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Music and psychedelics: a match made in heaven

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Music can play a vital role in the psychedelic experience. Traditional medicinal and spiritual practices that make use of psychedelic drugs consistently have musical components, and anyone who has experienced an altered state of their own can vouch that the music of the ‘set and setting’ has a unique power to influence the trip. Recently, scientific research has started to investigate the importance of music to encourage positive clinical outcomes in psychedelic therapy. To better understand the potential contributions that music has to offer the field of psychedelic research, we look to the historical relationship between altered states and music, the effect of music on the brain and body, and future applications of music to psychedelic psychotherapy.

Music as a Guide: Past and Present

Music is a virtually universal human occurrence, appearing as a key element in entertainment, work, and social interactions, as well as medical and spiritual practices1. Diverse traditional practices that make use of psychedelics are almost always combined with music2. From the Icaros sung during Ayahuasca ceremonies to the musical components of the mushroom rituals of the Mazatec Indians or the ibogaine rite of passage in Western Africa, music is acknowledged as playing a critical role in healing3. With the discovery of LSD and the subsequent surge of psychedelic research in the 1960's came an increased awareness of the profound impact that music can have as a therapeutic aid, and guidelines were developed for using it in clinical settings to better support the different phases of the psychedelic experience4. Across cultures and time, the combination of music and psychoactive substances has been used to encourage emotional catharsis and promote personal growth.

Music in Brain, Body, and Mind

There are many evolutionary theories about the functions of music that aim to explain its significant impact on our development and culture, e.g. by its effects on social bonding and sexual selection. Our understanding of the neurological and psychological effects of music also continues to grow. Listening to our favorite tunes not only changes the activity in the autonomous nervous system (affecting heart rate, muscle tone and respiration), but also evokes patterns of brain activity comparable to those evoked by the ingestion of stimulant drugs such as cocaine5. Research in the field of music cognition reveals that neuronal firing synchronizes with external rhythms, altering brain waves and state of mind.

Researchers are curious as to whether music itself may have certain properties to induce altered states, or if it simply accompanies and enhances the experience of other altered states5. It has been shown that serotonergic psychedelic drugs have notable effects on music perception: Brain regions that respond to music partially overlap with structures that are altered by consumption of psychedelics, interacting strongly to influence auditory perception. A study conducted by Kaelen et al. also showed that the synergy of LSD and music increases connectivity of the parahippocampal cortex and the visual cortex, changes which correlated with increased visual mental imageryand autobiographical scenes from the past7. The relationship between music and the brain is profound, informing experiences at the neural, corporal, and emotional level.

Music and Psychedelic Therapy

In a therapeutic setting music is frequently found to intensify emotions and mental imagery, or even 'take over' and guide the person throughout the experience6. The relationship flows both ways: in recent studies, psilocybin is shown to enhance the beauty and significance of music8, but also musical additions have been associated with an increased occurrence of mystical experiences in clinical settings, with patients emphasizing the significance of music to their experience9. Music is reported to provide a sense of calm and safety for patients in psychedelic therapy6 and support the meaningful resolution of psychological struggles — breakthroughs that are prevalent in psychedelic therapy10. For the pivotal role music seems to play in the psychedelic therapeutic setting, it has recently been dubbed 'the hidden therapist'6 due the strong associations between the quality of musical experience and therapeutic outcome.

Conclusion

As we move forward in the realm of psychedelic research, music is an important factor to consider. In the future, personalizing music to patients may help to harmonize the therapeutic experience and increase beneficial outcomes. Music can accompany, facilitate, and guide the free expression of emotions, creating a safe space for one to relinquish psychological control and let go. Music's therapeutic effects are widely acknowledged in the literature and in health care, and combining these findings with clues from indigenous traditions and current

research on psychedelic therapy, we continuously see the positive interplay between music and psychedelics and the power of these elements to bring about positive change.

The use of music can also play an important role when it comes to the integration of psychedelic experiences. If you are curious to learn more about that, take a look at our BEYOND EXPERIENCE workshops.

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