



Music that Promoted the Rise of Drug Abuse

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Abstract

Objectives: Drug abuse increased rapidly during the years 1965–1970. This study explores popular music from that period that promoted illicit drug use.

Methods: Songs driving illicit drug use were identified through high popularity ratings, performing musician prominence, and drug message clarity.

Results: Music from the late 1960s contained many references to benefits of using illicit drugs, correlating with their increase in popularity.

Conclusions: Conducive environments promote illicit drug use. Messages from popular songs and musicians correlated with the rapid rise of drug abuse in the late 1960s. Understanding and managing contemporary illicit drug use should include examinations of popular music.

Keywords: Music, drug abuse, drivers of drug abuse, history of drug abuse, drug abuse epidemiology

Introduction

In the early 1960s few people used illicit drugs. Researchers detected drug abuse in only 82 of 100,000 Boston City Hospital patients in 1962 [1]. The British National Health Service could identify only 328 heroin addicts in 1964 [2]. The Federal Bureau of Narcotics estimated 60,000 narcotic addicts in the United States (US) in 1964 out of a total population of 192 million [3].

Between 1965 and 1970 illicit drug use grew to involve many people, multiple drugs, and a drug-encouraging culture [4]. A National Institute of Drug Abuse study estimated less than 5 percent of the US population had any illicit drug experience in the early 1960s but exceeded 10 percent by the 1970s [4]. The US now has 59 million people who use illicit drugs, so understanding drivers of this initial increase in drug use may help current efforts to contain it [5].

This article reviews some music associated with the rapid increase in drug abuse between 1965 and 1970. Songs influencing illicit drug use were identified through their popularity ratings, performing musician prominence, and drug message clarity. Rating sources included Billboard Hot 100 and Cashbox services and *Mojo* and *Rolling Stone* magazines. Ratings reported are from Billboard. Lyrics reported are from Lyrics.com. Artists sometimes sang different lyrics in concerts, particularly in the

1960s when some radio stations censored songs for “inappropriate content” [6].

The 1960s

The US experienced steady growth and respected governance after World War II ended in 1945 until disruptive struggles began in the 1960s over civil rights, sexuality, and the Vietnam War. The War began in 1964 to contain communism, grew deadly in 1968 with the Tet Offensive, led to 500,000 troops in Vietnam with 58,000 dying, and created distrust of government policies. Many musicians protested the war and aligned with a counterculture that also embraced illicit drugs. Rock is a music of rebellion against authority, and in the early 1960s government policy required military service for men and restricted birth control drugs for women [6]. Find discussions of disrupting 1960s struggles in *The Shattering* [7] and *The Times They Were A-Changin'* [8].

A 1964 Bureau of Narcotics report states, “drug addicts are criminals and degenerates... and menaces to society”, which justified tight controls [3]. During the 1960s many people expanded their perception of drugs from physician treatments for diseases to personal choices for enjoyment. Timothy Leary, a psychologist from Harvard University, promoted the

hallucinogen lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) for spiritual enlightenment. At a seminal 1967 event, the Human Be-In that included speeches and music, Leary advised attendees to “Turn on, tune in, drop out” [9]. This became a counterculture motto, a guidance for finding comfort and meaning in life through hallucinogens. The Human Be-In led to large outdoor music festivals that encouraged drug use, beginning with the Monterey International Pop Festival (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Advertising poster for the Jan 1967 Human Be-In in San Francisco that combined speeches and music. Poster design by Michael Bowen and Stanley Mouse for San Francisco Oracle. Poster from author.

Culture helps individuals determine what to expect from drug use [10]. Conducive environments promote illicit drug use [11]. Popular music from 1965-1970 reflected and drove changes in culture and illicit drug use. *Mojo* magazine has listed the “100 greatest drug songs” between 1932 and 2002, of which 46 were released during the years 1966 to 1969 [12].

1964 and earlier

Before 1965 few popular songs mentioned drug use, mostly jazz and blues, and often disapprovingly. Music censorship in 1964 is exemplified by three government agencies that investigated whether the song, “Louie, Louie” contained “dirty” lyrics when played at different speeds [8]. The Beatles arrival in 1963 and The Rolling Stones in 1964 greatly increased interest

among teens and young adults in rock music [13]. The Billboard Top 100 songs of 1963 and 1964 contain none that overtly reference drugs. Their primary themes included romance, fast cars, beach parties, and dancing. The most popular songs of 1963 and 1964 - “Surfin’ USA” by The Beach Boys and “I Want to Hold Your Hand” by The Beatles - typified era songs.

Bob Dylan presciently predicted, and influenced, the coming tumultuous era with his 1964 song, “The Times They Are A-Changin’.

Lyrics (in part):

Come senators, congressmen
Please heed the call
Don’t stand in the doorway
Don’t block up the hall...
For the times they are a-changin’

1965

The Vietnam War began, and anti-war songs became popular. Counterculture groups used music to protest government policies, primarily the war and drug restrictions. A popular message at anti-war protests was, “Drop acid, not bombs”, referring to LSD.

“Eve of Destruction” by Barry McGuire reached number 1.

Lyrics (in part):

The Eastern world, it is explodin’
Violence flarin’, bullets loadin’
You’re old enough to kill but not for votin’
You don’t believe in war, but what’s that gun you’re totin’?..
Handful of senators don’t pass legislation...
Ah, you don’t believe we’re on the eve of destruction

“We Gotta Get Out of This Place” by The Animals became immensely popular with US soldiers in Vietnam, the first war where front-line soldiers listened regularly to popular music. Drug-promoting music probably contributed to high drug abuse among soldiers [14,15].

Lyrics (in part):

We gotta get out of this place
If it’s the last thing we ever do
We gotta get out of this place
‘Cause girl, there’s a better life for me and you

The Searchers released “Love Potion No. 9”, which reached number 3. The lyrics relate sexual success to a drug potion that police might confiscate.

Lyrics (in part):

I took my troubles down to Madame Ruth
You know that gypsy with the gold-capped tooth
She’s got a pad down on Thirty-Fourth and Vine
Sellin’ little bottles of Love Potion Number Nine

I told her that I was a flop with chicks...
She said "What you need is Love Potion Number Nine"...
I started kissin' everything in sight
But when I kissed a cop down on Thirty-Fourth and Vine
He broke my little bottle of Love Potion Number Nine

In "Needle of Death" Bert Jansch described how injecting drugs can bring peace. Listeners ignored the deadly consequences just as smokers do with cigarettes.

Lyrics (in part):

One grain of pure white snow
Dissolved in blood spread quickly to your brain
In peace your mind withdraws
Your death so near your soul can't feel no pain

1966

Musicians and lyrics increasingly promoted drug use. The Rolling Stones recorded "Mother's Little Helper" describing how drugs relieve life drudgeries. It reached number 8.

Lyrics (in part):

Mother needs something today to calm her down
And though she's not really ill, there's a little yellow pill
She goes running for the shelter of her mother's little helper
And it helps her on her way, gets her through her busy day...

The Byrds released "Eight Miles High", a psychedelic rock song. It described drug highs and became a counterculture favorite. Many radio stations banned the song, but it rose to number 14.

Lyrics (in part):

Eight miles high and when you touch down
You'll find that it's stranger than known
Signs in the street that say where you're going
Are somewhere just being their own

Many musicians extolled their drug use. Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys claimed, "I made 'Good Vibrations' on drugs. ...and it improved my brain" [16]. The song hit number 1 and received a Grammy award nomination, influencing other musicians.

Lyrics (in part):

She's giving me excitations (excitations)
Ah, ah, my my, what elation
I don't know where but she sends me there
Ah, my my, what a sensation
Ah, my my, what elation

Paul Revere & the Raiders recorded "Kicks" that warned about drug tolerance, but it seemed to motivate people to try them.

Lyrics (in part):

"Kicks just keep gettin' harder to find

And all your kicks ain't bringin' you peace of mind
Before you find out it's too late, girl
You better get straight

The Beatles started experimenting with drugs and released "Day Tripper" that describes someone partly into sex and drugs. Their album, "Revolver" reflected their interest in LSD and inspired psychedelic music [17].

1967

Many musicians praised drugs and performed at large outdoor venues. 100,000 people attended the three-day Monterey International Pop Music Festival (Monterey), which featured 32 performers from different national regions, extensive drug use by attendees, and a separate area for treating bad reactions to drugs – all festival firsts. Monterey became a model for future music festivals, began a "Summer of Love", and debuted Hippie and Flower Power movements [9]. These movements peacefully resisted the Vietnam War and drug restrictions.

Scott McKenzie released "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)", which was used to promote Monterey. It reached number 4 on the Billboard Hot 100, and number 1 in numerous other countries. The song helped make California a counterculture center and promote the Flower Power movement.

Lyrics (in part):

All across the nation such a strange vibration...
There's a whole generation with a new explanation...
For those who come to San Francisco
Be sure to wear some flowers in your hair.

Jefferson Airplane performed at the Monterey Festival and released "White Rabbit". It uses imagery from "Alice in Wonderland", the crescendo of Ravel's Bolero, and glorifies hallucinogens. Many consider it the most important song increasing psychedelic drug use.

Lyrics (in part):

One pill makes you larger, and one pill makes you small,
And the ones that mother gives you, don't do anything at all...
And you've just had some kind of mushroom, and your
mind is moving low...
Remember what the dormouse said Feed your head. Feed
your head.

Small Faces released "Itchycoo Park", which describes drug use positively.

Lyrics (in part):

We'll get high
What will we touch there? - We'll touch the sky
But why the tears there? - I'll tell you why
It's all too beautiful, it's all too beautiful

The Velvet Underground released "Heroin".

Lyrics (in part):

Heroin, it's my wife and it's my life,
Because a mainer to my vein
Leads to a center in my head, And then I'm better off than dead
Because when the smack begins to flow, I really don't care
anymore

Jimi Hendrix released "Purple Haze" that references a potent type of marijuana. The song features guitar playing that led to a Grammy nomination. Fans interpreted the song as referring to a psychedelic experience.

Lyrics (in part):

Purple haze, all in my brain
Lately things just don't seem the same
Actin' funny, but I don't know why
Excuse me while I kiss the sky

The Beatles released "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds". John Lennon, the composer, thwarted censors by denying it was about LSD, but the public detected the acrostic and felt in on a secret.

1968

"Journey to the Center of the Mind" by Amboy Dukes portrayed hallucinogenic drugs positively.

Lyrics (in part):

Come along if you dare
Take a ride to the land inside of your mind...
How happy life could be
If all of mankind
Would take the time to journey to the center of the mind

Steppenwolf released "The Pusher" that blamed drug pushers, not drugs themselves, for side effects.

Lyrics (in part):

You know I've smoked a lot of grass
O' Lord, I've popped a lot of pills
But I've never touched nothin'
That my spirit could kill...
But the pusher don't care
Ah, if you live or if you die...

The Holy Modal Rounders released "If You Want to be a Bird", another paean to drug use.

Lyrics (in part)

If you want to be a bird
Why don't you try a little flying
There's no denying

It gets you high

Easy Rider, a 1969 movie that popularized hippie lifestyles and drug use, featured both "The Pusher" and "If You Want to be a Bird" in its soundtrack.

Hair: The American Tribal Love Rock, a Broadway musical, garnered rave reviews. Its songs referenced drug use, with "Hashish" naming 25 drugs. A show theme was to let sunshine in by using drugs.

The Grateful Dead, a San Francisco rock band formed as the counterculture began, produced "That's it for the other one," a musical description of an LSD trip. Their performances became popular, attracting large drug-using audiences.

1969

The Woodstock Music and Art Fair (Woodstock) was billed as "An Aquarian Exposition: 3 Days of Peace & Music" in upstate New York (Figure 2). It featured 32 musical groups, attracted

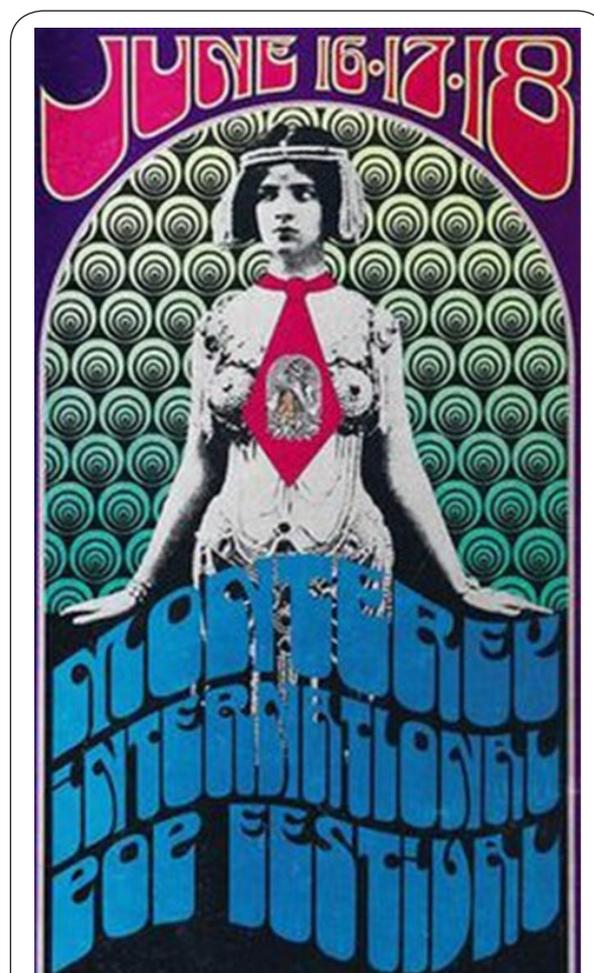


Figure 2. Poster announcing the June 1967 Monterey Pop Festival, an early outdoor concert with large crowds, drug music, and drug use. Poster from author.

500,000 people, and had rampant drug use. Historians regard Woodstock as a defining event for the counterculture generation and drug use [7]. Many images are available on the internet showing the large crowds and performing musicians using drugs. Jefferson Airplane sang "White Rabbit", their drug-promoting song.

Tommy James and the Shondells released "Crystal Blue Persuasion", which peaked at number 2. Several types of LSD tablets were colored blue, so listeners understood the drug reference.

Lyrics (in part):

A new day is coming, ooh, ooh
People are changing
Ain't it beautiful, ooh, ooh
Crystal blue persuasion
Better get ready to see the light...
Just look to your soul
And open your mind

1970

Three Dog Night released "Mama told me not to come", which peaked at number 1. It made drug highs seem another innocent adventure.

Lyrics (in part):

I'm lookin' at my girlfriend, she's passed out on the floor
I seen so many things I ain't never seen before

The Temptations released "Psychedelic shack", portraying drug parties positively.

Lyrics (in part):

Psychedelic shack, that's where it's at...
Come in and take a look at your mind
You'll be surprised what you might find

1970-73

Popular musicians Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Baby Huey died from drug overdoses in 1970 and 71, each in their 20s. The heroin addiction of John Lennon caused The Beatles to break up in 1970. Popular music started recognizing that recreational drug use had dangers, including death [13]. Drug lyrics turned negative. As the Vietnam War wound down, the counterculture movement and protest music dissipated.

In 1971 Brewer & Shipley released "One Toke Over the Line", a song about marijuana that Vice President Spiro Agnew labelled "blatant drug-culture propaganda" [18]. It peaked at number 2, but social and political forces were now working against drug-promoting music.

In June 1971, President Richard Nixon declared drug abuse "public enemy number one". Nixon stated: "In 1960, less than 200 narcotic deaths were recorded in New York City. In 1970, the figure had risen to over 1,000.... We are moving to deal

with it... I am transmitting legislation (for) a full-scale attack on the problem of drug abuse in America" [19]. This was identified as a "War on Drugs" and led to the Drug Enforcement Agency founding in 1973 [20].

In 1972 Neil Young released "The Needle and the Damage Done" after a bandmate died from a heroin overdose. This song ended the era of drug promotion by musicians as a meaningful way of life.

The Lyrics (in part):

I hit the city and I lost my band
I watched the needle take another man...
I've seen the needle and the damage done
A little part of it in everyone
But every junkie's like a settin' sun

Music today, particularly rap genre, references drugs, but seldom positively. Electronic dance music (EDM) is commonly played at raves, which feature music, dancing, and drug use. EDM lyrics seldom reference drugs.

Music is known to affect drug users emotionally and can be used to influence drug use positively or negatively [21].

Conclusions

In the late 1960s large increases in illicit drug use occurred in sync with cultural messages that promoted it. Many popular musicians and their song lyrics portrayed drug use as enlightening, social, and sophisticated. Perceptions about drugs from this period undoubtedly remain in our national culture. Understanding the complex influence of music on drug use during 1965-70 may inform efforts to reduce drug abuse today.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' contributions

Authors' contributions	REJ	MZ	MR
Research concept and design	√	--	√
Collection and/or assembly of data	√	√	--
Data analysis and interpretation	√	--	√
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