

EXCERPTED FROM

Sex, Drugs & Rock 'n' Roll: The Science of Hedonism and the Hedonism of Science

by Zoe Cormier

TURN UP THE BASS

Of all the things that humans do, music must be the strangest. The power of sound is potent and pervasive. So much so, that even for those who experience the world in silence, music can still intoxicate and enchant.

I grew up in the music industry, worked at a nightclub for five years, and with Guerilla Science have operated venues at dozens of music festivals, including a rat maze next to the Hell Stage in the middle of Glastonbury's 'naughty corner'. I've seen grown men moved to tears by the beauty of an opera, heavy metal crowds maniacally crush towards the stage to the point of self-obliteration, and felt the uplifting joy at countless gigs as the audience was carried to a new plane of camaraderie. Music has a strange effect on our strange species.

But on one unforgettable occasion, the power of music became more apparent than it ever has to me through a sight, not through a sound.

It was dark, and it was loud. Incomparably loud. With nobody to chat to (and not speaking the language of the crowd), I decided to make friends the only way I could. I tapped a friendly looking stranger on the shoulder. He turned around, regarding me quizzically as I held up a pink balloon.*

I inflated, tied it, and handed it to him. Wrapping his hands around the pink bubble, his eyes widened slightly as he read the inscription, and a smile spread over his face. He nodded at me approvingly, and wandered off with his acoustic bounty.

Emblazoned with FREE BASS in bold white lettering, the balloon was one of dozens handed out that evening. Everywhere hands gripped them tightly. Elsewhere other hands punched the air, in time to the thumping music wafting from the towers of speakers. Some hands wrapped around those of others in alluring, friendly invitations.

But most hands were doing something you rarely see: dancing through the air, darting this way and that in silent, animated conversations. Everywhere friends and strangers chatted in silent, passionate, expressive discourse. Sometimes from across the hall, hundreds of feet away from each other, unperturbed by the overpowering bass.

* I cannot count the number of times I have done this at music festivals and people nearby thought that I was selling nitrous oxide balloons and instantly lined up proffering cash.

‘I needed a new challenge – I was tired of being “cool” and putting on big, standard-issue club nights. I wanted to do something new. So I asked myself: in the world of music, what is impossible?’ says Ronald Ligtenberg, founder of Sencity, club nights designed to bring deaf and hearing people together through a mutual love of music.

Born in the Netherlands, Sencity has gone to Spain, Finland, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa before coming to London’s O2 arena in 2011 – a surreally conventional setting for such an unusual event. Inside the airy, sterilised, shiny dome, more like a shopping mall than concert hall, 2,000 people gathered for an event unlike any ever heard in the UK.

If you have ever held a balloon inside a nightclub (or muddy field-cum-party), you may have discovered that it vibrates with music. The sac of air acts as a natural amplifier for sound waves, and low frequencies in particular. Hence the pun: ‘free base’ is the nickname for a cooked alkaloid, such as ‘free-based speed’, or roasted amphetamine.

Guerilla Science has doled these balloons out for years, and we have found that people tend to be split in their reaction to them. People either love them or completely fail to understand what they do. Sometimes they stare at us in quizzical bemusement. But, most of the time, people instantly understand, no explanation required.

Charmed and delighted, they request several more, clutch them to their chests, and find ways to enjoy them that even we had not thought of. Some have pressed together a string of balloons four or five in series, enjoying the bouncing chain of sound.[†]

Others have found ways to trap them inside the grates of sound systems (technically termed ‘bass bins’), watching the pink spheres



54. Fancy some free bass? I cannot count the number of times people thought we were actually selling free-based amphetamines. The pun never ceases to amuse.

clatter in time to the beat. Couples have held one between their heads, enjoying vibrations in mutual appreciation.

It isn't hard to imagine why: deprived of the capacity to appreciate music through their ears, it is the physical nature of music that matters most.

Music, we sometimes forget, is a tactile sensation as well as an auditory one: our experience derives from feeling sound as well as hearing it. The sensation of hearing itself, the pattering of sound waves on the bouncy membrane of the ear drum, is 'touch at a distance' as British-born American perceptual and cognitive psychologist Professor Diana Deutsch puts it.

But once it reaches the brain – whether through the ears or the body – music can hijack our internal hormonal messaging systems and the electrical highways of the body to produce bizarre experiences that are felt from head to toe. Music can send shivers down the spine, raise goosebumps on skin, and even cause a vibrating thrum in the heart, just like the rush of being in love.

Nights that cater for the non-hearing take the tactile nature of music to its fullest expression, with massive sound systems blasting the heaviest basslines possible. Sencity even features a vibrating dance floor that thumps in time to the music. It has travelled the world over.

At these nights, 35 per cent of the audience is ‘profoundly’ deaf, and another third hearing-impaired in some way. Ligtenberg couldn’t put it better: ‘A third of the people here cannot “hear” at all. But they still love music.’