IN LATE OCTOBER, THE DRUG ENFORCEMENT
Agency summoned its specialists in intelli-
gence, analysis and enforcement from outposts
around the country to Washington head-
quarters for an unpublicized internal session,
at which they charted the federal response
to the nation's fastest-growing drug
scourge—LSD.

Whoa, hold your horses, cowboy. We
interrupt this story for a reality check.
This is 1987. When we talk scourge,
plague, drug pestilence, we're talking
heroin, cocaine, crack, methamphet-
amine. But LSD? You put LSD be-
hind you forever when you threw
away your last tie-dye shirt, didn't
you, amigo? Moby Grape and the
grape boycott are gathering cob-
webs in the attic of your mind.

"We're seeing a resurgence
of LSD use not only in Califor-
nia, but in Texas, Oregon,
New York, Boston, Phila-
delphia—an unbelievable
resurgence, an escalated
steady progression over
the last 10 years," says
Michael Pavlick of
the DEA's Dangerous
Drugs Division,
which organized
the four-day con-
ference. "LSD is the
No. 2 dangerous
drug in the Unit-
ed States right
now, based on
DEA seizures
in 1986—be-
hind only
metha-
phetamines. We
seized 14,844,000
dosage units last year.

"We don't want LSD to get to
epidemic proportions," Pavlick con-
tinues. "That's why we called our experts
in—to get the facts and to sit together and
evolve a national strategy." What the DEA is
seeing on a national level, narcotics agents of
the state Department of Justice have likewise
observed in California. Agent Michael Barnes

GOES '80S

By Mike Weiss

8/December 13, 1987/West
WHAT’S A WEIRD LITTLE DRUG LIKE
LSD DOING IN THE JUST SAY NO ERA?

says the number of dosage units seized— or, in other words, hits of LSD, which nowadays are mostly quarter-inch squares of blotter paper imprinted with cartoon characters or other art—increased 200-fold between 1985 and 1986.

Doses today are much smaller that was once common; their size is regulated by mysterious, undetected underground chemists. The drug that was supposed to have turned on, tuned in and dropped out an earlier generation may nowadays be nothing more than another designer recreation.

But the Golden Triangle of LSD, the Mother Lode, still has as its apexes Berkeley, the Haight Ashbury, and Santa Cruz. “Those are the three places that on any day of the week you could go and get acid,” says Dave Tresmontan, a state narcotics task force commander based in Santa Cruz County. “It’s been that way since the 1960s and it still is. Only more so now than ever.”

U.S. SIRIUS IS THE PEN NAME OF KEN GOFFMAN, editor of High Frontiers) The Space Age Newspaper of Psychedelics, Science, Human Potential, Irreverence and Modern Art. He can’t swallow all that the feds are saying. And Goffman, who coined the word Yummy (young upwardly mobile mutant), is as close to the new psychedelic scene as it is possible to get. “I think there is a small movement; I think there’s a certain amount of trend in that direction,” he says. “We’re shifting to an accelerated information age and quantum reality culture and psychedelics seem to be relevant to that kind of experience. But I think we’ve passed the point of having a zeitgeist around psychedelics or the counterculture. I do have to wonder who’s taking all this acid they’ve busted. You go out and look people in the eye.” he says, motioning toward Telegraph Avenue near the Berkeley campus, “and most of them look like they’re thinking about a slice of pizza.”

Well, I see his point. But then some of the human flow along Telegraph probably looks a good deal more hallucinogenic to me than it does to Goffman, who has below-shoulder-length hair, wears a worn fedora with an Andy Warhol button, and looks like a roadie for Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band. He is an incarnation of that very ’60s observation that the medium is the message, to wit: R.U. Sirius?

So what we seem to have here is the narcs saying there is a bull market in LSD and the heads saying “bull.” But maybe the different perspectives are not as mutually exclusive as they seem at first glance. The narcotics agents may be issuing a timely warning of a bad moon rising, but a newly discovered drug “epidemic” wouldn’t impact negatively on their budget requests. As for the people involved with nouvelle psychedelics, such as the smiling and personable Ken Goffman, he is aware that many high-profile acid mavens from the ’60s ended up doing time once the media began to hype LSD. So, in dealing with a reporter, R.U. Sirius has every reason not to be incurious.

WHEN TALKING ABOUT LSD—LYSERGIC ACID DIETHYLAMIDE 25, a potent psychedelic that forever should be held responsible for foisting Timothy Leary on an unsuspecting public—it’s important to remember that not only is it a clear, odorless, illegal liquid a few millionths of a gram of which can blast your mind to kingdom come, but that along with race track touts, criminal defense attorneys, and television news teasers, it falls into that group of pharmacological substances known as exaggersants. It is best when considering the entire subject to anchor one’s perspective firmly in Missouri.

The effect of the drug itself, which is a chemical synthesis derived from ergotamine tartrate, a parasitical fungus that grows on common grains like rye, is to cause deep and prolonged states of altered perception, some would say enhanced perception, which is what psychedelic means. It is not uncommon when tripping for your sensory and intellectual capacities to be on a roller-coaster ride. At one and the same time, everything you see or hear may seem both entirely original and as old as creation. Ordinaries distinctions can seem to disappear: Music can sometimes be seen as dancing colors; spoken language and silent thoughts move so fast that it seems impossible to tell which is which; your inner state may seem to join and run together with someone else’s. These profound alterations can be either exhilarating or horrifying. They also seem to encourage a messianic frame of mind; back in the ’60s it wasn’t unusual to hear someone say that if enough people tripped, or if there was only a way of dosing Nixon’s cola, you could save the world.

The LSD state lends itself to grandiose claims as participants become frustrated by the limits of ordinary language to encompass such a singular and stunning state. For instance, after ingesting a psychedelic in 1953, Aldous Huxley wrote: “I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of creation... Words like grace and transfiguration came to mind.”

Of course, not everyone trying LSD finds the prelapsarian Garden. The drug is powerful enough to injure, and has. Jerome Smith, special agent in charge of the California Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement’s San Francisco Office, says that the people experimenting with LSD today are too young to remember the “horror stories,” or have forgotten them. “They don’t remember that their first experiment may be a lifetime experiment they never get over. There was a young lady going to San Diego State back in the 1960s that took one dose and as far as I know never got over it. She may still be institutionalized. It’s a drug not to be trifled with; it’s mind-altering.”

Why did Smith reach all the way back to the 1960s for his horror story? If so many people are tripping these days, why aren’t there current horror stories? Why aren’t medical people at places like the Haight Ashbury Free Clinic seeing an outbreak of bad trips? And, even more tantalizing, what does it mean that so many people are evidently experimenting with LSD again? Does it have a social significance? Is it a harbinger? And if it is, of what?

BUT FIRST, A MORE IMMEDIATE QUESTION, why now? Why should LSD be making a comeback after all but disappearing from public notice for a decade or more? Nobody knows for sure, continued
but there are a few theories to choose among. Nostalgia has been rife—witness the celebrations of the 19th anniversary of the Summer Love of Love and of the release of the Beatles' Sgt. Pepper album. There is a vogue, too, for what Newsweek recently called the new psychedelic—tie-dyes, paisley, glasses, trappings of hippie style.

Of course, mass nostalgia is usually about style and seldom about substance. Another possible reason is suggested by Randy Daar, a San Francisco lawyer who has defended a dozen accused LSD dealers in courtrooms from Tennessee to Wyoming to California in the past two years. "It's cheap," he says. "That's why. In fact, the cost of a single hit of acid may be the only thing in America to be no more expensive in 1987 than it was in 1967, between $1 and $4 on the street. Over the same two decades, the price of a hit of good mari-juana increased from $0.50 to $500, and the cost of a bottle of Scotch quadrupled. Others say that there has been too little education about the drug's dangers, or that taste in drugs, as in so many other things, moves in ever-repeating cycles.

But none of these explanations captures, to borrow R.U. Sirius' word, a zeitgeist, a feeling for the spirit of the age in which LSD is popular. It seems an anomaly that, in a numb and conformist age, such an electric experience should be gaining in appeal. But maybe that's why.

Paul Krassner, who was the founding editor of The Realist and the man who first used the word yuppies, played an important role in those tumultuous years when the indwellers and privities of LSD were zapped by the '60s, see certain similarities in conditions today.

"What's similar now to the 1960s is the awareness of the suppression and dullness, and what came as a response in the 1960s was an explosion. This time it'll be different. But what we're really seeing is the old battle between cynicism and hope. I have a share of optimism," Krassner says, "because I have damaged chromosomes."

LSD's quietly coming back into vogue in the twilight years of the Reagan era is an incongruity, a seeming oxymoron (nothing personal, Mr. President), the question of who is just using the supply is an outright mystery.

There are people in law enforcement and outside it who think that supply is leading demand, and not the other way round. That not long ago somebody started to make a very high quality of low-cost LSD designed for the 1980s. That they have cultivated and cornered a sizable market. And that they have good dealers, and unpretentious.

No question, someone somewhere is churning out great batches. The nearly 15 million hits seized last year by the DEA don't include separate state and local seizures. In San Jose, for instance, 64 street arrests were made for LSD possession in 1986. And in the last August, state narcotics agents in Berkeley and San Francisco made their biggest haul in many years, 24 liquid ounces, enough to make 6 million hits.

And seizures themselves are only indicative of much larger amounts in circulation. Neither the feds, nor the state cops, nor the local peers know who is making the LSD. They know where cocaine, heroin and speed all come from, but not LSD. It is like a drug from elsewhere. In 1986, the DEA had a hand in busting 672 illegal drug labs of one kind or another. Not one of them made LSD. Zero. Nor did any of the hundreds of labs busted in '85, '84, '83...all the way back to 1981 in Seattle, which was the last time a cop saw the inside of a real honest-to-goodness LSD laboratory.

Police agencies in California have busted wholesalers, even large-scale wholesalers, only a step or two beneath the people at the apex of the LSD trade: the chemist and the manufacturer, the scientist and the businessman who usually team up to produce and distribute LSD. "These are the most fascinating people I've ever chased," says Dave Tresmontan, a clean-cut 36-year-old drug agent whose Santa Cruz task force assignment is the latest in a 16-year career. "They're very worthy opponents. You would think that just by chance somebody would smite. Every week somewhere in the country the Mafia, the Colombians, speed labs, PCP labs get taken down. Yet not one LSD lab."

Robert Sager, who heads the DEA's Western Laboratory, thinks the LSD chemists have successfully remained at large in part because there are so few of them. "I'd say there's very few of them, and that they're very cautious people. I sort of wonder if it isn't a network thing, an insider's thing, a club almost."

The probability is that these will-o'-the-wisp chemists are close by. "I know of only one geographic region producing this stuff in the United States," says the state Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement's Jerry Smith. "We have heard of a lab in existence here for years and we've never gotten to them. If LSD shows up in Ohio, New York, Florida, Texas, it always comes back to the Bay Area; that's where they trace it back to. The San Francisco Bay Area is to LSD what Miami is to cocaine."

Once you know how difficult it is to make LSD, it's not surprising that there would be only a handful of illicit labs and underground chemists. To begin with, you need ergonine, the base which is not readily available. Though it isn't a controlled substance, its purchase
Neither the feds, nor the state cops, nor the local narcotics know who is cooking the LSD. They know where cocaine, heroin and speed all come from, but not LSD. It is like a drug from elsewhere. In 1986, the DEA had a hand in busting 672 illegal drug labs of one kind or another. Not one of them made LSD. Nor did any of the hundreds of labs busted in '85, '84, '83... all the way back to 1981 in Seattle, which was the last time a cop saw the inside of a real honest-to-goodness LSD laboratory.

by other than established pharmaceutical firms who use it in migraine remedies and some other medicines it is suspect. Therefore it is often necessary to go to Eastern European or African countries to acquire the ergotamine without raising eyebrows.

Once you've smuggled it into the States, converting it to lysergic acid is a delicate and demanding chemical process. "If you look at it cross-eyed, it reminds you of a bathtub or cocaine paste, which is made by South American Indians in rude tin drums; it takes a real chemist and sophisticated lab. The purified, or, for instance, is lost if exposed to heat above room temperature. So you can't use hot water as a heat source. You do with most other chemical manipulations like you want a good yield you have to use a vacuum flash evaporator to boil off two solvents at low temperatures without the lysergic acid conglomerate disintegrating.

"Making it," says the same underground chemist, "requires very good technique. Purifying it is much more complicated than that." You needed more than a high school chemistry course to follow all his guidance on how the purification process utilizes preparative column chromatography, the isomers fluorescing as they pass through alumina at different speeds. And that's before you racemize the isomers. For too many chemists who can racemize racemizers are seeking a life outside the law.

But what is really remarkable, considering the clandestine and potentially dangerous circumstances under which LSD is being made, is that law enforcement agencies from coast to coast agree that virtually all the acid they have seen in the past few years is well-made and comes in uniform doses of between 50 and 80 micrograms. This is a real contrast to the LSD of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when doses varied wildly from pill to pill, but typical hits was several hundred micrograms. Thus uniformity is the most telling clue that virtually all the LSD being cooked is coming from very few people.

It may also indicate how desirous the chemists are to remain unnoticed. Smaller doses minimize bad trips and ostentation displays of druggie behavior, thus diverting both police and media attention elsewhere.

"Over the years, the quality control got better and better and better. We're seeing more sophistication through experience. They're aiming for doses of 50 micrograms and they're hitting it pretty good," says Robert Sager, the DEA lab chief.

Why isn't there more bad acid around, like crack cocaine? Randy Daar, the San Francisco attorney whose clients have included a number of accused drug dealers, thinks that the LSD subculture is different from the usual drug world. "What distinguishes LSD from all the other drug cases I see is there's never any guns; there's no underworld types; the profit seems to be little to nil because money isn't the primary motivating factor; and most importantly, they don't sniff each other off.

They tend to be the most loyal people who traffic in drugs."

Though even some police agree with Daar about the absence of weapons, hoodlums and snitches, whoever is making and distributing millions and millions of doses of LSD isn't making big money, then they differ from at least some of the people who deal acid in the past. Take Waldon NorthB (his real name), who once upon a time in the Haight Ashbury was known as Captain Clearlight. He says he distributed 250 million hits of LSD in 250 micrograms each between 1968 and 1975. At 6 feet, 4 inches, with flowing white hair and a beard, he looks like a shrewd biblical prophet. Back when he was trying to sell the street for marketing techniques to what had been a hippie cottage industry, he claims he has collected about $500,000 a month in cash. He gathered the money in shopping bags, enough money to have bought four airplanes, about 30 luxury cars and trucks, and numerous homes.

Captain Clearlight liked the ladies and usually had one or more in tow on his rounds. He remembers fondly that at the end of a long day they would rent a luxury hotel room with a king-size bed. Clearlight would spend the night in the bed with $100 bills. And they would dive in. "If it was especially hot or we worked up a good sweat, the green dye would come off on our skins and tint us."

Clearlight acid came in doses of 250 mcgs., three or four times as powerful as what is on the market today. With prices unchanged since the '60s, current profits could be 300 percent or greater. It strains his credibility to hear that huge profits aren't being taken.

Waldon NorthB's explanation for why no labs have been busted since 1981 is that after you've taken enough acid you "kind of know everything the other side is thinking and doing," an explanation which would be more impressive if he hadn't been busted three times, losing most of the wealth he accumulated with the hits along the way.

Probably the most intriguing idea about the labs comes from the Santa Cruz Task Force's Dave Tresmontan, who believes there is only one Superlab. He can't prove it, but he says there are plenty of indications. Even drug labs that have been secreted in legitimate institutions like DuPont or the Jet Propulsion Laboratory were sooner or later found. He makes note of the uniform doses nationwide. And the low prices unaffected by 20 years of economic fluctuations. "I think if there were more suppliers, there'd be more competition and the price would fluctuate. That's the American way, right? Someone's got a stranglehold on it."

Jerry Smith, the state narcotics agent whose office engineered the multitrillion dollar bust in Berkeley and San Francisco in late August, won't quite buy into the Superlab theory. But he does say, "There's somebody out there of the caliber of Owsley or Sand."

Smith is referring to two legendary chemists from long ago, Augustus Owsley Stanley III and Nicholas Sand. Owsley—as Stanley is always called—was the prototypical acid alchemist, the man about whom it was said that he did for LSD what Henry continued
So we return to the question of who is taking all this LSD. Some people say that LSD never went away but the media and the cops lost interest when flower power waned and people on bad trips stopped jumping out of windows.

The new-choosen-away crowd isn’t hard to spot any day of the week along the mall in Santa Cruz or Haight street; bikers, deadheads, aging hippies.

Gracie and Zarkov (not even close to their real names, but their chosen noms de pharmaceutique) never stopped taking drugs. They are psychedelic devotees who live a secret life unknown to their colleagues at the investment and banking firms where they earn six-figure salaries. They are part of a network of like-minded psychedelic freaks, the ones Ken Goldman of High Frontiers calls Yummies.

Gracie and Zarkov would not tell me their real names, nor where they lived, nor their telephone number, so I have no way of checking what they said about their above-ground lives. Zarkov, 38, wore a creaking new black leather suit; Gracie, 34, was in a dominatrix black leather dress, spike heels and black stockings. Zarkov is tall, erect but loose-jointed, intense, commanding. He took his nom from a character in Flash Gordon.

"I’m a principal partner in a prominent investment banking firm. I’m not talking about mergers and acquisitions, I mean cutting-edge high-tech investments," says Zarkov. Gracie is also said to be a successful banker.

Before they went into banking, they say, they ran a sex club in Chicago. Now, in their spare time they collaborate on experiencing exotic designer drugs and recounting their experiences in a privately circulated newsletter. Recent issues have included Gracie’s Visible Language Contact Experience and A High Dose 2CB Trip. 2CB is a designer drug said to enhance telepathic communication.

Zarkov says he personally knows "a large number of people who are very creative and successful in Silicon Valley who are using psychedelic drugs to develop analyses and isomorphic solutions to hardware and software problems." He says he is talking about perhaps 200 people spread among a number of different concerns.

Impossible to say just what it is about Zarkov that makes him seem truthful but not wholly reliable. His attitude seems to imply that he knows something terribly important that the rest of us haven’t figured out, an attitude that in the ’60s was called heavy.

Page 14
A lot of middle-class young people are dropping acid again. In 1984, the Ladies' Home Journal reported that 11 percent of its readers between the ages of 21 and 25 had tried acid.