

Albert Hofmann, Inventor and First User of LSD

The Swiss chemist who turned on the world dies at 102

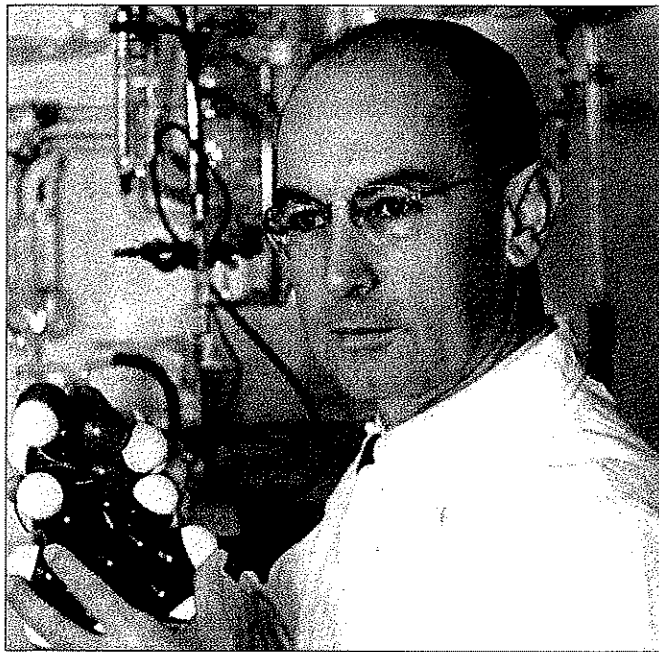
By Robert Greenfield

AS HE BEGAN GETTING off on the first hit of Ecstasy he had ever taken, at a conference at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, in 1985, 79-year-old Dr. Albert Hofmann's initial comment was "Ah, finally something I can do with my wife." In every way, the statement reflected the unique personality of the revered Swiss chemist who first synthesized LSD in 1938.

With his cropped hair, rimless spectacles and quiet demeanor, Hofmann seemed the very picture of a buttoned-up scientist. But if someone else had discovered LSD, there is no knowing whether the substance would have brought about the tectonic shift in consciousness that helped spawn the counterculture and revolutionized the music of the Beatles, the Grateful Dead and countless others. To the end, Hofmann, who died of a heart attack on April 29th at 102 in his hilltop home outside Basel, advocated LSD as a medicine that could help human beings expand consciousness. Born on January 11th, 1906, he was awarded a Ph.D. from the University of Zurich and began working for Sandoz Laboratories where he was charged with investigating ergot, a fungus that grows on rye kernels. Seeking a compound that would aid blood circulation, he synthesized a series of derivatives, the 25th of which was lysergic acid diethylamide.

When animal tests failed to yield significant results, Sandoz lost interest in the drug. For five years, the vial of LSD remained on a laboratory shelf. On Friday, April 16th, 1943, struck by what he would later call "a peculiar presentiment," Hofmann created a new batch of LSD-25. He accidentally absorbed some of the drug, perhaps through his fingertips, and was overcome by "a remarkable but not unpleasant state of intoxication . . . characterized by an intense stimulation of the imagination."

Returning to his lab on Monday, he decided to investigate the effects further. At 4:20 p.m. on April 19th, as Nazi troops were invading the Warsaw ghetto on the eve of Passover, Hofmann dis-



PROUD PARENT Hofmann with a model of the LSD molecule

solved 250 micrograms of LSD in a glass of water, which he drank in the presence of his assistants.

By five o'clock, he felt himself becoming dizzy, saw some visual disturbances and began feeling a marked desire to laugh. Hofmann decided to go home. Because of wartime fuel shortages, he got on his bicycle for what became an epic journey. With his wife

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and child off in the country, Hofmann, who had no way of knowing if he had taken a fatal dose or would be trapped forever in this state, felt himself leave his body. "I was seized by the dreadful fear of going insane," he later wrote. As the trip wore on, he watched in wonder as sounds became visual effects, and then he fell into a fitful sleep. Although he awoke the next morning feeling fine, Hofmann had learned that there was a dangerous side to LSD.

Eager to profit from his discovery, Sandoz gave the substance the brand name Delysid and began sending samples to psychiatric researchers for use in studies on alcoholism, drug addiction and mental illness. In Los Angeles, Dr. Oscar Janiger gave the drug to Cary Grant in a supervised session that proved to be of more worth to the star than all the time he had spent in therapy. In 1958, after obtaining a supply of "magic

mushrooms" from Mexico and testing the results on himself, Hofmann developed psilocybin. Timothy Leary wrote to Sandoz requesting a supply of psilocybin which he used to launch the Harvard Psychedelic Project.

Although he was revered by Leary, Hofmann never approved of the manner in which the "acid guru" advocated LSD's use. When the two met for lunch in 1971, Leary reported "an immediate mutual hit of pleasure and acceptance." In his book, *LSD: My Problem Child*, Hofmann wrote that he objected to the "great publicity Leary sought for his LSD and psilocybin investigations."

Hofmann continued taking the drug for spiritual purposes into his nineties. Retiring from Sandoz (now Novartis) as the director of the Department of Natural Products in 1971, he remained in active contact with organizations like MAPS, the Multi-Disciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, which works to restore serious research into the medicinal use of LSD. "We are extraordinarily lucky it was Albert who discovered LSD," says MAPS founder Rick Doblin. "Because he was such a gentleman and so highly respected in the pharmaceutical industry, Albert dignified LSD. Three weeks ago, we had a beautiful discussion. He said he would continue to help us renew serious LSD research, either from this side or the other."