

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Varieties of the MDMA Experience

THE DANCER

It was a fear of Dad and a fear of God for me. I was always—I was just a good kid. I didn't want to hurt my parents and I didn't want to disappoint my God. I was absolutely antidrug always. Antialcohol also. But my roommate came home one night saying, "I did that drug Ecstasy that Michael's always talking about." And she said, "You're gonna love it. You've gotta do it. You just want to dance. You want to dance, you want to dance, you want to dance." She was talking about it and how much fun it was, so a few days later, we were out with the guys, her friends that gave it to her, and they were selling it. And this is March of 1985, and it wasn't illegal 'til July. And so I tried it. And they gave us—we never took more than half, because a whole one is just too much for our body weight.

And I remember my first experience was that I just freaked out. We were at this place where they have live music, and we were watching Ray Wiley Hubbard. And they told me, "Now you may feel a little nauseous," and I freaked out. I got up and started walking around the room. You know, it was like (the drug was) following me around the room. I was just running almost. And then after a few minutes—all of a sudden you just feel great. So that was my first experience. We just had the best time of our lives on that stuff. I loved it. I thought it was a miracle drug. For someone who had never done drugs at all and didn't want to, it was wonderful! And I had heard all these good things about it and how it's not addictive and it's great for therapy. It's a very love, love, love kind of thing. And it was all true.

Oh, I loved it because that was one of the things that made it a miracle drug to me. With Ecstasy, you could go to sleep whenever you wanted to, as opposed to cocaine where you can't ever go to sleep. With X, I found that I could go to bed when I

wanted to, which is usually after we'd been dancing. We'd dance for four or five hours. We'd get home about 3:00 A.M. I could go to sleep and I'd wake up feeling great. However, I came off of it about three in the afternoon the next day with a hangover, with a headache. And I lost a lot of weight 'cause I was dancing hard, hard, hard all the time and I wasn't eating that much.

We used to go to the Rio Room. The Rio Room was one of those clubs where you could buy cocaine from the maitre d' if you wanted to. It was in '84, '85. It was the biggest—it's a private club—and it was the biggest scene of anything and everything. Everyone that wanted to see or be seen was there. We all miss it like crazy. Well, we would tell people that you're going to feel the big D. Then you'll feel the big N, and then you'll feel the big O. Which means you're gonna feel a little dizzy at first. Then you'll get a little nauseous. And then you'll get orgasmic.

It's so funny, you can't wipe the stupid smile off your face when you do it. You just feel so great. And you just love everybody and everyone wants to dance. This was the main thing. We had to dance. We loved to dance so much. We were dancing all the time at Rio, and you have to dance. And I didn't mix alcohol with it because I always had a glass of water in my hands with it. The bartenders knew me. They had a glass of water when they saw me coming. They'd have it there ready for me. Even if I wasn't on Ecstasy, they figured I would be, I guess.

I don't think I ever did it more than twice a week. And the whole time, it was from March until July—April, May—just four months of it. Maybe once a week for about two months. If you did it two nights in a row, it wouldn't work the second night. You just never would get off on it, unless you took more, I guess. Also, if I eat—eat anything—it doesn't work for me. So it's a great diet pill, absolutely great diet pill, I thought, 'cause you didn't want to eat and you drink lots and lots and lots and lots of water.

Yeah. We partied. We danced our butts off when we were on it. To me, I used to call it my "gotta dance drug" because that's what it is. You gotta dance when you're on it. And also, it was fun because I always tell people if you have an enemy in the room, you will make up with that person. I don't care if you haven't spoken for ten years. You will make up with that person if you're on X because you can't not talk to them. You talk to everyone and you love everybody.

The only negative I can feel about it is the hangover you get—that I got afterwards. Not everyone gets a hangover. And it

wasn't like a drunk, like a beer hangover or an alcohol hangover. It was a minor headache usually, and I'd be tired 'cause I would—well, if you dance four hours straight, you're gonna be tired the next day anyway.

And then once it became illegal, they wanted me to do it and I wouldn't do it anymore because I'm a chicken. I don't want to get caught at doing anything that's not right. I didn't want to do it anymore. I wouldn't take the chance. And also, I started fearing it because people were getting out of control with it. I heard a couple of horror stories about someone dropping dead using Ecstasy 'cause they took like ten of them, which no one would ever do. But still, this was a new drug to all of us, and I thought, "Well, we don't know what the side effects are going to be." We just quit. I quit clubbing. I quit partying. Dallas has changed a lot. You don't understand. The economy is so different now. People don't have the money to play with anymore. They don't go out and buy drugs like they used to. They don't party like they used to. (Lynn, a 25-year-old secretary)

THE SEEKER

I read about it in the newspaper. And what fascinated me about it is it said that one experience could be the equivalent of years of therapy. That's really how I learned about it—in the media. Then later I heard about it from my friend and she was kind of suggesting maybe I should try this. But I wasn't ready to, because I'm afraid of drugs. So I didn't, until maybe '87 when some other friends of mine, who are older and more experienced than my first friend, told me they had been taking quite a bit.

They were extremely well educated and they're total intellectuals—he's a scientist and she's a writer. So I heard a lot about their experience of it, and they're very cautious and sort of timid in life. They both had terrible, terrible family lives and terrible childhoods. A lot of the things they're most interested in have to do with the mind. So they've explored a lot . . . like Eastern religions and philosophies and various forms of psychiatry. Plus, I trust their common sense not to do something really dangerous.

What finally made me do it is that things were really getting pretty shitty in our relationship and we needed something positive to happen. We needed some relief and some good experiences, because we'd been through so many hassles with the kids and so many hassles with our house and working too hard and

not having fun and just got sort of turned off to each other. So it was kind of a desperate move on both our parts. So I talked him [her husband] into doing it. I tried to get him to hear about it from different people because he just didn't want to do it. But I think he finally did it for the reason I did—that we weren't feeling like we were in love or anything anymore at all. And it was time to do something drastic about our relationship.

At 2:00, when we got where we were going, I said, "OK, let me take it first and then you see if I get violently ill or anything and you take me to the hospital." And so I took it and then he waited about twenty, thirty minutes. I still didn't feel anything happening, so he said finally, "Look, I don't want to be too far behind you, so I'm going to take mine now, too." So he took his in a surge of bravado or something.

So then, a few minutes later, I still didn't think I was feeling anything. I looked at him and he started complaining about his head. He felt like maybe his head was hurting and maybe his neck was getting stiff or something. I don't know, some complaint. But I looked at him and I said, "You know, you have all these complaints, which is very funny, because if you look at your face, it's got this huge grin on it." And that was when we both started smiling and then we turned up the heat and took off our clothes and got in bed and started talking. We realized we really were madly in love with each other, but I think you would feel that way about anybody you took it with.

There was something interesting that happened that first time. Toward the end of it, while we were still under the influence, I don't know if he went to the bathroom or what, but somehow my attention was away from him for a few minutes. And something real scary started to well up inside, like in my mind or something, something black and gloomy and frightening. It went away, except that I remembered it and I knew it was significant and I was particularly interested in it because of my conversation with my other two friends. And so I knew there was something there that I needed to look at that was frightening and scary. And then we knew we each wanted to do it alone the next time.

But you should know as background that several times I've been in therapy. I went into therapy when my marriages broke up, but a couple of times I've been in therapy when it wasn't a crisis to try to figure out why I have anxiety attacks a lot, especially when I'm successful. So when I felt this welling up that first time, this feeling of anxiety for those two minutes, I felt like there was something there that I hadn't really explored and

understood and that if I could get to that and take a look at it, that would be like going through years of therapy and I would know what it was that was driving me. So I thought this MDMA would help me do that and there would be a lot of growth. And I thought that this could speed up the process and make me stronger and more aware of myself.

When I took it that second time, I got nauseated and I ran to the bathroom and threw up. But as soon as the nausea lifted and I went back into bed, up suddenly came exactly that same feeling . . . that black thing, that black feeling, that dark, ominous, scary feeling that I had felt for a moment. And all of a sudden I knew what it was, and I can't believe what it was!!!

I was being BORN! It was the birth process. And my breathing started. My respiration started like what was probably mine and my mother's. I guess we were connected by an umbilical cord. And it was horribly frightening because something was wrong. It wasn't going right. . . . And later I asked her what happened and she told me that the birth had been horrible for her. It never occurred to me it was also horrible for me. And they finally gave her ether and she passed out and I think it must have affected me, too, because the next thing I knew, all that had passed and I was being held in her arms. It was some time later. And so the next experience was of being an infant with her holding me and again feeling really safe and secure and feeling connected to her, bonded to her in a way that is really strange. The most important thing about the experience was what I had discovered. And this is why I can't wait to do it again, to see if it's still true or it's an hallucination or what. . . .

I had the distinct feeling when I was on MDMA that in all these other things, whether my mother was abusive at some times, and she clearly was, that I understood her pain somehow, and I understood that I had an awareness and a form of consciousness as an infant that's way beyond anything that I thought human beings could have, and that I wasn't as traumatized by those later things as I thought I was, because my existence and my survival was in fact that initial trauma. And so all the other things that happened . . . were somehow conditioned by my trauma at birth. That is, I was responding to these things in light of the fact that I had this severe trauma at birth which in a way made them less serious, made me wiser, more understanding, but in some ways also made me more threatened.

I think what happens is you remember things as you experienced them at the time. And the way you remember things most of the time is the way we have redefined them to fit in with our

current understandings of things. So what you do when you take MDMA is you go back to how you experienced it at the time, and what that allows you to do is come up with different definitions of the situation and different definitions of what you are and what your life is about.

I was really exhausted after the second one [MDMA experience]. You experience the emotions, you go through the emotions that you weren't able to go through at that time or that you only went through partially. And then you're free. I feel totally convinced that I will never, ever have an anxiety attack again like I have had before. What MDMA does is that you have a slow leak guiding the balloon. And MDMA just pops it wide open and then seals it up and you can put it back together with no leak, and so the course is smoother. (Susan, a 46-year-old psychology professor)

THE HEDONIST

So I was reading *Newsweek*. I was sitting in my office reading this article in *Newsweek* and they were calling this drug Ecstasy. They said that it reduced anxiety, and it had been used by psychologists and that there were bars in Dallas where they were passing it out, and people felt wonderful, and they did some user quotes where they said, "This is a wonderful drug." And it was kind of in the psychedelic family, but it wasn't like Acid, and everybody thought it was great. And it was the new hip drug, and it only lasted four hours. It's like, when I read FOUR HOURS, hey, sounds great. I don't do coke anymore. And it was selling for \$15 a hit. And I thought, "I can even afford that. This sounds wonderful. I want to do this."

So what happened was I sat there and I was reading this article and a person in my office turned around and said, "I have some, here it is." And he gave me two capsules. I said, "Well, thank you."

All right, so he gave it to me and I had this friend, the friend and I had done quite a bit of drugs together before. He was an old buddy. And he phoned up and I said, "I just was reading this article about this new drug, and you wouldn't believe it. It just fell into my lap." He said, "I read the same article, I want to do some." So he came and picked me up from work, and we were supposed to meet some other people at this bar. So he said, "What do you know about it?" And I said, "I don't know anything. It's supposed to last for four hours." And we had just

four hours, so we took it at about 4:00 in the afternoon. We dropped it at the office. By the time we got to the Embarcadero about 45 minutes went by, and we both went, "Oh my God!" It felt like Acid. I remember turning to him and saying, "This is fucking Acid, man. I know what this is. Twelve hours, son of a bitch." I was pissed. I started climbing, felt myself coming on. But fortunately I didn't go anywhere, kind of staying there with these rushes. That was kind of fun, it was nice. I kept waiting for the hallucinations and they didn't come, and I was pleased. I mean, its not that I don't like hallucinations, but that wasn't what I paid for, and I've never been one for surprise highs. They're not fun. And I only had four hours.

So it turned out to be wonderful. We walked into this bar and had a really good time. We grinned a lot. Talking was OK, but I did have a tendency to space out and get quiet. We'd gone and told all our friends, "Hey, we just took this new drug, its great." And they were watching and saying, "How do you feel?" So they got to see us be high. And then everybody wanted some, because it looked so fun.

So that was the first time I did it. I remember the next day. I got up in the morning and went out to breakfast. I remember I ran into some other people and I was still feeling the afterglow. I felt good, but I certainly wouldn't have wanted to be anybody's neurosurgeon the next day. I just kind of had a real nice day. I had a bunch of stuff I was supposed to do, which I didn't do because it was all stuff I didn't want to do. It was nice, it was fun. And I still . . . even into the next day, kind of felt, not really loaded but kind of a little feeling, like the drug was still there. It was a pretty excellent first experience.

I think the next time I did it was right before it became illegal, on June 30, 1985. So maybe it was three or four months after that first time. And then we had a "picnic" with Ecstasy for food, at the beach. And that was very fun. It was just a bunch of us laying around and being high, enjoying ourselves.

I like how it makes your body feel. It makes me feel pretty calm and spacey and drugged. This is one drug where you know for sure that you're high, and I like that. I know that some people see it as the new salvation. I don't see that. I think you can tell bold-faced lies on it if you wanted to.

I don't think it makes you any more . . . I think if you are open, an open person, it enhances that. I think if you're a little socially reticent, which I think I am, it would be easier to meet people while I'm on that drug. But I don't think that it makes you anything that you're not already. There's no magic. You

have to have some kind of substance there to start with. So that if you give this drug to shallow assholes, they will continue to be shallow assholes. They're not going to get any better.

If I was a couple with somebody, I could see how you could cut through a lot of bullshit. I could see where if you were having a difference that you could have a really good discussion about whatever the difference was about . . . because the one thing the drug does is to take away suspicion. You're trusting, you're more trusting and you're more open and accepting. I think it does lower your defenses and make you trust that the other person is coming from a good place and the other person cares about you, and that they're trying to work it out and that there's no ulterior motive. I could see where in a couple situation it would be real good for that. I could also see where you could get very close to somebody.

I feel like it's something that's probably going to be a part of my life. It's a fun thing. I can see where it would be a therapeutic tool. But I've never taken the drug for a specific purpose. I want to do the one where you cover your ears and your eyes and just lay there. I want to try that one out. I'd last about 25 seconds. But I'd like to see what that's like. It's also just fun to take some and do it with friends. I can't see doing it alone.

I think we're going to see more drugs like MDMA. They can make anything now. It's great. And if they would make some more—like with a nice “down” that you could drive on, and only lasted a couple of hours—that would be nice. I'm putting in my order.

The short duration is important to me because I just don't have that much time to devote to drugs anymore. I'm very busy doing all this stuff. I could give it a Saturday, but not a Sunday, too. It's like, you can't give up two days. But it's got to be strong, an experience, too. I don't have as much time to be high as I used to. I'm in the “I took it to get high” crowd. I value getting high for getting high's sake, like a hedonist, exactly. Kind of a controlled hedonist. I don't do it to garner any insights. Not that they're not great, but that's not my motivation for doing drugs. I don't have any agenda. To me this is “time-out” behavior. I have lots of responsibility, I've got a lot of work that I need to do. I have a lot of deadlines. So to me it's like time out. It's a way to . . . it's like taking a vacation to Mexico for a week, only I'm going to do it in a day because that's all I've got. (Gail, a 37-year-old lawyer)

Three different people, three markedly different perspectives, three very different experiences, and *one* drug. There is nothing

new about diversity of users, perspectives, and experience relative to a particular substance. Nevertheless, as revealed through respondent accounts in the pages that follow, MDMA provides a unique illustration of this phenomenon and the importance of contextual factors in shaping the experience. Those who have used MDMA generally have at least one thing in common—a very strong feeling about the drug and vivid memories of their experiences under its influence.

Less than a decade ago, few people had even heard of MDMA. But suddenly, in 1985, Ecstasy became the object of extensive media coverage, highlighting what appeared to be dramatic increases in use. Much of this interest was sparked by the controversy that followed government attempts to criminalize its use. At center stage, two interest groups were squaring off in a courtroom to decide the fate of MDMA.

Representing one faction were various psychiatrists and other proponents who viewed “Adam” as a valuable therapeutic adjunct with minimal harm associated with carefully monitored use (Downing, 1985; Greer, 1985; Grinspoon, 1985; Lynch, 1985; Strassman, 1985; Wolfson, 1985). The opposing side was largely composed of drug enforcement officials, who viewed “Ecstasy” as a dangerous and abused “designer drug” without therapeutic value (Lawn, 1985; Holsten and Scheister, 1985; Sapienza, 1985; U.S. Department of Justice, 1985). Summing up the controversy, chemist Alexander Shulgin observed that “MDMA has been thrust upon the public awareness as a largely unknown drug which to some is a medical miracle and to others a social devil” (1985:3).

The uniqueness of MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine) is exemplified by the confusion over the proper terminology to describe its actions. As an N-methyl analogue of MDA, MDMA is related to both the amphetamines and mescaline. Although often referred to as a psychedelic drug, MDMA possesses stimulant properties as well. Moreover, it is rarely hallucinogenic and seldom produces the sensory phenomena or mental confusion commonly associated with other psychedelic substances (Nichols, 1986; Shulgin, 1985).

In response to challenges made by therapeutic proponents, three federal administrative law hearings were held in 1985 to determine MDMA's fate. What emerged from these hearings was the lack of research assessing the potential benefits and/or harms of MDMA. Overall patterns of use were clearly a mystery as well. Conse-

quently, proponents of both sides of the controversy were limited to offering testimony based largely on anecdotal data or extrapolations from preliminary animal studies. The most significant point of agreement between the two camps was the need for further research to better determine the potential benefits and risks of a substance used by increasing numbers of Americans (Beck, 1986).

We followed the scheduling controversy and were struck by the depth of feeling, opinion, and commitment expressed by MDMA's adversaries and allies alike. Moreover, we were amazed at the dearth of sociological information about the drug—despite what appeared to be the inevitability of its placement into an illegal status. Sparked by this interest, we applied for a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse and in June of 1987 began work on the first federally funded, sociological exploration of MDMA users.¹ Its recent emergence and popularization furnished a unique opportunity to examine gradually evolving use patterns among different user populations. We collected information through ethnographic fieldwork² and conducted formal interviews with one hundred MDMA users.³ Our study, completed in 1989, provided a detailed look at the diverse user populations attracted to the therapeutic and/or recreational qualities ascribed to MDMA (Beck et al., 1989).

Building on the findings of our "Exploring Ecstasy" study, in this book we describe the MDMA experience and the roles played by user social worlds, government, and the media in shaping that experience. We look at problematic aspects as well as attractions of MDMA. Our presentation uses the words of the people we interviewed and strives to provide their perspective. We also look at views of MDMA emanating from other sources, primarily those of the media and government.

We were fortunate to begin our study less than two years after MDMA had become illegal. This meant that many of our interviewees had used the drug both before and after its criminalization. Therefore we were able to examine shifts in attitudes and behaviors among users throughout MDMA's transition from licit to illicit status. Since MDMA had become popular only two years prior to our research, we were able to explore its diffusion into a variety of groups. This allowed us to look at the various factors encouraging and/or discouraging the spread of Ecstasy.

A unique aspect of the study was that it gave us an opportunity to look at little-studied drug-using populations.⁴ This included

individuals generally regarded as conventional, such as middle-class professionals. These rarely studied user groups attached expectations and meanings to their drug use that were very different from more visible and researched illegal drug users. They also had unique motivations and expectations underlying their pursuits of ecstasy and/or insight from MDMA use. Contextual factors emerged as essential components in understanding the diversity of such pursuits as well as variations on the MDMA experience itself.

By the end of our study in the late 1980s, the media had turned its fickle attention to other drugs. MDMA remained virtually absent from drug problem indicators such as the Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN). The government had successfully criminalized Ecstasy and it had returned to relative obscurity. Many saw it as simply another faddish drug that had run its course. Yet far from fading away, this book shows how its reputed therapeutic and euphoric qualities and “user-friendly” nature account for MDMA’s continued popularity among diverse user populations. Exemplified by the rapid expansion of the British “Rave” scene to the United States and elsewhere, these attributes underlie MDMA’s spread to new user populations despite the current strong antidrug climate.

In addition to presenting the findings from our own study, we will be reviewing other sources of information about MDMA and its users. Particularly valuable for trend analysis and comparative purposes are the findings of recently published studies conducted overseas.

PURSUIT OF ECSTASY: PLAN OF THE BOOK

In Chapter 2, we set the stage by providing a chronological overview of MDMA’s popularization and control. We look at the emergence and diffusion of Ecstasy as well as the process by which MDMA was placed into Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act.

In Chapter 3, we describe the diverse social worlds and scenes that have evolved around MDMA use. As demonstrated throughout the remainder of the book, these social worlds are very influential in shaping respondent motivations, expectations, and perceptions of the MDMA experience itself.

In Chapter 4, we look at why people use MDMA, and the various attractions ascribed to the MDMA experience. Differ-

ences in perceived attributes are considered in light of respondents' diverse motivations and social worlds of use. After first examining the reasons that most users try MDMA, the chapter addresses those aspects of the experience they most appreciate. We conclude with an examination of different user perspectives regarding MDMA's long-term benefits and therapeutic potential.

In Chapter 5, we look at why individuals moderate or discontinue Ecstasy use. We assess the various factors responsible for tempering enthusiasm and use.

In Chapter 6, we examine adverse reactions and abuse in assessing the potential of Ecstasy to become agony. We include lessons respondents learned from attempts to accentuate or prolong the MDMA experience. Noting the problematic use encountered in the British Rave scene, we examine similar patterns among some of our population in assessing long-term abuse potential.

In Chapter 7, we attempt to answer the question "What should be done about Ecstasy?" We begin by summarizing the key findings and implications of our study. A number of recommendations are offered for developing harm reduction strategies and encouraging research on the therapeutic potential of MDMA. Acknowledging the likelihood of continued resistance, we discuss how and why it is important to overcome these obstacles.