

# Why ecstasy associated with dance music media essay



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The aim of this project is to discover the reasons as to why and how ecstasy has become associated with today's dance music, and how the two link together. This project will cover issues such as the history of the drug, the varying genres of music and how the drug respond to each other, as well as the social and political factors concerning this area.

My research was done through reading and referencing books and articles in newspapers and journals, as well as the use of the internet.

### The Origins of Ecstasy

Whilst researching it became apparent that, according to popular history ecstasy, otherwise known as MDMA, was first discovered in 1912, when it was developed by a German pharmaceutical company called Merck, as a way to suppress the appetites of soldiers in the German army. However reports of bizarre side effects among the people testing the drug became apparent, meaning that Merck was forced to withdraw the drug until it was resurrected by Alexander Shulgin. Alexander Shulgin worked as a biochemist for Dow chemicals, and was pursuing an "interest in psychedelics on the sly." (Reynolds 1998, pg 22). Having been successful with Dow, he was able to set up his own government approved laboratory, allowing him to legally produce the chemicals he wanted.

Shulgin introduced ecstasy to Leo Zoff, who was regarded as a highly respected psychologist who was known to administer psychoactive drugs, such as LSD, to patients during his therapy sessions. Zoff was close to retirement when he was introduced to the drug, but became so convinced of

its therapeutic potential that he spent the next few years travelling America, introducing Ecstasy to hundreds of therapists and thousands of patients.

Many therapists found that the emotional effects of ecstasy made patients communicate more easily and openly, therefore helping with the treatment of patients. In *The Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* by Philip Wolfson, one therapist quotes, “MDMA is penicillin for the soul.”

Realising what they had been working on Shulgin and Zoff, agreed that it should be kept under wraps. Due to this, no scientific papers were published on the impact of the drug on humans until as late as 1978.

However, word of the drug soon spread and started to become readily available. This meant that the Drugs Enforcement Agency (DEA) started to investigate, and came to the conclusion that ecstasy should be banned as too many people were taking the drug recreationally.

Although therapists were outraged that the drug was banned, it became apparent that Ecstasy would have uses far more influential than those imagined by Alex Shulgin and others. Ecstasy was being taken in combination with music and clubs, rather than in bonding sessions between couples. As Simon Reynolds noted:

“When large numbers of people took Ecstasy together, the drug catalysed a wondrous sense of collective intimacy, and even more significantly, MDMA turned out to have a uniquely synergistic/synaesthetic interaction with music,

especially up-tempo, repetitive, electronic dance music.”

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Below is a timetable created by Helen O'Brien from the Guardian newspaper, who wrote an article on the development of ecstasy.

## **Timeline**

1912 First synthesis of MDMA by Kollishch at Merck in Darmstadt 1970 First detection of MDMA in tablets seized in the streets of Chicago. By the mid-1970s the drugs expert Alexander Shulgin had begun to research its effects 1977 MDMA classified as a Class A drug in UK 1984 MDMA's street name of 'ecstasy' coined in California

1985 MDMA becomes a Schedule 1 controlled substance in the US In the UK the street price of ecstasy is £25 Mid to late 80s Raves become increasingly popular, spreading out from the centre of London and Manchester 1989 Raves, and the electronic dance music and ecstasy, which fuels them, lead to a 'second summer of love'. Acid house, with the accompanying smiley-face T-shirts, goes mainstream and into the pop charts. This year also sees the first recorded ecstasy-related death in the UK 1994 Parts of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act target raves, or gatherings with music which is characterised by 'a succession of repetitive beats' 1995 Death of Leah Betts after taking an ecstasy tablet on her 18th birthday 2003 6, 230 people found guilty, cautioned or fined for ecstasy related offences 2005 In a survey of 500 Edinburgh students, 36% said they had taken ecstasy and of those, 75% considered ecstasy a 'positive force' on their lives 2006 The current street price is £3-8

During the eighties, unemployment levels within the UK were high. Therefore more of the younger generation decided to see the world and have some

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fun, rather than claiming unemployment benefits or working for a low wage in the cold, wet, weather, many travelled to Ibiza, and survived financially by doing odd jobs, bar work or handing out club flyers, in order to earn some money whilst also enjoying the weather and lifestyle of the island. Ecstasy had been notorious in Ibiza since the early eighties, and increased in popularity every year. Although the music being played in the clubs contained some house records, the style of DJing would become known as 'Balearic'. (This meant a mix everything from; soul, reggae, hip hop, electronic pop and house.)

The varying genres of music could be due to the varying ages and nationalities in the crowd.

One of the most famous DJ's associated with the Balearic style in Ibiza was Alfredo, who had a residency at a club called Amnesia.

Paul Oakenfold, Johnny Walker, Nicky Holloway and Danny Rampling are the four people associated with bringing the Ibiza culture to England.

Paul Oakenfold had originally tried before, at a club in 1985. However, no one in the crowd could understand why all these strange records were being played amongst the ones they expected to hear, and the club failed.

Mathew Collin has one suggestion as to why it didn't work: " There was no Ecstasy." pg 86

In September of 1987 the four of them went to Ibiza to celebrate the birthdays of Oakenfold and Walker. They ended up in Amnesia, taking Ecstasy and listening to Alfredo. They decided that the Ibiza experience had to be repeated in London, by any means necessary. This decision changed the ideas and perception of dance music. As Paul Oakenfold quoted:

“ It became probably the most important - as well as the best - holiday all four of us have ever had.” (Matthew Collin Pg 122)

Paul Oakenfold first opened a club night known as “ spectrum”, which focused on “ acid house music”. Then Danny Rampling opened “ Shoom” which focused on the “ Balearic” theme but also played “ acid house”. Then when Nicky Holloway opened “ The Trip” the ecstasy scene went mainstream. Whilst Acid House gained popularity, a Smiley face was the symbol that was associated with the music, and was found on all sorts of products, such as: T-shirts, and badges, that could be bought from your high street shops. The Sun newspaper even had its own T-shirt offer, supported by the following headline: “ It’s groovy and cool - It’s our Acid House T-shirt. Only £5. 50 man.” However, The Sun newspaper later printed an article headlined “ The Evil of Ecstasy.” Apparently, according to ‘ The Sun Doctor’ Vernon Coleman, “ if you take Ecstasy”:

“ You will hallucinate. For example, if you don’t like spiders you’ll start seeing giant ones.”

Due to more people taking ecstasy, the amount of alcohol consumption declined. Therefore the brewers decided to try and work with the ecstasy

culture. This included ideas of drinks being called “ Ravers” and “ DNA” which had a glow in the dark label.

One significant statistic also worth considering is the price change in Ecstasy over the years. When the drug first came to the UK, one pill could cost as much as £25. According to Matthew Atha, in 1995, statistics showed that the average price for a pill was £11. 65. This figure has fallen each year to as little as £2-3 for a pill.

According to Decca Aitkenhead:

“ Ecstasy has cut across social boundaries in a way no drug has ever done before. It is the first drug to bear no attendant ideology, identity or idealism; it has in fact rendered the very phrase ‘ drug culture’ meaningless. What we have now, instead, is a popular culture defined by the drug Ecstasy.”

The music we listen to, the clubs we visit, the slang that we use, and the clothes we wear, all in some way have been influenced by the Ecstasy culture. The product that Ecstasy has become associated with is dance music, specifically music with a four-on-the-floor kick drum. Such as House and Techno. This is because house and techno are both made up of a sequence of repetitive beats.

#### Political and Social Factors

During the rise of the ecstasy culture in Britain. Margret Thatcher was in power of the British government.

Ecstasy allowed those from all classes, races and sexualities to socialise together. Proof of this can be seen when rivalries between football hooligans dispersed. Simon Reynolds states that:

“ In the eighties with mass unemployment and Thatcher’s defeat of the unions, the football match and the warehouse party offered rare opportunities for the working class to experience a sense of collective intimacy: to belong to a ‘ we’ rather than an atomised, impotent ‘ I’.”

Although ecstasy did not bring football violence to an end, it helped to remove an amount of animosity.

During the eighties, clubs in Britain had strict opening and licensing laws, which meant that they had to close at 2 or 3 in the morning at the latest. One reason why people had so much success with illegal raves, was due to their illegal status, and did not abide by these laws. The Conservative government wanted to clamp down on illegal raves. An Entertainment Bill was created so that anyone found guilty of organising illegal parties would face a £20, 000 fine and six months imprisonment. This was set up in July 1990. Many promoters stopped their set up of illegal raves, making warehouse parties less frequent. The Bill also resulted in many clubs being given licences to open all night, and many promoters began to organise legal raves in venues such as sports and dance halls. Mathew Collin comments on the period:

“ Slowly, raves became integrated into the infrastructure of the entertainment establishment: shepherded back into licensed premises, contained and commodified.”

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Due to clubs being given longer licences, clubbers who wanted to party all night could legally. The aim of the Bill was to reduce the amount of drug use amongst the party goers by helping move the culture into the mainstream. However, since clubbing was now available to everyone, this meant that dance music and ecstasy, were also available to everyone going out, most of whom started to experiment with ecstasy.

As well as the political issues, during this time the threat of AIDS was a huge concern as a serious killer. This resulted in many party goers preferring to experiment with ecstasy, rather than risk their immediate health by sleeping around and drugs like heroin, that required intravenous injection into a vein.

Phil Sutcliffe states in his book "The selling of smiley culture":

" Ecstasy arrived at a time when drugs were being regarded with even more trepidation because of the association between heroin use and AIDS."

The popularity of the rave scene at the end of the eighties could be linked to the change in the attitude towards sex. According to Jimi Fritz " AIDS had turned sex into a dangerous and potentially lethal game", particularly for homosexuals, and society had to re evaluate its attitudes towards sex. This was done by questioning and re evaluating the benefits and pleasures of casual sex. The rave scene, accompanied by ecstasy use, gave younger people the chance to express themselves sexually, but without the risks that had been previously accompanied by this kind of behaviour. This change in attitude led Steve Redhead to comment on the sexual atmosphere in clubs in this era. Instead of the females being subjected to lecherous behaviour, " dancing no longer represents the erotic display of the body."

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## Varying genres of music

The popularity of the rave scene helped, for new genres to develop, as well as, a new drug gaining in popularity as the scene branched out. In particular hardcore and jungle music, with both genres having a similar structure and make up. However both genres had differing views on the use of ecstasy.

The hardcore scene grew out of house and techno music in the early 1990s, creating a second wave of rave. The scene was notorious for Ecstasy abuse, as the music helped clubbers party even harder than before. Around 1993, jungle music started to evolve out of hardcore, but the drug of choice veered towards marijuana rather than Ecstasy. The two scenes existed alongside each other, but there were differing opinions on Ecstasy use. On the one side, the hardcore ravers were seen as idiotic, whilst junglists earned a reputation as being moody and unfriendly.

Hardcore music was creating a new digital future for the followers of the genre. This is because cheap computer based home studio set-ups and sequencing programs like Cubase, allowed people to take the influences of house, techno, reggae and hip hop, and manipulate the sound, in order to create their own styles, to fit their needs and desires, such as, Looped breakbeats, that were chopped up and sped up, and were combined with the "four on the floor" kick drum.

In order for people to fulfil these needs, mega-raves were created with events such as: Rainedance, Helter Skelter and Fantazia. These massive events attracted crowds of up to 25, 000, in arenas specifically designed for a full-on audio/visual sensation. Lasers, strobes, funfair rides, massive sound-

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systems and star DJ line-ups were all employed to give punters an experience like never before. Simon Reynolds states that:

“ As rave became big business, the rave transformed itself from a lawless zone into a highly organised space programmed for pleasure.”

The hardcore ravers developed techniques, to enhance the effects of ecstasy, one of which involved smearing their chests with Vicks Vapour rub. The menthol fumes supposedly increased the ecstasy buzz, bringing on a rush. The use and abuse of the drug in this period is evident from a number of angles. Firstly, Simon Reynolds talks about the change in language. On a good night you'd get 'faced' (off your face), 'slegged' (into a coma), 'cabbaged' or 'monged' (turned into a vegetable). Good tracks were 'mental', 'kickin' or 'bangin'. The weekender side of raving had always fitted neatly into the traditional working class 'culture of consolation', but hardcore took this further and evolved into "a regime of punishing bliss, simply for the headstrong." Another piece of evidence regarding the extent of Ecstasy use was the rise in police seizures for the drug in that period, according to the Independent Drug Monitoring Unit. In 1990, the London Metropolitan seized 5500 kilos; in 1991, the figure was more than 66,000 kilos. These figures reflect both the increased numbers of people doing the drug, and the increased recklessness towards drug intake. Unsurprisingly, the number of MDMA-related deaths began to rise too. It is also worth considering the titles of tracks being released, and the lyrics and vocals contained within them, for example: 'Rush In The House', 'Feel Real Good', 'Closer To All' and 'Such A Feeling' were all obviously linked to the taking of

ecstasy. Another example of this is: Baby D's ' Let Me Be Your Fantasy' The opinion gained from listening to the lyrics could be perceived that the lyrics are sung from the point of view of Ecstasy itself. (Please find a copy of the song in appendix I) The hardcore scene seemed driven by Ecstasy consumption, which eventually caused the scene to split in two. Many clubbers realised that their bodies were suffering from the punishing weekly regime of partying and pill taking constantly, and slowed down. But others pushed on regardless. This type of behaviour is common to all Ecstasy scenes, as Mathew Collin explains: " The first rush begins the honeymoon period - the beatific, loved-up, evangelical phase. Within a year or so, that early excitement begins to fade and many experience diminishing returns. A few accelerate into excess, abuse sometimes leading to the emergence of physical or psychological problems. The third stage is the comedown: disillusionment, reduced use, and attempts to readjust to the fact that the initial high is gone forever. Finally comes the re-entry into the post-Ecstasy world, a time of reassessment and the regaining of equilibrium." Between 1992 and 1994, jungle started to evolve and branch off. This was done by losing the " four on the floor" kick drum pattern linked with hardcore music. Jungle music also does not follow the repetitive pattern as much as hardcore. Therefore ecstasy would not have the same effects. Whereas hardcore had been solely about ecstasy and the rush, jungle favoured reggae sounds and samples about weed. As marijuana began displacing ecstasy as the drug of choice, dancing lost its mania, and became less ravey and out of control. This shift in patterns of drug use was reflected in the crowd that would be seen at jungle events. The perception of life within hardcore music was that everything will be ok. Whereas those listening to jungle music, had a more

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realistic impression of life and were of a more sceptical nature. The one original difference between hardcore and jungle was the kick drum. This one thing could be argued to of led to the two genres having such contrasting views on ecstasy use. However, because of the repetitive nature of the kick drum. If the four-on-the-floor kick drum was not part of the music, there would be no call for the other rush-inducing effects such as ecstasy, because people would not wish to take Ecstasy to the music in the first place. The proof of this theory is jungle. This genre has evolved without a repetitive structure and therefore has not taken on board any of the rush-inducing effects of hardcore. Since the music discards repetition, people do not enjoy taking ecstasy to it. Therefore, as the music develops it does not develop as an aid to ecstasy consumption. Hardcore, on the other hand, has been allowed to be developed as an aid to Ecstasy consumption, because it contains the only necessary component: a repetitive kick drum. For example, with repetitive music such as hardcore, when it is played to a crowd dancing in a repetitive pattern, most of those dancing are under the influence of drugs such as ecstasy which encourages repetitive behaviour. The concept of why dance music and ecstasy are so popular together, could be argued that ecstasy encourages its users to behave in certain ways and to follow certain rules and patterns, such as listening and dancing to music with repetitive drum patterns. One anonymous source, quoted in a research paper by Stuart Borthwick, stating:

“ Ecstasy and dance music just go hand in hand... When you dance on Ecstasy [it] enables you to climb inside the music and to feel its beat. It

enables you to perfectly lock onto the drum patterns so that your body has almost become a machine.”

Stuart Borthwick goes further to suggest that there are links between the regular pattern of the working week and the way in which we approach weekends, when we are free from these restraints:

“ Despite its repetitive nature, or perhaps because of it, dance music provides an exploration of, and an explanation for, the repetitive nature of [our] lives. Participants suggest that this phenomenon is furthered and deepened by the repetitive trance-like state caused by the use of Ecstasy.”

He continues:

“ The repetition at the heart of contemporary dance music is also at the heart of contemporary dance culture, and represents a symbolic attempt on the part of contemporary dance culture to understand its place within late capitalist society...Ecstasy is not used by participants within contemporary dance culture for purely hedonistic reasons, but is tied to the repetitive nature of both dance music and life within British society.”

So, because of the repetitive nature of our everyday lives, society is far more susceptible to forms of repetition in free time as well. Clubbing is a release from the repetition of work, but is a repetitive experience, particularly when it is combined with ecstasy. After reading this it could be argued that it is no coincidence that it has become associated with dance music in today's society.

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Whilst researching the internet on how ecstasy works, one discovered that ecstasy affects the brain by increasing activity in the brain cells. In particular serotonin. The Ecstasy causes these neurotransmitters to be released from their storage sites in neurons, resulting in increased neurotransmitter activity. Ecstasy causes an increased serotonin release and a smaller release of dopamine.

The online medical doctor website takes this further by talking about how serotonin works:

Serotonin is a hormone that is found naturally in the human brain; it is also found in the digestive tract and platelets of some animals, including human beings. Categorized as a neurotransmitter, it is important in transmitting nerve impulses... Serotonin can be considered a “ happy” hormone, as it greatly influences an overall sense of well-being. It also helps to regulate moods, temper anxiety, and relieve depression.

In 2006, the BBC reported that Italian scientists had found a connection to ecstasy and dance music, whilst testing the drugs on rats. The scientists tested the drug on rats, which were then exposed to music at nightclub noise levels, so that they were exposed to the same sort of environment as clubbers, who enter an environment with loads of flashing lights and loud music. The researchers then measured the electrical activity in the rats' brains. They discovered that noise prolonged the effects of ecstasy by up to five days. The BBC report said that:

The researchers, from the Institute of Neurological Science in Catanzaro, found low doses of ecstasy did not modify the brain activity of rats if no <https://assignbuster.com/why-ecstasy-associated-with-dance-music-media-essay/>

music was played. But total electrical brain activity in the animals significantly decreased in the presence of loud music, selected to mimic levels commonly found in clubs. High doses of ecstasy reduced brain activity even without noise, but the effect was enhanced by loud music and lasted for up to five days after the drug was administered.

In rats given a high dose of ecstasy but not exposed to music, brain activity returned to normal in one day.

Dr Michelangelo Iannone, was the person who led the ecstasy on rats experiment. He suggested that the effects of the drug could be made more potent “ by relatively common environmental factors” and stressed the “ potential danger for man of substances that have been so ‘ popularly’ accepted as relatively ‘ safe’ owing to their ‘ short term’ effects.”

## Conclusion

From the research gathered, one could draw the conclusion that clubbing and ecstasy go together. This is due to both clubbing and ecstasy being a vastly popular pastime for young people in Britain. Perhaps unsurprisingly, house music has the greatest attachment to this area.

It appears that music made up repetitive beats has the biggest contribution to Ecstasy use, which supports statements made in previous

sections. This leads me to believe that the repetition found within these genres affects Ecstasy users subconsciously. This subconscious effect is far more influential because it ‘ forces’ clubbers to dance, because they feel like they have to be dancing, to a structure. The repetition is an underlying part <https://assignbuster.com/why-ecstasy-associated-with-dance-music-media-essay/>



of the music. If it is not catchy or memorable like a hook or riff, and it does not affect your body like a bass line.

The conclusion that people listening to non repetitive dance music,

do not enjoy taking ecstasy whilst listening to these genres can be drawn from a quote by Simon Reynolds:

“ Music like jungle sounds good on Ecstasy, but you just can't dance to it, because there is no focus point, like in house or techno. In order to really enjoy the music on Ecstasy, you have to be able to lose yourself in it. Jungle is too complicated for this, and so the Ecstasy experience becomes less enjoyable.”

This quote explains why jungle and other non-repetitive genres are not helping to contribute to the ecstasy experience. This is because the music is constantly evolving. Since ecstasy causes the brain to act in an abnormally. Taking ecstasy makes the user to want to lose themselves in the music. Because jungle has complex rhythms it does not allow the ecstasy effect to happen, making the ecstasy experience less worthwhile.

The difference between those who took Ecstasy and those who don't can be distinguished by the responses to the breakdown sections of songs. Those taking the drug particularly trance and hardcore, normally feel euphoria as their main emotion. This is because the drug allows you to feel as if you are part of the music. The breakdowns of hardcore music are filled with piano chords and vocals, that are intended to trigger an ecstasy rush. Those drugs at this point are experiencing euphoria in these sections. Those not on the

drug and listening to the same music do not experience this feeling, leading to the conclusion that certain genres of music are aimed specifically at Ecstasy users.

My final conclusion is that house, techno, trance and hardcore are the genres of dance music, with the biggest contribution to ecstasy use, because they are made up of a sequence of repetitive beats. Ecstasy can change opinions on music, because it opens up the mind, allowing unusual or different genres to become accepted. This fact was vital in the late eighties when house music started to be played in the UK. Finally, genres of dance music that can be described as non-repetitive, are more suited to cannabis, alcohol and cocaine, because they reduce the users inhibitions whilst also allowing them to concentrate on the complex rhythms of the music.