

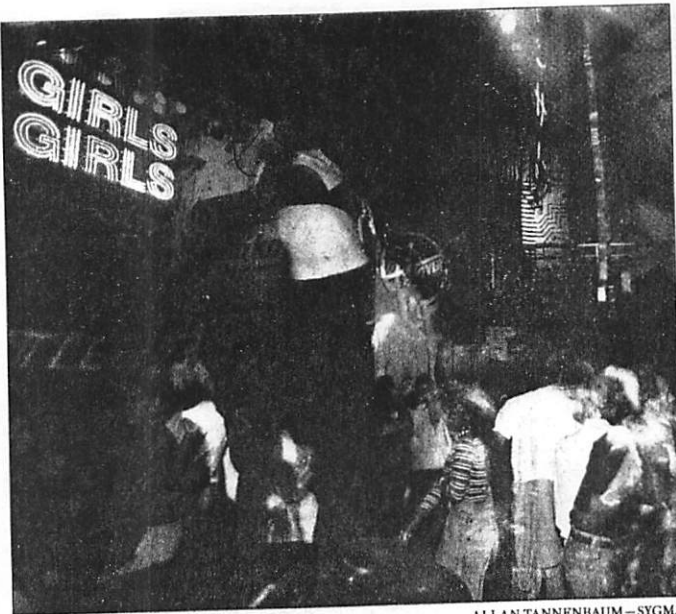
The New View From On High

Trends: A wave of drugs floods the clubs

MOST AMERICANS REACTED to the death of River Phoenix in October with at least a sigh of sympathy. Among a certain set, though, it sparked a grim curiosity. Early press reports of the actor's death by overdose mentioned GHB, an obscure and dangerous steroid substitute occasionally gulped down by West Coast thrill seekers. Never mind that according to a Los Angeles coroner's report GHB was not found in the actor's body. And never mind, too, that it's scarcely available outside a few Los Angeles nightspots. The hunt was on. "I'd never heard of GHB before. No one in New York had," said a Manhattan drug user last week. "This month it's the only drug."

Even drug abuse is subject to the whims of fashion. It's not that the old standards have quit the scene. Phoenix's death was apparently caused by a mixture of morphine, cocaine and other drugs. But members of his generation, mainly middle class and well educated, have turned to other, more exotic highs to fuel their nights. Whether it's Ecstasy at raves or DMT to launch the mind travel of self-styled "psychonauts," there's an alphabet soup of designer drugs to choose from. "It's a different culture of use," says Carlo McCormick, an editor of the New York trendsheet Paper and a student of drug culture. "These drugs are serving the same function that has existed for 20 years. They're just specific to a new generation."

And they're in plentiful supply. Alexander Shulgin, a pharmacologist at the University of California, Berkeley, has researched 179 potential intoxicants in one psychedelic chemical family alone, the phenethylamines. Forced to play a game of catch-up, last week the Drug Enforcement Administration hastily added one of them, 2C-B, to its schedule of controlled substances. But an informal survey last week by Miami club personality Julian Bain found that 2C-B, sold under the name Nexus, has already become the number-three drug of choice in South Beach.



ALLAN TANNENBAUM—SYGMA

Exotic substances to fuel the night: A New York City nightspot

Club Pharmacopeia

Special K (ketamine)
Cost \$40-\$50 per half gram
Effect Apparent weightlessness, disorientation
Who Uses Mainly New York gays

Ecstasy (MDMA)
Cost \$20-\$30 per pill
Effect Introspection, euphoria
Who Uses Ravers nationwide; British ravers and soccer fans

GHB
Cost \$20 per ounce
Effect Alcohol-like drowsiness
Who Uses Body-builders, West Coast clubgoers

DMT
Cost \$200 per gram
Effect Extreme perceptual alteration; "out-of-body" hallucination
Who Uses Serious "psychonauts"

Nexus (2C-B)
Cost \$25-\$35 per capsule
Effect Giddiness, visual effects
Who Uses Denizens of dance clubs in California and Florida

D Meth (methamphetamine)
Cost \$60-\$120 a gram
Effect Long-lasting manic energy
Who Uses Formerly bikers/blue collar, now West Coast ravers

Of all the drugs in the designer pharmacopeia, the most popular nationwide is MDMA, or Ecstasy. It's been 10 years since "X" hit the bars, including some in Dallas where it could be bought with a credit card. Considered by many the ultimate "dance drug," X is often described as less disturbingly "trippy" than LSD and more serene than cocaine, which are considered cruder drugs. The white pills of MDMA give feelings of empathy and togetherness coupled with an up-all-night amphetamine rush. Despite nine MDMA laboratory busts in 1992, the Department of Health and Human Services reported 236 emergency-room visits involving the drug that year.

Designer-drug use tends to follow regional and demographic trends. With all the high-tech choices, getting high can now mean getting fairly specific. The New York City nightclub Bump! isn't named after the goofy disco dance, says staffer Marc Berkeley. It's a tongue-in-cheek reference to a dose of ketamine (street name: Special K), a surgical anesthetic snorted by much of the club's mainly gay clientele in an attempt to magnify dance-floor sensations like lights, music and rhythm. The club has a 100-foot twisting slide lined with flashing lights. It's called the "K-Hole," the slang term for the episodes of numbed confusion that ketamine can induce.

Head rush: San Francisco's small but devoted DMT scene is a far more serious set. The orange powder causes a violent head rush that devotee Terence McKenna, author of "True Hallucinations," says can be used as an "epistemological tool" to understand the world. McKenna's trancelike public readings attract hundreds of fans. But if anyone's actually smoking the stuff, he's far from the crowd—anathema to the herd mentality bred by MDMA and ketamine. DMT has a nasty side effect: total physical collapse. "You're supposed to have someone there with you to take the pipe out of your hand," says Lon Clark, 27, a rave lighting designer who's seen it smoked.

In the clubs, advocates of the designer drugs claim psychological benefits including everything from enhanced self-image to emotional insight. Scientists, however, know little about the drugs' effects. Dr. George Ricaurte of Johns Hopkins recently found signs of damage to the nerves that release the neurotransmitter serotonin in former MDMA users. But Rick Doblin, president of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, a North Carolina group that promotes MDMA testing worldwide, disputes whether such effects are lasting or significant. Dr. Charles Grob of UC, Irvine, plans to test MDMA for possible medical applications like pain management for the terminally ill. Step one, set to begin at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in Torrance, Calif., this month, will seek to determine the drug's toxic effects on the body. That's information from which young clubgoers could profit.

PATRICK ROGERS with
 PETER KATEL in Miami