Introduction

Over the last 35 years, the author has studied the role of plant hallucinogens in tribal and third world societies (see Dobkin de Rios 1972, 1984,1994). Several articles have examined the role of music produced by shamanic healers as adjuncts to their healing rituals, particularly with such plant hallucinogens as ayahuasca (various Banisteriopsis sps.), as well as other hallucinogens (De Rios and Katz 1975, Katz and De Rios 1971). In Hallucinogens: Cross-cultural Perspectives (1984:211), a table was compiled of the then described music that accompanied psychedelic rituals world-wide. They included, among others, tropical rain forest native Indians such as the Chama and Cashinahua of Peru, the Huichol of Mexico, the Jivaro of Ecuador, and the Kiowa and Comanche Indians of North America. It appeared that percussion and drumming were the major modalities used.

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AYAHUASCA AND MELODY
Fred Katz, a musicologist and I prepared an article for the American Journal of Folklore (1971) in which we transcribed some of the ayahuasca tapes that de Rios had gathered in urban Mestizo healing sessions in Iquitos, Peru. Healers were adamant about the importance of music in the healing session, and the role that melody played in programming the actual content of the vision in their “icaros,” or chants calling upon familiars to help them to see the cause of illness (often witchcraft hexes) and to allow them to return the evil to the perpetrator so that healing could occur. Katz and I subsequently published a second article on music and drug-induced altered states of consciousness (1975). We argued that the anxiety generated by rapid access to the unconscious may be expressed in such symptoms as nausea, diarrhea, cramps, tachycardia and increased blood pressure. These components of the “bad trip” have been reported in all cultures for which adequate data is available. The pervasive presence of music as an integral part of the drug experience constitutes one of the most powerful rituals associated with the social management of altered states of consciousness.

“JUNGLE GYM”
The participant in the ritual perceives the structure of music quite differently from the way he would perceive it during normal waking consciousness. We know, of course, of the mathematical precision and structure that all music possesses, whatever the musical tonal system of a given culture or the repetition of musical phrases involved. What Katz and I argued is that once the biochemical effects of the hallucinogenic drug alter the user’s perception, the music operates as a “jungle gym” for the person’s consciousness during the drug state. Just like the playground structure that children climb upon, the “jungle gym” provides a series of pathways and banisters through which the drug user negotiates his way. Here we are using metaphorically the architectural structure composed of
iron bars interlinked in horizontal and vertical planes. In contrast, however, to the child’s playtime structure, where the child can choose spontaneous pathways and heights to explore, we suggested that the companionship of music to the hallucinogenic drug experience functions almost like a computer’s software. It instructs the machine in a particular course to follow. The cultural patterning of hallucinogenic–induced visions suggest that the mathematical structure of music may serve specific cultural goals—allowing the drug taker to see the guardian spirit of the ayahuasca vine, to achieve contact with a special supernatural deity, and so forth. The music is imposed upon the drug user by the shaman, who controls to some degree his client’s visual options within this ritualized use of music.

**FREQUENCY**

The lowest common denominator of the musics appears to be the frequency of rattling effects, or rapid vibratory sounds, almost always in consort with whistling or singing. Rattles, singing, chanting and vocal productions in general, may be a very important part of the hallucinogenic experience in that the “jungle gym” is built up, torn down and rearranged in a sort of “block-building” of consciousness to serve specific cultural goals.

**SYNESTHESIA**

Synesthesias are commonly reported by drug users. In most tribal and third world societies where drugs are used, this scrambling of sensory modalities is not only recognized but actually underpins the programming of rituals so as to heighten all sensory modalities that include visual, olfactory, tactile, auditory and gustatory senses.
LSD and Psychotherapy

Most recently, I have published a book, *LSD, Spirituality and the Creative Process* (2003), based on LSD research from 1954-1962 conducted by the psychiatrist, Oscar Janiger, when more than 930 people in Los Angeles were given Sandoz LSD experimentally. While the aim of the experiment was not to validate psychotherapeutic benefits of the LSD, a large subset of more than 225 people who were then in therapy, were given a moderate dose of LSD. Included in the sample were artists and musicians. One world-renowned musician reported the following effects:

“My flesh is charged with emotional responsiveness to the Mozart E-flat symphony. My skin seems microscopically thick and porous so as to admit the music more easily. The inner lines of counterpoint are suddenly so clear. The dissonances are so penetrating and the bass-line is positively alive. It jumps and strides with a kind of cosmic purpose. I am very sensitive but my real emotions still have not been engaged.

...My listening is extremely acute. (He listened to Mozart, Bizet Symphony, Moussorsky Pictures, the suite from Strauss’ Der Rosenkavalier and his own incident music).

My reaction to these pieces began with the conventional response but gradually took on a new character. It was as though the remaining ecstasy that flowed through me has washed away my patience with the exterior posturing of music. I felt that I saw directly into its heart and was interested only in what the music was really saying, remaining totally indifferent to how I was dressed. ...The visual hallucinations were one of the more entertaining features of the afternoon. ...I could not for a time distinguish between sight and sound. Later Mozart’s melodic line was filling the room. Later woodwind harmonies released ethereal glowing purples and pinks in shafts of radiant light which streamed out from a picture in precise synchronization with the music. I felt that moment of incredible exaltation. I am, in this very instant, free from every petty negative emotion. I am devoid of anger, of jealousy, of fear.”
Conclusion

If these hallucinogenic substances are to be used psychotherapeutically in the future, the role of music as a primary conditioning agent of the experience will have to be taken into account. Any planning for psychotherapeutic intervention in times to come would necessitate a clear musicological approach to create therapeutic states of consciousness. Not discussed in this article is the work that Grob and I have done on suggestibility and the hallucinogenic substances (see Grob and De Rios 1996, De Rios and Grob 1994) which are also important effects of the hallucinogenic experience. Music can be a major mode of managing the drug-induced altered state of consciousness for therapeutic goals.

References


