

**“COME AND GET YOUR
BEER AND BENZEDRINE!”**

**—FROM “ON THAT GREAT COME AND GET IT DAY,”
FINIAN’S RAINBOW BY YIP HARBURG**



SPEED-SPEED-SPEEDFREAK

A FAST HISTORY OF AMPHETAMINE • BY MICK FARREN



FERAL HOUSE

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The band had graduated from pills to glass ampoules of pure liquid methedrine. The running gag among the musicians and roadies was that the only clinical use for the stuff, aside from fueling a ramshackle rock & roll band from one performance hellhole to the next, was to revive patients who had clinically died on an operating table. We took a certain suicidally romantic pride in our advanced substance abuse—it was, after all, the late 1960s. We might not play as well or be as popular as The Who, but there was a good chance we were taking quite as much speed as they were, and we figured that had to count for something. Some band members injected the drug, others, the ones with a phobic dislike of needles, simply cracked open the neck of the ampoule and poured it into a Coca-Cola or a Pepsi...

—MICK FARREN ON THE DEVIANTS

CHAPTER 1

A DRUG IN SEARCH OF A FUNCTION

WHEN BASIC AMPHETAMINE WAS FIRST SYNTHESIZED in 1887 by the Romanian chemist Lazar Edeleanu, working at the University of Berlin, no one was thinking about madness, death, or any combination of the two. The hope was that this new compound would prove an easily manufactured and more efficient bronchodilator for asthmatics than the drug ephedrine, which had been isolated from the plant *ma huang* that same year by Nagayoshi Nagai in Japan. Edeleanu dubbed his creation “phenylisopropylamine,” but later switched its name to alpha-methylphenethylamine which was quickly shortened to the more pronounceable amphetamine. (As in alpha-methylphenethylamine.)

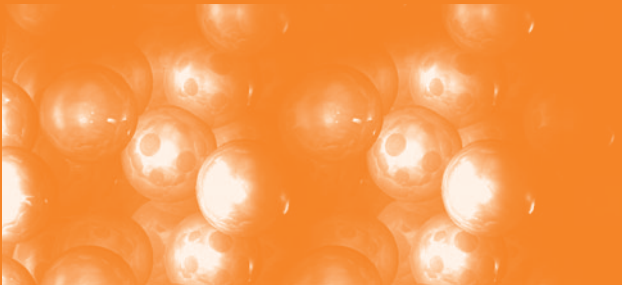
From the very start, amphetamine proved itself to be a drug in search of a function. It had proved disappointing as an asthma cure, but it showed a quite amazing range

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of side effects. Test subjects exhibited alertness, euphoria, heightened physical energy, and prolonged stamina. In early tests, it enhanced concentration, caused rapid and volatile verbalization, boosted confidence, and increased social responsiveness. Other effects of the drug included decreased appetite, and a noticeable enhancement of the sex drive and sexual response in both men and women. When, again in Japan, in 1919, the related but far more powerful crystallized methamphetamine was synthesized by a research team led by Akira Ogata (via reduction of ephedrine using red phosphorus and iodine), commercial uses still could not be found, but it was noted that the same powerful side effects observed with the original amphetamine were even more pronounced in this advanced variation.

At that point, the research on amphetamine was shelved, and it wasn't until 1927 that pioneer psychopharmacologist Gordon Alles resynthesized the drug, still seeking a substitute for the asthma cure ephedrine, but, again, it failed to fulfill its intended purpose. Although to continue research on a drug without any immediate specific therapeutic goal is common in today's pharmaceutical industry, such work was simply considered a waste of time and laboratory space in the early twentieth century. Alles had, however, discovered that amphetamine could be produced in a volatile form that lent itself to packaging as an inhaler. This attracted the attention of the corporate pharmaceutical giant Smith, Kline & French (SK&F), who decided that amphetamine could be profitably marketed as a means of relief for a whole variety of ailments. In 1932, the Benzedrine inhaler was launched in drugstores in the United States, and was both prescribed by accommodat-

ing physicians, and sold over the counter, first as a general treatment for respiratory problems, then within less than three years, for relief of more than 39 medical conditions ranging from hiccups to schizophrenia.



THE SCIENCE OF SPEED

AMPHETAMINES release stores of norepinephrine and dopamine from nerve endings by converting the respective molecular transporters into open channels. Amphetamine also releases stores of serotonin from synaptic vesicles when taken in relatively high doses. This effect is more pronounced in methamphetamine use. Amphetamines also prevent the monoamine transporters for dopamine and norepinephrine from recycling them (called reuptake inhibition), which leads to increased amounts of dopamine and norepinephrine in synaptic clefts. These combined effects rapidly increase the concentrations of the respective neurotransmitters in the synaptic cleft, which promotes nerve impulse transmission in neurons that have those receptors. ●

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WHILE SMITH, KLINE & FRENCH AND THE MEDICAL profession were extolling the virtues of Benzedrine, a section of the ever ingenious public-at-large quickly discovered that the inhalers had an equally extensive non-medical potential—essentially the range of side effects first observed by the researchers Edeleanu and Nagai—and began to devise ingenious ways to exploit them. The abuse of Benzedrine inhalers required only minimal cunning. The inhaler was a tube about the size of a fat cigarette, a hard case containing either a paper strip or cotton ball saturated in Benzedrine. All this first generation of speedfreaks needed to do was to crack open the casing of the inhaler, and swallow the contents, rolling the paper or cotton into small balls and washing them down with coffee, a soft drink, or alcohol. In 1937, Smith, Kline & French released a pill form of Benzedrine, and “bennies,” as instant street slang nicknamed them, became the new recreational drug.



The use of both the pills and inhalers was rapidly adopted on all levels of society. In addition to the usual drug culture lowlifes—the zoot suiters, jazz musicians, strippers, hookers, and petty criminals who might be expected to dunk the contents of a Benzedrine inhaler in their all-night coffee, college kids resorted to

them when cramming for exams, or just to party. Long-distance drivers used them to stay awake at the wheel, while factory workers on the newly introduced production lines used bennies to help them work double shifts. Whispered rumors also circulated about the use of Benzedrine as a performance enhancement in professional sports, and doubtless its radical effects on sexual stamina and creativity had also been noted. Back in the pre-Kinsey 1930s, no one wrote openly about the ins and outs of sex and sexual responses except on the level of smudged, cheapo print porn like the time-honored Tijuana Bibles in which bennies are now and then mentioned.

The bizarre paradox, however, was that Benzedrine in particular and amphetamine in general were close to being an exact chemical analogue of traditional American virtues—stamina, dedication, hard work, endurance, and the willingness to repeat mindless actions for hours on end. This fact was not ignored by capitalists and captains of industry. Far from discouraging drug use on the factory floor, a number of industrialists—Henry Ford reputedly among them—studied, at least in theory, the effects that the distribution of amphetamines to the labor force might have on the equation between manpower and productivity in manufacturing industries. A drug that would narrow the machine operator's focus, and make him or her more at one with their machine had to be good for any business from the mighty General Motors to the smallest and most sweaty of garment industry sweatshops.

Meanwhile the old-time Hollywood studio bosses like Harry Cohen and Louis B. Mayer didn't bother to conduct studies. They didn't even hesitate. They saw amphetamine

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as a chemical tool that could reduce the budgets on their movies, and they immediately put it to use. They went right ahead and fed speed to their performers to keep them animated on camera during extended shoots. (Or, in some cases, to cure monumental movie star hangovers.) Child actors seem to have been particular targets of this chemical talent enhancement.

Both Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney have made no secret of how they were constantly given speed in order to make it through grueling 12- or 14-hour, all-singing, all-dancing shoots. The Judy Garland entry on the Internet Movie Database is totally blunt in its Garland biography: “The same studio that made her a star unwittingly made her a drug addict, providing her with amphetamines to keep her energy level high and her weight level down. This in turn kept her wide awake at night, so she was given barbiturates to help her sleep.” Garland herself confirms the effect of this brutal chemical regimen: “The studio became a haunted house for me.” She remained a prisoner of the speed-and-downer cycle until her death in 1969—from an “incautious self-overdosage of Seconal,” taken to counteract the speed she used to help her through the day.

Although the 1930s had more tabloid newspapers than today, they didn’t in those days dwell on the substance abuse of celebrities. The excesses of the Hollywood studios never came to light until years later, when the



JUDY GARLAND AT 16

old-time studio bosses like Mayer and Cohen no longer wielded power or instilled fear, and the public was at least a little more sophisticated in its reaction to drug use. The stars themselves felt more able to talk about what had been done to them, and how it amounted to nothing short of deliberate pharmaceutical child abuse. At the time, though, when Garland was turning out movies like *Pigskin Parade*, *Love Finds Andy Hardy*, and *Broadway Melody of 1938*, the public assumed the formidable zip and pep of the juvenile performer was nothing more than exuberant teen energy and good clean fun.

The great irony, however, was that the Depression-era tabloids were far from free of drug news. Harry J. Anslinger was busily demonizing marijuana, and, to a lesser extent cocaine, to consolidate the position (and budget) of his newly formed Federal Bureau of Narcotics, claiming that the demon weed would inexorably lead to mayhem, madness, and murder, and also sexual promiscuity and rape. By an odd coincidence, Benzedrine was first being marketed at approximately the same time as the Volstead Act was repealed, after a dozen years of alcohol prohibition. Anslinger had previously held office as the assistant commissioner in the Bureau of Prohibition, and much of his motivation—aside from pure megalomania, and an envy of J. Edgar Hoover and his Division of Investigation (DOI) that would change its name, in 1935, to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the omnipotent FBI—was to provide alternative careers for prohibition agents who were out of a job when Franklin Roosevelt came to power and ended the absurd and highly corrupt ban on alcohol.

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The modern temptation is to treat Anslinger as a joke, and he has even been made the subject of a campy musical, but, at the time, there was nothing funny about his propaganda campaign against “reefer madness”—fully endorsed by newspaper baron William Randolph Hearst. The Anslinger assault would shape the War on Drugs for the rest of the twentieth century, and clear on into the twenty-first, and be responsible for thousands of deaths, millions of incarcerations, trillions in criminal profits, the erosion and abuse of civil liberties, and an entire and detrimental revision of the relationship between citizens and those in authority. With Hearst’s help, Anslinger attempted to create a national (and even international) drug hysteria with horror fantasies typified by this excerpt from *American Magazine*:

“An entire family was murdered by a youthful addict in Florida. When officers arrived at the home, they found the youth staggering about in a human slaughterhouse. With an axe he had killed his father, mother, two brothers, and a sister. He seemed to be in a daze... He had no recollection of having committed the multiple crimes.”



ARTIFICIAL PARADISE

AT APPROXIMATELY the same time Harry Anslinger was spreading grotesque and fabricated disinformation, Aldous Huxley summed up for the first time the basic dilemma that has, throughout the twentieth century, surrounded the very idea of recreational drugs. “That humanity at large will ever be able to dispense with Artificial Paradises seems very unlikely. Most men and women lead lives at the worst so painful, at the best so monotonous, poor, and limited that the urge to escape, the longing to transcend themselves if only for a few moments, is and has always been one of the principal appetites of the soul. Art and religion, carnivals and saturnalia, dancing and listening to oratory—all these have served, in H. G. Wells’ phrase, as Doors in the Wall. And for private, for everyday use there have always been chemical intoxicants. All the vegetable sedatives and narcotics, all the euphorics that grow on trees, the hallucinogens that ripen in berries or can be squeezed from roots—all, without exception, have been known and systematically used by human beings from time immemorial.

To these natural modifiers of consciousness modern science has added its quota of synthetics—chloral, for example, and Benzedrine, the bromides, and the barbiturates.” ●

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UNFORTUNATELY, ANSLINGER HAD A FAR LARGER, and much more gullible and ignorant congregation than Huxley, and they were more than prepared to swallow Harry J's calculated racist, anti-pot screeds like the story of "two Negros who took a girl fourteen years old and kept her for two days under the influence of hemp, and who, upon recovery, was found to be suffering from syphilis." It was also, on the surface, surprising that Anslinger concentrated with such unilateral ferocity on the innocuous cannabis, but closer examination made clear that Anslinger was more concerned with headlines and political power than the alleviation of any social menace, either real or imagined. To tell tales of multiple rape, mass murder, drugged victims, and stoned psychosis, and chase down a kid with a lid of dope, or an impoverished Mexican with a marijuana patch, was far easier than confronting any more real problem. Anslinger was being supported both politically and financially by DuPont, the giant chemical corporation, and it wanted him to eradicate the hemp industry, creating a competition-free market for its new man-made fibers.

Another incongruity was that Anslinger and the Federal Bureau of Narcotics showed absolutely no interest in the widespread use and abuse of Benzedrine, especially as it was beginning to demonstrate that it definitely had a darker side, especially when a habitual user was coming down off the drug. Even while Smith, Klein & French were touting Benzedrine as a manifold panacea, more independent members of the medical profession were expressing

serious doubts about the protracted use of amphetamine. The textbook descriptions of a speed comedown described psychological symptoms like “insomnia, mental states resembling schizophrenia, aggressiveness, irritability, confusion, and panic.” They went on to warn of how “chronic and/or extensively continuous use can lead to amphetamine psychosis, which causes delusions, depression, and paranoia.” One might imagine that an agency such as the FBN might at least take an interest in a widely used chemical stimulant when doubts were starting to be expressed about the physical and social effects of its prolonged use, but Anslinger is not on record as ever having said a bad word about Benzedrine, and one can only assume he was unwilling to go up against such a powerful entity as Smith, Klein & French.

Stretching the imagination quite a bit further, the “youthful addict” who slaughtered his family, or the alleged syphilitic “negroes,” had they existed at all, were more likely extreme cases of amphetamine psychosis in individuals who had been driven to madness by toking on a couple of joints. Indeed, if Anslinger had been making even a minimal attempt to run a functional federal agency to regulate drug use in the United States, he might well have investigated any possible evidence of amphetamine use by the celebrity criminals of the time, the now legendary killers and bank robbers like Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, John Dillinger, or George “Baby Face” Nelson, and not allowed them to become the sole targets of his arch-rival J. Edgar Hoover and his armed G-men.

The truth about the lives and habits of all of the gangsters of the Great Depression has, of course, been

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seriously distorted by Hollywood myth-making and the wish fulfillments of popular culture—the real Bonnie Parker, for instance, is now inseparable from the character played by Faye Dunaway—but speculation that the violence of their headlong bank robbing, and their obvious need for notoriety and self-aggrandizement, could easily suggest that maybe their ultimately suicidal crime sprees were, at least in part, fueled by the contents of cracked-open Bensedrine inhalers.

Of all of these Dust Bowl desperadoes, “Baby Face” Nelson is by far the most likely to have been an overlooked speedfreak. Jay Robert Nash, in his highly comprehensive crime encyclopedia *Bloodletters and Badmen* describes Nelson (real name Lester Gillis) as “something out of a bad dream. Where outlaws such as ‘Pretty Boy’ Floyd and the Barkers would kill to protect themselves when cornered, Nelson went out of his way to murder—he loved it,” and had the unique distinction of being considered too ruthless and reckless for other hardened gangsters to tolerate. Despite his boyish looks, Nelson was an unpredictable thrill-killer with an irrational and hair-trigger temper, and John Dillinger refused to rob banks with him. He had also been exiled from Chicago by no less than Al Capone as being “too violent” for Capone to control. Clearly psychopathic, Nelson had no compunction about gunning down lawmen or innocent bystanders, and ended up killing three FBI agents, more than any other criminal in history.

Obviously the suggestion that “Baby Face” Nelson’s psychosis was caused, or at least exacerbated, by amphetamine is pure speculation, but it does fit what we now know of as the classic sociopath behavior pattern of the

terminal speedfreak, and it should be noted that his great excesses occurred in 1934, when Benzedrine had been available for a full two years. Benzedrine was also on the market in 1933, at the time of what became known as the Kansas City Massacre, a mass slaying of four law-enforcement officers and their prisoner right outside Union Railway Station in Kansas City, Missouri. Charles Arthur "Pretty Boy" Floyd, Vernon Miller, and Adam Richetti attempted to free their running buddy, Frank Nash, from federal custody while he was being transported to the US Penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas, from which he had escaped. The long-term effect of the Kansas City Massacre was to tilt public opinion away from the sort of empathy shared with outlaws like Dillinger, Barrow and Parker, Floyd, and the rest. The Robin Hood mystique they had enjoyed in the hardscrabble 1930s, when banks were perceived as the villains, disappeared, and the outlaws became viewed as little more than stone killers, fit only to be hunted down and destroyed.

To postulate that maybe speed played an unrecorded part in the gangster chronicles of the 1930s may verge on the fanciful. That connection perhaps never existed in reality, but the behavioral levels of ruthless arrogance, the almost total lack of external empathy, and any sense of long-term consequences, fit all too closely to patterns that would repeat themselves over and over again as speed became increasingly integrated into multiple levels of drug-linked subculture. We will never know for sure if Bonnie and Clyde or "Baby Face" Nelson were dangerous prototype speedfreaks, but they certainly exhibited many of what became familiar symptoms.

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What is certain is that the manufacturers must have been aware that the amphetamine they were marketing could, in extreme cases, lead to extreme paranoia, and in a worst-case scenario something akin to schizophrenia. Far from backing off, however, SK&F kept the inhalers and the pills not only rolling, but actually started them rolling in a whole new direction. The military had also noted the unique side effects of the failed asthma cure and became extremely interested. To the military mind, the idea of whole divisions of combat soldier, crews of warships, or airmen on bombing missions with increased stamina, and who were able to function, possibly for days on end, without either sleeping or eating was the stuff of any general's wildest and most fantastic dreams. By the end of the 1930s, the military, led by the Germans and Hitler's reconstituted Wehrmacht, were enthusiastically moving into the speed business.

"The comedown would start with flickering in the periphery of one's vision. It could resemble the flapping of tiny wings, but if you turned your eyes to look, they immediately vanished. These half-seen hallucinations may well have been what caused Hunter S. Thompson to come up with the concept of 'bat country,' a region/state-of-mind in the Nevada desert that his hero Raoul Duke drives through in the classic novel *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas* with '...two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt shaker half full of cocaine, and a whole galaxy of multi-colored uppers, downers, screamers, laughers, and also a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether, and two dozen amyls.' The band's disrepu-

table Ford truck with no insurance could never boast such a cargo manifest, but we desperate rock & rollers did our level best to rise to any intoxicant occasion, which made the long drive home, clean out of everything, doubly surreal and, on occasion, triply unpleasant.

“When high, the speedfreak has a certainty of his or her own omnipotence. Sleep and hunger have been vanquished. The chimes of freedom are flashing. One talks incessantly, but hardly listens to what anyone else is saying. All things are possible except you can’t remember what all things had been, 10 minutes earlier when you first enumerated them. Coming down, on the other hand was something else entirely. There was no true physical reaction as when the junkie is deprived of opiates, except maybe a jagged shaky feeling that made it hard to keep one’s hands steady. The consequences were in the mind, the vision, and the perception. The drummer had the best idea. He had a habit secreting a couple of Mandrax (the British name for Quaaludes) about his person and then dropping them at the start of the journey and putting himself in a blissful coma for the whole experience. As for the rest of us, without the same medicinal forward planning, we would go home the hard way, craving a soft bed and maybe 20 milligrams (mg) of Valium.

“At first we would talk and sing, but then the interior of the vehicle would fall quiet as we retreated into our own post-high introspect. Details would crowd in, irrational irritations like the way one of the band members cleared his throat, or the shape of another’s ear. The grip of paranoia would never be far away, and it would become all too easy to conjure scenarios of conspiracy and

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betrayal, how one's jealous band mates might be plotting to get rid of you. In some ways the semi-hallucinations came as relief, the fluttering at the edge of your vision, or the grotesque imagined crowds, like Wally Wood drawings from classic 1950s issues of *Mad*, that might mysteriously gather in the fields, woods, or hedgerows beyond the hard shoulder of the highway, at least served as a reminder that nothing was as it should be, and little was really real, beyond the ceaseless driving on an endless highway in grey pre-dawn that seemed filled with unfocused specters and undefined threat.” ●

CHAPTER 2

SPEED FOR THE SUPER SOLDIER

IN 1938, THE BERLIN-BASED TEMMLER PHARMACEUTICAL company began marketing a German version of methamphetamine under the brand name Pervitin. It rapidly became a top seller among the German civilian population, but Otto Ranke, the director of the Institute for General and Defense Physiology at Berlin's Academy of Military Medicine, had other plans. In September 1939, Ranke tested the drug on 90 university students, and noted the speed-dosed undergraduates clearly demonstrated increased self-confidence, concentration, and willingness to take risks, at the same time as being far less sensitive to pain, hunger and thirst, and able to go for long periods—in some cases three or four days—without sleep. Ranke believed he had found the key to better-blitzkriegs-through-chemistry, and the creation of the legendary super soldier.

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Once he had concluded that Pervitin could help Nazi Germany win the coming global war, Ranke was faced with the problem that time was against him. With the invasion of Poland already underway, extensive further research was clearly impossible with armies on the move, and declarations of war being made by Britain and France. Some fairly perfunctory tests were carried out on Wehrmacht military drivers during the advance into Poland, and when these confirmed the results obtained from the 90 students, Pervitin was distributed, without delay and en masse, to combat troops and air crews with hardly any restrictions. Between just April and July of 1940, more than 35 million tablets of Pervitin and Isophan (a slightly modified version produced by the Knoll pharmaceutical company) were shipped to the SS, the Wehrmacht, and the Luftwaffe in packages labeled “Stimulant,” and with instructions recommending one or two 3 mg tablets should be taken “to maintain sleeplessness.” Later, as though the speed itself wasn’t attractive enough for the troops, it was even packaged like candy to make it super palatable. Chocolates dosed with methamphetamine were known as *Fliegerschokolade* (“flyer’s chocolate”) when given to pilots, or *Panzerschokolade* (“tanker’s chocolate”) when given to tank crews.

As the panzers rolled and the Stuka dive-bombers dropped from the sky with banshee sirens, as Hitler’s seemingly unstoppable blitzkrieg stormed across Europe, swallowing Poland, France, Belgium, Holland, and large areas of Yugoslavia, the use of speed was hardly a well-kept secret. Somewhat better concealed were the increasingly clear side effects caused by the indiscriminate use of Pervi-

tin and Isophan, and that German soldiers were drinking more heavily than might be expected, and stealing medical-kit opiates to counter the strain of the constant diet of speed. Another unfortunate fact was that the supposed super soldiers quickly developed a tolerance to the drug intended to make them super. In November of 1939, a 22-year-old soldier in occupied Poland wrote home to his family in Cologne, "It's tough out here, and I hope you'll understand if I'm only able to write to you once every two to four days soon. Today I'm writing you mainly to ask for some Pervitin." Seven months later, in May of 1940, the same soldier wrote again. "Perhaps you could get me some more Pervitin so that I can have a backup supply?" Finally, in July of the same year, another request was mailed. "If at all possible, please send me some more Pervitin." The ration of one or two 3 mg tablets didn't seem to be doing it for him. After the war, the young soldier would prove to be the writer Heinrich Böll, who in 1972 became the first German writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature after World War II.
