

Psychedelics and Alternative Rock:

An Interview with David J of Love and Rockets

By Damon Orion
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The 1980s were a grim time for kids in search of higher consciousness. Cocaine, capitalism, hedonism and hairspray held sway, and all the things our parents had revered—psychedelic sacraments, meditation, tribalism, gentleness, artistic expression—were considered hopelessly uncool. Not surprisingly, the music of the day reflected this shift: “Turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream” had given way to “everybody Wang Chung tonight.”

One of the psychedelic treasures that mushroomed from this mulch was Love and Rockets, a British alternative rock band comprised of three former members of the pioneering post-punk group Bauhaus. Love and Rockets broke through to mainstream American audiences in 1986 with its second album, *Express*—a title that on one hand challenged the group’s hair dye-sporting, trench coat-clad fan base to communicate through art, and on the other hand proclaimed that the magical mystery tour bus of the 1960s had been replaced by a faster, sleeker mode of transport to the astral realms. When bassist/vocalist David J urged, “All aboard the Express Kundalini,” it was in much the same spirit that yesteryear’s psychedelic Pied Pipers had inquired, “Is everybody in?” and “Are you on the bus?” But the band’s stylish, cutting-edge sound left no question: This train was headed out where the rainbow-painted buses didn’t run.



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Enticed by the palpable whiff of LSD-fertilized spirituality emanating from Love and Rockets’ music, many of us accepted the invitation. David J served as a friendly, wise, cosmically cool tour guide, directing us to let go of our old identities (“You are disintegrating into everything around”), nudging us toward the realization that enlightenment can only be found in the present moment (“Are you in search of somewhere or something that rings true? Well, it could be closer than you think”) and gifting us with Alan Watts-ian bits of mind-origami (“You cannot go against nature, because when you do go against nature, it’s part of nature, too”).

David J, who explores the mystery of mortality on his latest solo album *Not Long for this World*, insists that the essence of chemically catalyzed knowledge can’t be captured in words. “It’s like the Tao: ‘The Tao that can be expressed in words is not the Tao,’ and the psychedelic experience

that can be expressed in a song lyric is not really the psychedelic experience,” he offers. “But it can give you a little hint. And maybe you can dance to it at the same time, which is fun.”

Damon: How have psychedelic experiences influenced your art?

David: I didn’t really get into psychedelics until ’85. It was the time of the first Love and Rockets album [*Seventh Dream of Teenage Heaven*]. In fact, the collage that’s on the inside of the gatefold sleeve—that was finished on LSD, on the day of my first trip. I remember being quite delighted with it! I remember sitting on the floor, looking at [guitarist/vocalist] Daniel [Ash]’s antique furniture and thinking how sexy the legs of the furniture were, and remarking on this! [*Laughs*] The curvature of the furniture, and Daniel just smiling.

My second experience was very heavy. That was

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indoors, and I decided to do some drawing and listen to The Beatles' *Revolver* and *Sergeant Pepper's*. Just something I had to do. So I got as far as *Revolver*, and I was looking at this sheet of blank paper, and I just started to see this jungle in the paper. It was sort of like the cover of *Revolver*, but again, it was sort of like this effect of being embossed, almost like watermarks. It was incredibly detailed—there was all this fauna and jungle vines and leaves, and there little characters in there, sort of like going through the hair on the front cover.

The music sounded incredible. That was when I was listening to "Tomorrow Never Knows." Then I remember looking at the back of my hand and seeing through to my bones, seeing the cellular structure, seeing blood coursing through my veins, and then seeing my hand rot in front of my eyes. It was horrific. But I remembered that old Buddhist adage: "If you see something terrible, do not turn away. If you see something beautiful, do not cling to it." I embraced that and went into the hand, into the death, and came through the other side. I saw it as a very beautiful process.

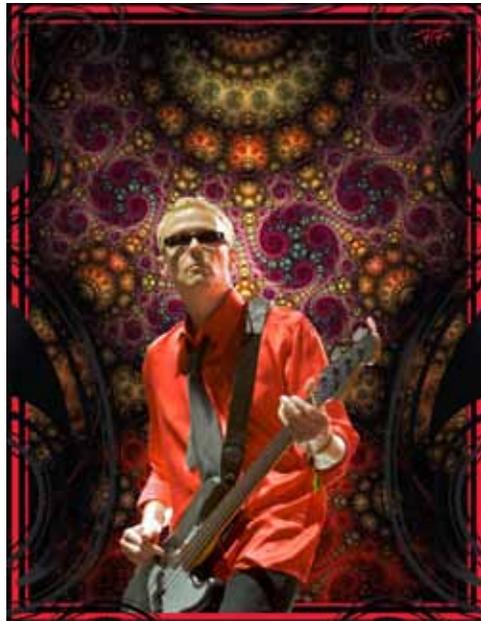
There's a line in one of our songs, "The worm we dug from higher ground"—that's what that came from, that experience. So it was the death trip. If I had turned away from it, it could have turned very negative, but thankfully I didn't. And there was a huge lesson in that.

Damon: "I know what it's like to be dead," indeed! So, as long as you're referencing "Kundalini Express," how did that song come into being?

David: That song originally was gonna be called "Dr. Hofmann," and it was going to be about Albert Hofmann discovering LSD, but it just sort of mutated into this lyric about kundalini [Editor's Note: A Sanskrit word meaning "energy" or "force"] and aligning that with psychedelic experience.

Just before I started experimenting with psychedelics, I had a spontaneous kundalini experience when I was meditating. I didn't know anything about kundalini, but I started to hyperventilate, and then I effectively stopped breathing, which was very strange.

I felt this glow at the base of my spine, and I felt a warm substance rising through the



David J of Love and Rockets.

Image: Brendon Crigler

spine...I wasn't thinking anything sexual. And then I had, like, an explosion of this substance in my head! It was orgasmic, but it was like a cosmic orgasm. And I felt a golden—I just equate it with the color gold—it was gold, and it just flowed over my brain! It was just ecstatic. I had no idea what had just happened, so I started to look into this experience at the library—this was pre-Internet. I discovered kundalini, and I'd had a classic spontaneous kundalini experience. Never had it again.

Damon: You struck gold there! People who have heard of kundalini can strive for 30 years to get there, and you just stumbled onto it! You mentioned Albert Hofmann. Did

you ever meet him?

David: No. I met Timothy Leary a couple of times, though. He was interested in Love and Rockets. He actually really liked the lyrics of "No New Tale to Tell"—so the last time I spoke to him on the phone, I invited him to a gig we were playing at The Palace in L.A. But I didn't realize that he'd gone down really quick since the last time I saw him, and he was just staying in bed. But he said, "I'll be there in spirit." And he died a couple of days later.

We were on tour at the time, and at the gig that happened the day after he died, I dedicated "Yin and Yang (The Flower Pot Man)" to Tim. That song starts with an acoustic guitar, like a Bo Diddley rhythm. Daniel struck the guitar in a funny way, and it just made the strings feed back in a way I'd never heard before or since. And this vibration just picked up, and I thought, [excitedly] "Let that go, Daniel! Just let it go!" And he thought the same, 'cause he did. I remember him holding his hands up in the air, just lettin' this thing ring out and build up and up and up.

He started doing this undulating rhythm, and it was echoing 'round this big hall. Kevin [Haskins, the drummer] picked up on it and started doing a bass drum beat to this rhythm, and then the crowd picked up on that and started clapping. We all started clapping in the band, and this tribal sound just grew and grew. It was really something! And at the right moment, Daniel went back to the Bo Diddley rhythm, and we crashed back into the song. The chorus of that song goes, "Beauty, beauty, beauty, beautiful." Then I saw [Timothy's personal assistant] Howard, who was with Tim when he died. I said, "What were his last words?" He said, "His last words were 'Beautiful. Beautiful.'" And then the last thing he said to me came back: "I'll be there in spirit." •