

## SEAN ELDER



## ON ECSTASY

THE FIRST THING I heard about "Ecstasy" was that it was the designer drug of the eighties. I had never been sure what exactly "designer drugs" were, but I imagined that, like designer jeans, they would cost more than regular drugs for no reason but the name.

But no. The word on the street for the new drug in town was, well, ecstatic. People said it gave the user the confidence of cocaine and the insight of LSD. (There are, of course, problems with that analogy, as anyone who's ever seen a cokehead crawling on the carpet looking for a grain no bigger than a pinpoint can testify; confidence is not the word that comes to mind. As for acid, I can't help but recall the title of a drug propaganda film they used to show us in high school: *LSD: Insight or Insanity?* But more on that later.) Not only that, the high lasted only about four hours, your thinking remained lucid and coherent throughout, and you were erotically energized. Oh, and there were no bad side effects either. Seriously.

Then there were the conscientious proponents of the drug, therapists and spiritual seekers who claimed that it gave the user a great sense of peace and contentment, that it melted the fear in people's hearts and opened them to love in a way that they never felt possible. These advocates often refer to MDMA (Ecstasy's true call letters) as an empathogenic substance because of its "empathy generating" properties. Great for couples counseling, some therapists have testified. Helpful for those overcoming a cocaine addiction, others have said. Also wonderful in grief counseling, accelerating the long and painful process of grappling with the death of a loved one. It had also been successfully used in treating victims of rape and violent accidents, helping them face their horrible memories without fear or anxiety.

So if this drug was so fucking wonderful, so fun and liberating and harmless, why had the federal Drug Enforcement Agency outlawed it two years ago? I decided to try it myself (anything for a story) and suss out a few of the experts, pro and con, in the meanwhile.

Conveniently, the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic and Merritt Hospital were co-sponsoring an interdisciplinary conference on the drug. It turned out to be a big draw, a sea of beards and Ph.D.'s with all the honchos of MDMA in attendance, the Learys and Alpert and even Owsleys of Ecstasy. Such a varied confab gathered to confer on LSD would have been unthinkable twenty years ago. Even more unthinkable would have been the presence of a government representative there to tell the assembled weirdos why the feds were taking their sunshine away.

But here was Frank Sapienza, a chemist from the DEA, standing at the podium, looking like a Christian prepared to address a group of very Roman lions. Clearing his throat, Sapienza began his address.

"Hi," he said. "Uh, any questions?"

MDMA, MORE POPULARLY known as Ecstasy, "XTC," or "Adam," is the abbreviation for the drug's chemical name, 3, 4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine. It was originally developed by E. Merck, a German pharmaceutical firm, in 1914 as an appetite suppressant but never marketed. Had it been, all of Eastern Europe might now be thinner and happier, and the Archduke Ferdinand might be summering in Cannes.

The drug made its reappearance in the later 1970s as one of the new designer drugs—or, in its case, a redesigner drug. "Designer drugs" was the phrase coined to describe the flurry of narcotic analgesics being produced at the time, drugs that had, basically, three things in common: They were hard to detect, hard to test for, and—most significantly—chemically different from psychedelics outlawed under the Controlled Substance Act of 1970. The idea was to design and manufacture new, fun drugs faster than the feds could outlaw them.

MDMA, brother to the longer lasting, speedier and illegal MDA, was the newest and funnest of the bunch.

In fact, MDMA was so much fun, so too-good-to-be-true, that the DEA canned it but good in the summer of 1984, placing it under Schedule I, a category of controlled substances that includes heroin and LSD. (Indeed, it was almost exactly twenty years ago that the feds gave acid the same kibosh.) According to the DEA, Schedule I drugs have a high potential for abuse, no safety standards accepted by the Food and Drug Administration and no accepted medical use. What this meant to the potential dealer was that trafficking in MDMA could land him fifteen years in prison and a \$125,000 fine. Very unecstatic.

What this meant to the therapeutic community, though, the psychologists and spiritualists who had been quietly using the drug for years in search of contentment and "individuation," was that their activities were now illegal. It was the "no accepted medical use" part of the DEA's definition that really rankled them. A wave of protests from the medical community caught the DEA by surprise, and in August of '84 they granted a series of hearings before banning the drug. Among those protesting the proposed ban was San Francisco psychiatrist Jack Downing, who had good things to say about the effects of MDMA on the troubled psyche.

"In general, it gives patients some release from the fear and anxiety that pattern everyone's life," says Downing now. "They can approach whatever it is—the fact that their parents didn't love them, the fact that they themselves have acted in a way they were ashamed of, almost anything. Practically everybody has done something so distressing that they prefer to hide it in the closet, the emotional closet, rather than express it."

Needless to say, the pleas of Downing and his comrades fell on deaf ears. As Sapienza said at the conference, "Even if the DEA had been aware of the drug's therapeutic use, it would have not been considered accepted medical use." Accepted medical use means the

treatment of some physical ailment, and the testimony of a therapist and his patient—or a thousand therapists and a thousand patients—is not admissible. What the government found admissible were the experiments done with MDMA on rats and dogs. Large, human-sized doses of the drug were administered to these beasts, and hyperactivity and heart failure were the result. Go ask a dog about his state of mind. (Or, as one of the animal researchers at the conference remarked, “My rats are all atheists.”)

But it wasn’t the psychiatric community with its controlled, introspective use of the drug that had attracted the DEA’s attention. It had been (shades of LSD!) thrill-seeking youngsters, blowing their gourds in public, that had excited the feds into action. Bars in Dallas were dispensing the stuff the way other taverns sell lottery tickets and the young folk were acting strange, dancing, hugging, getting all emotional. Of course the government banned it.

I TOOK ACID for the first time when I was fifteen, not long before my sixteenth birthday, in the company of a gang of like-minded imbeciles. We had come together not so much through choice as by social exclusion. We didn’t fit in. We hated school—that was a given—but we also hated sports and beer parties and fights and dating and all the other standard small-town high school diversions. Aside from shooting pool and swimming in the American River in the summertime, the only thing we really shared was a love of drugs.

I ended up doing acid once or twice a week for the next year or so. It became a way of life for me and my friends; we’d do it on weekends, at parties, even in school, waiting to see who would notice. I started wearing weird gear to classes—capas, goggles, rubber waders—hoping to get a rise, or at least a look, out of someone. A friend and I even ran for school office under a “Joint Ticket.” I put up a big painted poster in the cafeteria that read “Let Sean Decide,” with the first letters of each word painted in bright, fluorescent orange.

It wasn't long after I was elected to the office of Junior Boy (yes, that was the title) that I had my first bad acid experience. I had cut school with another fellow to spend the winter day tripping down in the canyons of the North Fork. Suddenly, all of nature, which had seemed so beckoning before, turned menacing and insatiable. Time was turning on some wheel that now had teeth, and my friend and I were going to be ground down and consumed, little legumes in the garbage disposal of life.

We sped out of that canyon like insects out of a drain, thankful to be still alive but equally sure that our lives were meaningless, expendable. We wandered back toward town, where, my friend kept telling me, we were sure to be caught and hung by our thumbs. I had already spent time in Juvenile Hall for drug offenses; why risk eternal incarceration, he reasoned, by wandering around all lit up like a goddamned Christmas tree? Why not stay put in the hills where at least the chances of being noticed were considerably less?

The demarcation point between rural relief and community consumption came at an irrigation ditch above our school. In my friend's mind, it was the point of no return. If we crossed the little bridge that went over that ditch, we were finished, history. And in my stoned mind there seemed to be only one alternative: I leapt into the water, fully clothed, in the middle of February, thinking that I was somehow beating the preordained events that conspired against me.

My friend beat a hasty retreat, figuring at that point that I was too far gone for any recollection, and no doubt dealing with some demons of his own. I emerged, soaking wet in my blue jeans and work shirt, a hundred feet down the canal and every bit as amped as I was when I went in. I sloshed my way down into town back to my mother's house, where my little brother was watching a rerun of *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* on television.

"Are you okay?" he asked as I entered the living room.

On the TV screen Jim Nabors squinted, smiled, and spoke. "Gollleee, Sarge! It's hepalah arn foor shorn nah gebalah?"

I walked in a trance into my bedroom and changed my clothes to go to work. For some reason, I was convinced I had to go to my after-school job, repairing educational films for the county school district. I arrived there not long afterwards, still wet, still blasted.

"It just keeps going around and around," I announced profoundly to the first person I saw. I was immediately escorted back home.

Later that evening, considerably saner, I forswore drugs for all time, even flushing a lid of fine grass down the toilet. I kept to this new lifestyle for at least a couple of days, in the course of which I decided that the only way to deal with my acid paranoia was to—well, do more acid!

And so I did, like some idiot who keeps flinging himself against the wall, thinking there's some hidden door there. I kept having bad trips, seeing things that weren't there, laughing at the shadows, making a fool of myself. And through it all I was poison, socially speaking, as welcome as a leper at a Twister party. It wasn't until years later that I heard acid-trailblazer Richard Alpert's dictum against repeated use: "When you get the message, hang up the phone."

GIVEN MY DRUG-SCARRED psyche and my increasing skepticism about the potential of any wonder drug to provide anything but a portal to other possibilities, I seemed like a logical candidate to take the MDMA test. (I don't feel comfortable calling it Adam; that's my son's name and he is far from an ephemeral experience. And I don't believe in ecstasy outside of sex or death.)

I took it by myself, outdoors, in the Marin Headlands, between forts Berry and Cronkhite. (I did give some thought to my choice of location; I wanted to be able to move about, I like the openness of that area and I'm comfortable near the ocean.) And though I had no specific issues I wanted to deal with, my psychic closet certainly needed cleaning. I'd been divorced in the last year. One of my best friends wasn't speaking to me. And I wasn't making enough money at my chosen profession to buy myself a new pair of shoes.

I set out on my excursion as though I were going to camp for the weekend, making a list of things to bring with me in my daypack: suntan lotion, a pair of shorts, a sweater, a canteen of water, smokes, matches, money, a Walkman and some tapes I thought I might want to hear, a notebook and portable tape recorder to take down any profound thoughts I might have. I did everything but sew my name in my underwear.

It had been raining the morning I set out on my trip, though the weather service assured me that it would clear by mid-day. Sure enough, by the time I reached Fort Berry, the clouds had all blown away and the sun was burning off the residual fog. I parked my car, hoisted my daypack, took my pill (a 150-mg dose of MDMA), duly recorded the time (11:30 a.m.) on my tape recorder and set out in search of the unknown.

Within fifteen minutes I discovered that all the trails leading away from Ft. Berry are in a cloverleaf and kept leading me back to the same spot, one of the many cement fortresses built by the Army in anticipation of a Japanese invasion during World War II. Since I was told that the drug should take effect in thirty minutes, I decided to drive a little further down the road before I was incapable. Besides, the clearing weather was bringing out clusters of tourists, whom I didn't want to deal with.

As I drove down the access road I dutifully recorded my unchanging perceptions on my little Sony: "11:50 and still no difference," I muttered into the little metal box, one hand on the wheel. "If nothing changes soon, I'll take another hit." (I had thoughtfully brought a second.) I parked my car away past the path that leads down to Black Sand Beach, near another cement cannon housing. As I climbed out of my auto and checked my belongings I felt a slight rush, as though I were coming on to speed. Probably just anxiety, I figured grimly, anticipation of something that's not going to happen. The whole thing might be a hoax, I thought as I trudged off toward the bluffs, a sort of mass hysteria that's been built up around no-big-deal, like Kohoutek or the traveling K-Paul's kitchen.

There were other nature lovers gathered around the sight, basking in the sun, reading the Sunday paper, picnicking on blankets. After walking out to the cliffs and realizing there was still no clearly marked trail that led down the coast, I rethought my route for a second time. About half a mile down the road, on a green lawned area near Point Bonita, I could see a wedding party gathering. A little greenery, perhaps, or at least the trail out to the lighthouse; that was the way to go. I decided to drive again, still feeling straight and figuring that when the drugs did finally kick in, I'd want to be close to my car. So I hiked back to the road, looking at the graffiti spraypainted large across the cement walls.

It was about a quarter after noon as I approached my car, and I still figured nothing was happening. A little anxiety, probably the result of too much coffee. I should have stayed home, I thought, I should have brought some pot. Then I realized, as I gazed plaintively through the window of my car, that I'd locked my keys inside.

Now, I WON'T say that I've never locked my keys in my car before; I have, at a time of great duress. But generally getting out of the car with my keys in my hand is second nature to me, like walking out of the house with my pants on. As I stood there, metaphorically bare-assed, looking at my own sorry reflection in the windshield, I thought of a story a friend had told me about the time she and her lover had locked the keys in their van while tripping on acid. With the engine running. And a dog inside. And I found myself thinking that it was too bad you couldn't teach dogs to do simple things like unlock car doors, and that if it had been Lassie inside that car, she would have gotten behind the wheel and driven back to the ranch for help.

Suddenly I felt very stoned. It wasn't just the image of Lassie on the CB that convinced me. It was my complete lack of concern for my predicament. Sure, I was a good ways from home—San Francisco shimmered off in the distance like the Emerald City—but, like a good

Boy Scout, I had come prepared. It was the shank of a beautiful day and it wouldn't be dark for another seven hours. My car was a rolling dumpster and easily accessible (it had been broken into before). All I needed was a coat hanger, which didn't seem too much to ask. I set off down the road toward Point Bonita, in search of pliable wire.

As I walked I gauged my perceptions. I wasn't hallucinating: I stared at the stones before me and found them to be just stones, unchanging. I felt slightly speedy, but not wired for sound. I had been told that MDMA had aphrodisiacal properties, but making love at that moment would have been physically impossible: My member had done the incredible disappearing act familiar to any man who's ever done speed. Looking out over the whole San Francisco Bay glistening in the sun, the world seemed a perfect pearl, and I felt impossibly serene.

I reached the green at Point Bonita and observed the wedding party for a moment. It was a well-heeled crowd, dressed in formal pastels, emerging from expensive German automobiles—the sort of people I would ordinarily despise. But as I watched them awkwardly greet each other, anticipating the ceremony, I felt an unexpected compassion for them. Just try to be happy, I thought, floundering around like everyone else, without a clue. I noted “love-of-yuppie” as a new symptom.

I passed a portable restroom where a young father was having trouble with his recently toilet-trained son, who was refusing to come out of the john. The father lost his patience and began banging on the door.

“If you don't come out of there right now,” he yelled, “we're going straight home, do you hear me? We'll turn the car around and go straight home!”

I was amazed to find that parents still used this chestnut. I thought of my own father—impatient, occasionally cruel—using this line on us, a hundred miles from home (“Now this vacation doesn't mean so much to me, but your mother. . . .”). As I walked past this scenario, one being played out in cars and parks across the country, I

felt a great empathy, not just for the poor kid trying to pee, but for his shortsighted dad, doing what he learned from his father. Would the kid go on to yell at his son like that?

I walked out to the end of the point, through the tunnel that led to the lighthouse, marveling that I had never been out there before. If I was stoned on acid, I told myself, this tunnel would take on some symbolic portent, as would the light at the end of it and the lighthouse. But now all just seemed right. Darkness, good. Light, good.

I passed couples sitting quietly in the sun, small children running up the stairs that led to the lighthouse. Out at the crest I stood alone, looking out over the ocean while a warm breeze blew through my hair. Ships were passing out of the bay into the ocean, sailing away, some forever. And I thought about loss.

Everybody's afraid of losing. Friends and lovers leave, things fall apart, people die. Then you die. (Ouch.) And nobody wants to go. The Buddhists believe that it's our attachment to things that makes us unhappy. At that moment I felt very unattached. Nothing really went anywhere, it seemed at that moment; friends, wives, children went out the door, but they don't really go anywhere: there is nowhere to go. Time passed, sure, but where did it go? For an instant I felt I understood the notion of the "eternal now" that Claudio Naranjo had spoken of in his writings on empathogenic drugs. And in short I was unafraid.

I was still broke, it occurred to me as I walked away from the lighthouse—there are some things that even wonder drugs won't change. But who would judge me by my shoes? The world was very beautiful and God inhabited it fully. In the bay the buoys were singing their warnings to the clear ocean air.

I walked back inland, over the narrow wooden bridge that led toward the park. I had given up on getting back into my car. Seven maids with seven mops had swept this area for half a year; the ground was cleaner than the floor of my house. I walked up a trail out over the

bluffs, farther and farther from the people below. I knew there was a bus that went from Fort Cronkhite back to the city; my car wasn't going anywhere. It just meant embarrassment, perhaps. And there, far from everything, I found it.

A coat hanger.

I WASN'T EXACTLY praying for a coat hanger that day; I was, rather, musing that a benignly indifferent universe might just spit up an odd bit of wire that it had no use for, a hanger that, in fact, had no business being there. And, lo: what was needed had been produced. No reasonable offer refused, the universe seemed to be saying. *Se habla español.*

I walked back to my car feeling that all was in balance. I got the wire inside the wind-wing and was inches away from getting a loop of it around the door-latch when a park ranger pulled up in a truck.

"Locked out of my car," I said, rather sheepishly. When she failed to respond I added, "Doesn't look like the kind of car you'd want to steal, does it?"

"No," she said (a little too matter-of-factly, I thought). She produced a slim-jim and in a matter of moments had my door open.

It should be noted that a non-stoned person might have thought of finding a park ranger immediately. But I seldom think of searching out people in uniforms, no matter the stripe, when under the influence of illegal substances. But then the non-stoned person probably wouldn't have locked himself out of his car.

Once the door was open I produced some proof of ownership and then we chatted amiably for a moment or two, her telling me which trails led where. Talking was no problem: I felt as lucid as a linguist, as shameless as a priest. I had been told that this was the drug you could call your mother on, and though I didn't feel like calling Mom, I was quite content to chat up this park ranger. She seemed so *pleasant*, fascinating, really, a wonderful person. . . .

From there I hiked down to the Black Sand beach, thinking it time for a rest. Once down there I removed my clothes and sat contentedly, watching the ships again. I was coming down, nearly four hours after taking the capsule.

In the end, taking MDMA seemed a transient glimpse at our transient existence, an experience as delicate and ephemeral as breath on a glass. I didn't feel as though I had learned anything new, but that I had been reminded of something important.

Before I left the beach that day to make the long climb back up the road, I went down the shore to write my son's name in the sand. I was thinking of him more than anyone else at the end of it all. He was my anchor, my earth and his presence seemed palpable. I wrote his name, Adam, in the black sand and then watched in perfect contentment as the waves washed the words away.