and the like.

One of the leading figures in the counterculture that did the most to spread the message of ingesting LSD was Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. Recorded in Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Wolfe portrayed Kesey as having only one real goal: for everyone to do acid (granted he had to be the one to facilitate it and decide who does how much at what time). Kesey first tried LSD-25 as a volunteer for drug experiments at Menlo Park in late 1959, before it became well-known. As Wolfe wrote, “how many?—maybe two dozen people in the world were on to this incredible secret!”¹⁴ LSD was still relatively unknown to the mass public when Kesey first started to do it. When he set off on his bus trip with the Merry Pranksters, he wanted more people to know about LSD and to take it to experience it for themselves because Kesey believed it was a mind-opening substance. By driving cross-country, Kesey was able to influence many to join the counterculture by trying LSD. He also created an image associated with the counterculture, which was Day-Glo colors and disheveled looking youth, a contrast from the styles that were popular in the early 1960s.

Throughout the 1960s, the public’s view of LSD was still hostile, even with the work that Leary and Albert did. A *Time* Magazine article from 1966, entitled “Drugs: The Dangers of LSD,” described multiple stories illustrating the negative effects of taking LSD.¹⁵ The media sensationalized the dangers of consuming drugs; LSD was a new psychedelic that people knew very little about, and therefore the public feared it. In 1966 the New York Times featured pictures of people looking like they were in deep despair while on LSD with quotes like, “I saw myself walking through a graveyard...I saw things I didn’t want to look at....A dream was not like what I was

¹² Schou, Nicholas, *Orange Sunshine: The Brotherhood of Eternal Love and It’s Quest to Spread Peace, Love, and Acid to the World* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2010), 147.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Wolfe, Tom, *The Electric Acid Kool-Aid Test* (New York: Picador, 1968), 44.

¹⁵ “Drugs: The Dangers of LSD,” *Time*, April 22, 1966.

going though....This is more real, vivid.”¹⁶ While this was written after the Merry Pranksters launched their bus tour, the media highlighted LSD and drugs in general as bad and dangerous. With the feeling of danger surrounding drugs, it became almost exhilarating to do them; it was another way to rebel against mainstream media. The counterculture was dubbed the counterculture because the people involved went against the norm and what they believed society expected everyone to do. By taking LSD and other drugs, people were acting out against typical societal rules, and they believed they were opening up their consciousness.

As Kesey’s journey with The Merry Pranksters continued, LSD started to gain popularity and the counterculture community was forming. Journalist René Dubos argued that “for thousands of years there have been attempts to provide alternatives for the existing social order in response to the perennial grounds for dissent: hierarchy and privilege, distrust of bureaucracy, disgust with hedonism and consumerism.”¹⁷ Dubos was correct here, but the 1960s counterculture was more than just disobeying authority and creating a counter society, it included the idea of expanding consciousness, brotherly love, and trying new things, all which could be done using drugs.

While Ken Kesey’s influence was the strongest, he alone could not have created the counterculture community. Acid rock bands helped to further spread the message of engaging in drugs and opening one’s mind. As Richard Goldstein illustrated, “musical ideas are passed from group to group like a joint.”¹⁸ As the Beatles turned more and more psychedelic sounding, and the Grateful Dead grew in popularity, more acid rock bands popped up, singing songs of good vibrations and drugs. Charles Kaiser described John Lenin and George Harrison’s first time doing LSD, in which John thought he was in a submarine, which may have been the inspiration for Yellow Submarine.¹⁹ Kaiser also pointed out that “Beatlemania and the psychedelic era reached their common peak.”²⁰ Bands like the Beatles and the Grateful Dead were able to spread the gospel of drug culture more rapidly and widespread than prominent figures could. People who did LSD and listened to their

¹⁶ Hill, Gladwin “Turn On, Tune In and Drop Out’: LSD Users Describe Their Experiences During a Psychedelic Trip; LSD Spread in U.S. Alarms Doctors and Police,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 1967.

¹⁷ Dubos, Rene, “The Roots Of Counterculture,” *The New York Times*, September 24, 1972.

¹⁸ Goldstein, Richard, *Reporting the Counterculture* (Winchester: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1989), 55.

¹⁹ Kaiser, Charles, *America in 1968* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988). 206.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

music felt it in a different way, which helped create the signature sound of acid rock. Often, these bands became the faces of certain recreational drugs, and people associated the bands, like the Grateful Dead, purely with LSD.

The underground press, too, had a large influence on the spread of ideas during the counterculture. In fact, in a study done by James L. Spate for the *American Sociology Review*, he analyzed the major values in underground press, and found that expressivity was the most important one, with instrumental themes as the least important, and political concerns between the two.²¹ Alan Young, a member of the Liberation News Services, described underground newspapers during the 1960s as focused on “psychedelic graphics, poetry and articles on drugs, which appealed to the hippie generation.”²² Allan Katzman, the managing editor of Manhattan’s East Village Other, which was the initiator of the Underground Press Syndicate, expressed, “we hope to transform the middle class by internal and external stimuli, by means of media and LSD.”²³ These publications were mostly aimed at the counterculture, and, because they featured drug content, they linked the counterculture and drug use.

On January 14 1967, Timothy Leary spoke to the crowd at the Human Be-In in San Francisco and told them to “turn on, tune in, drop out.”²⁴ He wanted people to dedicate themselves to LSD and open their consciousness. He even “suggested that the use of drugs would decondition youth, allowing them to be deprogrammed and reprogrammed (apparently for the better good of society).”²⁵ Unfortunately for Leary, only a minority of the population would partake in the mind-altering experiences that Leary, Kesey, and others advocated so considerably. In fact, according to a Gallup poll taken in 1969, “only 4% of American adults said that they had tried marijuana.”²⁶ Even with such a small amount of drug users in the United States during the 1960s, drug culture was still huge in the counterculture community. Without it, it would be difficult to imagine exactly how the counterculture would have played out.

²¹ Spates, James L., “Counterculture and Dominant Culture Values: A Cross-National Analysis of the Underground Press and Dominant Culture Magazines,” *American Sociological Review* 41, no. 5 (1976): 877.

²² Salpukas, Aigs, “Underground Papers Are Thriving on Campuses and in Cities Across Nation,” *The New York Times*, April 5, 1970.

²³ “The Press: Underground Alliance,” *Time*, July 29, 1966.

²⁴ JANUARY 14, 1967 *Human Be-In*. PBS, Accessed December 4, 2014, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/love/sfeature/timeline_human_trans.html.

²⁵ Perone, James, *Music of the Counterculture Era* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 113

²⁶ *Decades of Drug Use: Data From the '60s and '70s*, n.d., <http://www.gallup.com/poll/6331/decades-drug-use-data-from-60s-70s.aspx>.

The American counterculture in the 1960s created a lasting *zeitgeist* in the United States. Aspects of it can still be seen in the modern world. If it were not for drugs, then the core ideas and trends of the counterculture would not have existed. By influencing the music, writings, clothes, and ideas, drugs were the main cause of the counterculture.

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