



John Densmore

Breaking on Through: The Psychedelic Experience 50 Years On

JOHN DENSMORE

All this to say—if you are up against that wall—in a place where it feels like there are no options—and your intuition says it’s right...go ask Alice.

I’M 73 YEARS OLD, AND still feeling quite good about myself. Well, I know I’m on the descent, but it’s a nice ride...right now. I know it’s going to get more difficult, but if I can just hang on to what I experienced 50 years ago, I’ll make it to where I’m supposed to go.

*So play the game “Existence” to the end...
...of the beginning, of the beginning*

Fifty years ago, my friends and I were street scientists, experimenting with then-legal psychedelics. At Monday rehearsals, we would all share what happened on our weekend “trips.” On one of those Mondays, Jim suggested we call our new group The Doors, after the Aldous Huxley book, *The Doors of Perception*. It seemed the esteemed British scholar had written a little book about his mescaline experience. The new name quickly became unanimous. All of us went through the gauntlet—tough moments that lasted for a few minutes, or quite a while. A few friends never came back fully to their former mental selves, and actually all of us were in some way changed forever—mostly in quite positive ways.

Lifting the veil is dangerous, but if the environment is supportive, the outcome can be life-changing. I only took the trip a few times, but the opening is still with me. I realized these experiments were extremely rigorous on the nervous system, so I found myself heading towards a less shattering route: meditation. But the initial couple of liftoffs have definitely impacted my life permanently.

Now, 50 years later, I still can touch the feeling of wonder that I got from these initial excursions. It’s hard to describe anymore than that; kind of like trying to describe God. My 90-year-old cousin, who is a diligent thinker, laments the loss of

the framework of organized religion. I told him that the impact of a tab of acid made a much bigger impression on my spiritual life than the communion wafer at mass. And I can’t go back. Even though Pope Francis is challenging my renegade Catholicism because he is so wonderful, I still can’t go back. The great mythologist Joseph Campbell says that the new mythology might take 100 years or so to fully form. So I comfort myself with a patchwork cosmology: a little Hinduism here, a dash of Buddhism there, and a whole lot of indigenous wisdom.

Let me be clear—I am not advocating indiscriminate drug use. But recent studies have shown that used carefully, some psychedelics can actually help treat addiction to other drugs. Plus, carefully conducted scientific studies from non-profit organizations and major universities are showing many physical and psychological benefits, including a powerful treatment for PTSD and anxiety in people with serious illness. Even the much-maligned weed is showing stunning evidence as an important medicine that fights diseases like epilepsy and cancer.

These are very exciting studies, but psychedelics still have a stigma: the old patriarchal, mistaken outlook that all drugs are the same. We now know that “Just Say No” is an extremely simplistic and misleading response to a very complex issue. As Ethan Nadelmann of the Drug Policy Alliance said years ago, the appropriate phrase is “Just Say Know.” This is apparently lost on the new U.S. Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, who is trying to go back in time with tough policies that have failed. Sessions’ predecessor, Eric Holder, has called this “dumb on crime.”

Of course, there are those who will quickly judge this rant as a “hippie flashback.” If that’s what this is, then bring it on. I have raised a family, have grandkids, written three books, a significant amount of music, and many articles. No slacker’s or stoner’s rant is this. In fact, I’m very careful now about what I



*John Densmore (above);
and The Doors (l to r) Jim
Morrison, John Densmore, Ray
Manzarek, and Robby Krieger.*



put into my system, and those early days of exploring my mind were key in forming my values and my spiritual path.

Now here's the cosmic part (you saw it coming): when I stepped outside while under the influence of LSD, I saw God in every leaf. OK, now you expect me to say I started eating those botanicals since I was so loaded, but what I really came away with is a sense (which is still with me) that this moment in time is not the only moment happening at this moment! This might sound like double-speak, but there are other realities going on right now outside of our awareness.

But before I stepped outside, I had a few minutes of absolute terror. My friend, who was also "tripping," pulled me out of it by laughing hysterically. You see, in those days, we didn't have doctors like today at Johns Hopkins hospital in Baltimore carefully monitoring our voyage. Due to our early experiments, and of course centuries-old shamanic cultures, researchers are now clear about the safe boundaries needed to make the excursions the most fruitful. Knowledge is often surrounded by danger. You have to get out on the edge to see the whole clearly.

*Turn off your mind, relax and float down stream
It is not dying, it is not dying*

Every night when we choose to go to bed, we are accepting a "little death," giving up our conscious daily life. We know we need rest to reset our body for another day of sentient life. In effect, it's a small rehearsal for the big "D" coming at the end of our time here on planet Earth. When that time arrives, going peacefully is what we all want. For thousands of years, Tibetan Buddhists have believed it is crucial to be calm in the moments before crossing, or you won't get to where you're supposed to go. Now we are seeing terminal cancer patients receiving effec-

tive help via psychedelics with the "little death" rehearsal.

*Lay down all thoughts, surrender to the void
It is shining, it is shining*

So once again, the U.S. government is very slow to get the message, and continues to interfere with the availability of traditional indigenous medicine. Bipartisan support for criminal justice reform has been halted. Medicine that has helped people for centuries is once again under attack. It's sad, because Vietnam vets that have been metaphorically stuck in the jungle have been finding their way out of years of mental and emotional torture thanks to medicinal plants.

Retired Sgt. Jonathan Lubecky, who served in Iraq, says about MDMA-assisted psychotherapy, "This treatment has made it possible for me to watch my son grow up. He will not be presented with a folded flag on behalf of a 'grateful nation' in recognition of a parent who took his own life." So unfortunately, there are more roadblocks to the "good" drugs, but thank God for human enterprise. No wall can keep out the human spirit, which seeks healing.

All this to say—if you are up against that wall—in a place where it feels like there are no options—and your intuition says it's right...go ask Alice. Make sure you have planned your excursion, have a guide, and this is really what you need to do. Then you will build a bridge or dig a tunnel into your soul and find yourself. 🌀

John Densmore is a musician, author and activist. He is best known as the drummer of the rock band The Doors, and as such is a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. His memoir *Riders on the Storm* was a NYTimes bestseller. He can be reached at johndensmore.com.