

## To Fathom Hell or Soar Angelic: Four Psychedelic Explorers Who Changed America

A review of



**The Harvard Psychedelic Club: How Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, and Andrew Weil Killed the Fifties and Ushered in a New Age for America**

by Don Lattin

New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010. 256 pp. ISBN 978-0-06-165593-7

\$24.99



---

Reviewed by

[Frederick Heide](#)

It's been almost exactly a half century since a newly appointed Harvard academic named Timothy Leary traveled to Cuernavaca, Mexico, on summer vacation and washed down a bowl of seven psilocybin mushrooms with a cold beer. Transfixed by what he would describe as "the deepest religious experience of my life" (p. 41), he returned to Cambridge and (with Richard Alpert) launched one of the more notorious research projects in the history of psychology.

The impact of this research has been much smaller on the field itself than on American society as a whole. In *The Harvard Psychedelic Club: How Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, and Andrew Weil Killed the Fifties and Ushered in a New Age for America*, Don Lattin argues that everything from the Apple computer to the availability of organic foods in supermarkets has been influenced by four seminal explorers of mind-

altering substances at Harvard in the early 1960s: Leary, Alpert (later Ram Dass), Huston Smith, and Andrew Weil. The book's clever premise is to examine the intersection of their lives then and beyond.

Investigating the history of the psychedelic movement is not new and has been done with greater depth and nuance in earlier volumes such as Jay Stevens's (1987) *Storming Heaven* and Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain's (1985) *Acid Dreams*. However, Lattin creates an engaging and highly entertaining narrative best suited to the general reader intrigued by or nostalgic for the dizzy sense of possibility that characterized America in the 1960s.

Lattin mostly follows a chronological course in charting the lives of his four subjects. He intersperses multiple short chapters on each man, tracing them from youth to the mid-1970s before jumping to where they are now (or, in Leary's case, a discussion of his passing in 1996).

## The Psychedelic Quartet

Each emerges as a compelling, if not quite flesh-and-blood, figure. Lattin calls Alpert the *Seeker*, recounting how he became "the counterculture's most articulate and accessible tour guide" (p. 219) largely through his willingness to share his own spiritual journey and personal struggles. Leary is labeled the *Trickster*, a term used by his student Ralph Metzner to describe his Irish rascal nature. Instead of dismissing him as an egotist or reckless cause of psychedelic casualties, Lattin offers a complex picture of Leary as brilliant, charming, heedless of status but longing for recognition, inadequate as a parent yet messianic in his belief in the power of psychedelics to catalyze a psychological revolution.

Andrew Weil, termed the *Healer*, is said to have had the greatest impact on contemporary society through his promotion of alternative medicine. In his first semester at Harvard, Weil had sought to participate in the new psilocybin study but was rejected because Leary had an agreement with the university to not use undergraduates. Lattin writes that when Alpert later befriended Weil's dorm mate Ronnie Winston and turned him on, Weil tried to bring down the project "with the zeal of a jilted lover" (p. 60). Lattin delves into Weil's relatively unknown role at the *Harvard Crimson* in getting Leary and Alpert fired, accusing him of violating journalistic ethics by failing to reveal in print that he was part of the underground scene on which he was reporting. Lattin also describes how, despite Weil's repeated attempts at reconciliation, Ram Dass has thus far refused to do so.

Least known of the quartet is Huston Smith, referred to as the *Teacher* for devoting his life to educating the public about comparative religion. Prior to participating in Leary and Alpert's psychedelic research, he was already a professor of philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and author of *The World's Religions* (which has gone on to sell over 2 million copies). Although he has called his involvement with the Leary/

Alpert experiments “the center of my reflective and social life” for several years after his initiation (Smith, 2000, p. 15), he has barely been mentioned in several previous histories. Smith’s inclusion in the book offers the welcome perspective of an open-minded scholar both excited by the religious significance of psychedelics and wary of the Dionysian atmosphere that would spring up around Leary and Alpert.

*The Harvard Psychedelic Club* has multiple strengths, including how it draws on Lattin’s interviews with the surviving principals and those who were part of the scene (e.g., Ralph Metzner, Paul Lee, Harvey Cox). There is a cascade of intriguing facts, anecdotes, and tales. For example, Leary’s famous smile and sunny demeanor were consciously adopted for public appearances on the advice of Marshall McLuhan, who thought that the psychedelic advocate seemed dour in an appearance before two Senate subcommittees. And Lattin discloses that Leary’s infamous advice to “turn on, tune in, drop out” was made while tripping on 300 micrograms of LSD.

Lattin notes parallels between the men. At about the same time that Alpert was getting the silent treatment during prep school for being thought gay, Leary received the same treatment for drunkenness at West Point. Similarly, both struggled academically during schooling and wound up at Harvard only through the mediation of David McClelland.

The author gives the book substance via offering light historical context, tying what went on at Harvard to earlier work by William James, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Aldous Huxley. And he notes how the edginess of this research reflected the election of Harvard alum John F. Kennedy to the presidency (on the very night that Huxley and fellow psychedelic pioneer Humphrey Osmond would first meet Leary to discuss his new project). Given how controversial psychedelics are even now, the Harvard experiments must have seemed completely off the wall during an era when the *Boston Herald* could deliver this shocking news about the Alpert/Leary home: “BIG FAMILY STIRS PROTEST: Men Do the Dishes in Newton ‘Commune’” (p. 100).

## **More Journalistic Than Scholarly**

Although *The Harvard Psychedelic Club* tells a fascinating story, it lacks the scholarly stance that many psychologists favor. The chapter titled “Sinners and Saints” offers an example. It describes the two most significant research projects of the Harvard psychedelic era: the Concord Prison Project and the Good Friday Experiment. In the former, Leary sought to reduce a recidivism rate of almost 70 percent by giving prisoners strong doses of psilocybin. In the latter, 20 seminarians from Andover Newton Theological Seminary participated in a double-blind experiment in which half were given psilocybin in a chapel. Almost everyone in the experimental group had an experience indistinguishable from mystical ecstasy.

Lattin does a more complete job with the second study. Although both projects were subject to thorough follow-ups by Rick Doblin (1991, 1998), Lattin mentions only the Good Friday follow-up. Thus, the reader never learns that Leary's initial claim of a prison treatment effect was false. Leary inappropriately compared the recidivism of experimental participants at 10 months with base-rate data taken at 30 months. When comparable periods were used, the treatment effect evaporated. On the other hand, Lattin treats the reader to a delightful tale. Huston Smith, serving as a guide for the Good Friday experiment, was required (while tripping heavily on psilocybin) to race down Commonwealth Avenue to prevent a participant from announcing the dawn of the Messianic Age to the dean of theology at Boston University.

While such anecdotes make the story eminently readable, the narrative jumps around in time and is occasionally hard to follow. Intriguing topics are raised and never explored (e.g., Leary's daughter committing suicide while in jail for attempted murder). And by recreating dialogue presumed to have taken place between the principals, the author renders all quoted material in the book suspect, including some that might have been accurate.

Lattin could profit from greater precision. He contends that in the 1970s Weil would become "the new ringmaster of the drug culture" (p. 3), which seems a stretch. About Alpert, he claims that "it wasn't reported at the time, but his romantic attraction to undergraduate men was one of the sins that would get him kicked out of Harvard" (p. 7). If this is true, Lattin offers no documentation. Alpert was officially removed for giving psychedelics to undergraduates, and the issue of romantic involvement wasn't raised.

## **Shunning of the Shamanic**

Lattin also describes all four of his subjects as turning "from the scientific to the shamanic" (p. 3) as a result of their psychedelic baptism. In the orthodox definition, Smith was never a scientist, and none of the four engaged in shamanism as anthropologists understand it. Indeed, one of the ironies of the Harvard undertaking is that it was launched by a plant (psilocybin mushrooms) that had been revered for thousands of years by Mexican healers, yet the deep wisdom of that tradition was never consulted.

Had it been, the revelations of the Harvard group might have been even more radical. The first scholar to ever participate in a mushroom ceremony, Gordon Wasson, noted in *Life Magazine* three years prior to Leary's first trip that the mushrooms "spoke" and supplied specific veridical information used by the indigenous community. Preposterous as this may sound, it has been corroborated by anthropologists and contemporary users (Beach, 1996–1997; Bunch, 2009). Such observations are part of premodern practices in which experiential interaction with the spirit world has been used to guide societies for millennia worldwide (e.g., Winkelman, 2010).

Rather than investigating such extraordinary claims, members of the Harvard Psychedelic Club (except for Smith) contributed to an atmosphere in which the ancestral knowledge tradition of our species was made illegal. Lattin devotes little attention to the hysterical media reaction that brought this about and doesn't mention Smith's role in restoring legal religious use of these substances in 1993 (Smith, Rhine, & Cousineau, 2006).

But Lattin's goal is not scholarship. He is offering an accessible introduction to psychedelic history to the general public, and at this he succeeds. Hopefully his efforts will result in more people becoming aware of the revival of psychedelic research that is verifying many of the original claims of the Harvard group (e.g., Griffiths, Richards, Johnson, McCann, & Jesse, 2008).

This research process was thwarted by the release of the psychedelic genie into the wider culture, and Lattin does a good job of providing an overview of the range of reactions that resulted. The dialectic between the spiritual potential of psilocybin and LSD (explicated by Alpert and Smith) and the hellish depths to which others would fall (e.g., Leary's multiple stints in prison) recalls how Aldous Huxley and Humphrey Osmond struggled to name these drugs. They settled on *psychedelic*, or "mind revealing." Osmond summarized it in a little rhyme: "To fathom hell or soar angelic, take a pinch of psychedelic" (p. 66). Fifty years later, neither psychology nor society has come close to plumbing the depth of these substances. Lattin offers an opening for those who want to join the effort.

---

## References

- Beach, H. (1996–1997). Listening for the Logos: A study of reports of audible voices at high doses of psilocybin. *Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies Newsletter*, 7(1), 12–17.
- Bunch, K. (2009). *Psilocybin and spiritual experience* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). California School of Professional Psychology, Alliant International University, San Francisco, CA.
- Doblin, R. (1991). Pahnke's "Good Friday experiment": A long-term follow-up and methodological critique. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 23, 1–28. PsycINFO
- Doblin, R. (1998). Dr. Leary's Concord Prison experiment: A 34-year follow-up study. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 30, 419–426. PsycINFO
- Griffiths, R. R., Richards, W. A., Johnson, M. W., McCann, U. D., & Jesse, R. (2008). Mystical-type experiences occasioned by psilocybin mediate the attribution of personal meaning and spiritual significance 14 months later. *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, 22, 621–632. doi:10.1177/0269881108094300 PsycINFO Article

- Lee, M. A., & Shlain, B. (1985). *Acid dreams: The complete social history of LSD*. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Smith, H. (2000). *Cleansing the doors of perception: The religious significance of entheogenic plants and chemicals*. New York, NY: Jeremy Tarcher.
- Smith, H., Rhine, G., & Cousineau, P. (2006). *A seat at the table: Huston Smith in conversation with Native Americans on religious freedom*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stevens, J. (1987). *Storming heaven: LSD and the American dream*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Winkelman, M. (2010). *Shamanism: A biopsychosocial paradigm of consciousness and healing* (2nd ed.). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
-