

Forethoughts

‘See, I think drugs have done some good things for us, I really do. And if you don’t believe drugs have done good things for us, do me a favour: go home tonight, take all your albums, all your tapes, and all your CDs and burn ’em. ’Cause you know what? The musicians who’ve made all that great music that’s enhanced your lives throughout the years? *Real fuckin’ high on drugs.*’

This gag, by American stand-up comedian Bill Hicks, is sampled at the beginning of a song by Californian alternative metal band Tool. Immediately after the punchline, the audience knowingly laughs as one.

I would’ve been around twelve years old when I heard it for the first time. I didn’t understand the joke’s concept or context. I just laughed because the audience did, and because my new favourite band had obviously thought highly enough of this funny guy to quote him – three times – on their second

album. (Pancreatic cancer had killed Hicks two years prior to its release, at age thirty-two.)

Years later, I realised that the lyrics to this particular Tool song – ‘Third Eye’, the final track on the 1996 album *Ænima* – are about expanding one’s consciousness by opening up the proverbial ‘third eye’, which allows perception beyond ordinary sight. The subtext is that illicit drug use is a short cut to achieving that end.

While that idea is fertile ground for a compelling lyrical narrative set to the violent clash of drums, distorted guitar and bass, it took a long time for me to confront this in reality. One reason for this, I believe, is that the conversation surrounding drug use in modern Australia is a black-and-white battleground bisected by stark pathways: the straight-and-narrow of alcohol, caffeine, nicotine and prescription medication, and the dark-and-crooked of cannabis, cocaine, ecstasy, heroin and methamphetamine.

The message that’s been cooked up and reinforced for decades by powerful societal figures – police, politicians, public-health officials and much of the media – is that you’re a fine, upstanding citizen if you stick to the former path by purchasing these government-approved mood-altering substances. Conversely, if you seek out and consume anything in the latter category, you’re a criminal, a loser, and a bad person.

Through my adolescence, I trod the straight-and-narrow line uncritically. As far as I’d come to understand, illicit activity was associated with antisocial behaviour, drug trafficking, violence and crime. It was rare to hear any alternatives to these overpowering, fear-based messages; films and TV

shows – usually made in the United States – provided the only compelling contradictory visual evidence. But these were fictionalised versions of reality. At an intellectual level, I could not entertain the possibility that illegal drugs had the potential to be fun, safe, life-affirming, non-habit-forming – or all of the above. These sorts of stories are rarely told in our society.

Like many Australian teenagers, I abused alcohol – a socially acceptable form of intoxication – on a consistent basis. A hangover is often greeted by your peers with a wink and a playful shake of the head – physical evidence of an apparently memorable night.

In 2007, at age nineteen, I extended one foot across to the dark-and-crooked by smoking cannabis for the first time. I still upheld the old dichotomy in my mind, but now I was a student at a residential college attached to the University of Queensland and was feeling ‘experimental’ – living proof of a classic quote from an early *South Park* episode centred upon drug education: ‘There’s a time and a place for everything, and it’s called college.’

Smoking pot became an occasional, illicit thrill. It felt different from those years of boozing; it felt naughty. It made the mind somersault in strange and interesting ways. It attuned the ears to different frequencies, which made music even more attractive than usual – quite an achievement, as I’ve obsessed over music for as long as I can remember. For the first time in my life, I found myself ‘dabbling with drugs’, and enjoying the company of the outsider types attracted to such behaviours.

I drew the line at weed, though. It took another five years for me to work up the courage to cross it by trying anything ‘harder’ than smoking a joint. In hindsight, this distinction feels

absurdly abstract. What is the difference between smoking pot and swallowing MDMA powder, the psychoactive ingredient in ecstasy? One drug grows from the earth and the other is the product of chemical synthesis, sure. But both are illegal in the eyes of the law. Both are frowned upon by large sectors of the community. The mental leap required to use both substances appears so small as to be insignificant.

Yet, for me, the chasm between the two was vast. I had learnt through the media that any public figure who admits to enjoying illegal drugs can expect to have their character assassinated by moralising commentators who claim to speak on behalf of concerned parents and citizens. A textbook example of this type of demonisation is the story of rugby league player Andrew Johns, who admitted that he enjoyed ecstasy after being ‘caught out’ with an E in his pocket in London in 2007. Cue sensationalist reporting and a remarkably heavy-handed interview on *The Footy Show*, where he was essentially forced to atone for his supposed sin. In retrospect, the entire episode smacks of hypocrisy; Johns was grilled over his occasional and apparently harmless use of a stimulant, despite the fact that the excessive consumption of alcohol – a substance whose harms are well known – has long been a conventional way for both players and fans to celebrate sporting wins and losses alike.

There are very few industries in which the use of illicit drugs is permissible, if not tacitly encouraged. Music is one such profession. It’s not the only one, but it’s certainly the most visible and instantly identifiable. Who besides the archetypal ‘rock star’ can get away with wanton hedonism on any kind of regular basis?

‘Sex, drugs and rock and roll’ may be a cliché – or even, in 2014, something of a myth – but the phrase perfectly encapsulates what our society tends to expect from those who sling guitars, lean on microphone stands and bash drum-skins. Smart rock stars adopt a larger-than-life pose; crowds feed off the life we imagine that they’re living. It doesn’t matter whether that life is in reality tame, tedious or even intolerable. So long as the image is consistent, the sunglasses are worn indoors and the act is well rehearsed, we are sated.

It helps, too, that we tend to perceive creative people – musicians, painters, actors, writers and the like – as living ‘on the edge’, outside of the social norms and expectations that come with nine-to-five, salaried jobs. It’s on the edge, we’re led to believe, that ‘the magic happens’: that by pushing the boundaries of the human mind and body, great work is created.

Drug use is a natural fit with that ideal. Who wants to hear about a musician who treats the creative process like a job, with the regimented hours and routines familiar to so many of the rest of us? That’s mundane. We’d much rather hear about how a hit song was written at the tail-end of a five-day bender in Ibiza, its creators torn and frayed after a non-stop cocaine- and booze-fest.

Whether or not this type of debauchery ever happens is irrelevant: it’s the *idea* that’s potent. Most of us couldn’t live that way, even if we wanted to, so we live vicariously through the myth. ‘Sex, drugs and rock and roll’ is shorthand for ‘someone else’s job is more fun than mine’. It’s our nature to covet that which dangles beyond our grasp, and, for many, the imagined life of the popular musician is one such carrot.

In late 2012, after five years of freelance journalism, I was invited to submit a book proposal on a topic of my choice. Before too long, I was struck by the thought of combining two of my interests, music and drug use, by investigating the thread that linked them.

The seed had been subconsciously planted some twelve years earlier, as my developing brain took in the appealing sounds of Tool and their appreciation of Bill Hicks' dark humour. I was not naive enough to take his comedy at face value; it is simplistic to assume that all musicians were *real* fuckin' high on drugs when creating the songs that enhanced our lives. But it's an assumption worth investigating, in order to separate fact from fiction.

As a journalist, I hunt for stories. The purpose of *Talking Smack* is to seek out and record real stories about drug use in Australia across the last four decades, from the 1970s onwards, by speaking with some of the nation's prominent musicians, singers and songwriters. The goal from the beginning has been to capture the truth about a fraught topic that is rarely discussed with candour, or without judgement.

Talking Smack is not a reductive text with easily digestible conclusions, as there is nothing simple about the nuanced matter of drug use. Nor is it a scientific analysis of the effects of certain substances. I'm not interested in statistics; instead, I have endeavoured to uncover true stories about the realities of this tricky topic and present them without prejudice.

When approaching artists for these interviews, I outlined my request for an honest conversation about drugs. To borrow a cliché, I wanted the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I have no reason to believe that anyone I interviewed failed to meet this request.

Keep in mind, though, that what follows is the individual's interpretation of events. This is not about finger-pointing, blame-shifting, or naming other parties who may or may not have been involved in certain activities. (Handily, this should keep my publisher's lawyers from exerting themselves too strenuously.) Instead, each chapter is the story of one musician's life, viewed through a lens focused on their experiences with drugs. In some cases, those experiences are incidental, or even non-existent; in others, they are significant and consuming.

It is worth pointing out, too, that my interviewees are as fallible to the inconsistencies of human memory as you or I. At one point during his 2008 memoir *The Night of the Gun*, the *New York Times* journalist David Carr – a former alcoholic and crack-cocaine addict – paused the narrative. 'But was it really all thus?' he wrote. 'When memory is called to answer, it often answers back with deception. How is it that almost every warm bar stool contains a hero, a star of his own epic, who is the sum of his amazing stories?'

In that book, Carr decided to report on his own past, spending two years pulling documents and interviewing people he hadn't seen in two decades. 'By turns, it became a kind of journalistic ghost dancing,' he wrote. 'Trying to conjure spirits past, including mine. It felt less like journalism than archaeology, a job that required shovels and axes, hacking my way into dark, little-used passages and feeling my way around.'

Talking Smack is not that kind of book. Wherever possible, I have fact-checked matters relating to time and space. But most of what you'll read in each chapter is an individual's retrospective interpretation of how things were, and how they

came to be, based on a single face-to-face interview. I am not concerned with multiple points of view. Just monologues.

Steve Jobs said in a famous 2005 commencement speech that it's impossible to connect the dots looking forward; his point, I believe, is that we can only make sense of our behaviours by looking backward. Oftentimes, objects in the rear-view mirror appear clearer than what we see through the windscreen.

My fourteen interviewees have my timeless admiration and sincere thanks for being involved with what any rational human would describe as a thorny project. None of them had much – if anything – to gain by entrusting these stories to a journalist. I suppose it has been ever thus, given the purely transactional nature of most entertainment interviews. But, in this case, they never even had a product to sell – neither new music nor forthcoming tour to promote.

Perhaps 'street cred', or a desire to build or uphold a certain reputation – the aforementioned rock-star myth – could have been a motivating force. But I found no such vanities while working on this book. Instead, many of my interviewees agreed to talk to me because of the two simple words that follow.

Drugs exist.

To pretend otherwise is foolish. Some have been developed by pharmaceutical companies to treat human ailments. Others occur naturally. Still more were created for innocuous purposes and later discovered to have psychoactive properties (as with MDMA, which was first synthesised with the goal of stopping abnormal bleeding). These differing substances attract different people for different reasons. For some, it's an

occasional holiday from their daily responsibilities. For others, it's a welcome escape from a painful existence. For many, the attraction lies somewhere in between those two extremes.

Neither end of that spectrum is right or wrong. There is no better or worse. It's disingenuous to categorise alcohol and paracetamol as polar opposites of cocaine and LSD. Recreational use, drug addiction and sobriety are all as worthy of discussion as the other. To exclude any substance or lifestyle choice from this conversation would be a failure on my part, just as I believe it has been a failure on the part of Australian society to snuff out or shrug off any attempts to discuss the use of illicit drugs with a clear head.

As will become apparent throughout the following pages, I have some first-hand experience with substances. But I am a nobody – an interlocutor, a messenger boy. It is far more interesting, I think, to hear true stories about drug use – both good and bad, productive and destructive – from the mouths of those who know what they are talking about, from musicians who've made all that great music that's enhanced our lives throughout the years.

Maybe they *were* real fuckin' high on drugs at the time.
So what?

Andrew McMillen, Brisbane

STEVE KILBEY

At the age of thirty-seven, Steve Kilbey found himself at a crossroads. He'd become a pop star fronting The Church, a band whose song 'Under the Milky Way', the lead single from their fifth album, *Starfish*, became a worldwide hit in 1988. He'd made quite a lot of money: he had a house and a recording studio in Sydney, a couple of cars, a load of instruments and some cash to spare. He wasn't filthy rich, but he was certainly very comfortable.

By this point, Kilbey considered himself a worldly drug user: he had started smoking pot in his late teens, tried psychedelics soon after and bought his first gram of cocaine after making his first record, *Of Skins and Heart*, in 1980. Eleven years later, he was recording for a new project named Jack Frost with his friend Grant McLennan, a fellow Australian pop star best known for his work with Brisbane act The Go-Betweens. One night, while out at a bar and feeling an empty sense of unhappiness at the life he'd earned, despite his success, Kilbey

was taken aback by McLennan's proposal: 'Let's get some heroin.'

'It came right out of the blue,' Kilbey recalls in February 2013. 'It was the last thing on my mind. I went, "Oh, here's \$100, get me some too.'" No one had ever offered it to me up until then. All the other drugs you might get offered, but no one ever says, "Hey, want some heroin?" It's not like that. If you've got a stash, you don't offer it. You don't really go around turning other people on. It's not the sort of thing you advertise.'

When McLennan made his proposal, Kilbey thought to himself, *Yeah! That'll shift things around a bit.* 'As a teenager, I'd been hearing how bad marijuana was; people were being arrested and chucked in jail [for using it]. And then, when I started smoking it,' he says, 'I thought it was the most benign, pleasant thing that doesn't seem to have any real drawbacks. I wrongly assumed heroin might be the same. I thought it might be the victim of really bad press, and that all the perils had been exaggerated.' He pauses for a moment, then laughs. 'And I believed that for a little while, naively.' He had no idea that his first taste of that substance would come to define the next eleven years of his life.

'I loved it. The moment the fucking stuff hit my nostrils, I was like, "Wow, this is what I'm looking for,'" he says. 'All my life, I'd had my conscience going, "You're a cunt, you're a horrible guy, you don't deserve what you've got. You did this and that, and your mum and dad didn't love you." All this stuff. And then, the moment that first line of heroin hit my nose, it all stopped. I was sitting there going, "Oh, I'm all right. I feel kind of cool. I feel like people could like me.'

It stopped that whole dialogue instantly, and I felt warm and cosy and happy.’

He acknowledges that not all heroin dabblers experience this instant affinity for the drug; some try it and think it’s horrible. ‘But for me,’ he says, ‘it was like’ – he snaps his fingers – ‘something I’d been waiting for my whole life.’

Kilbey wasn’t the kind of guy to wait around for his friend to call his dealer; nor was McLennan reckless enough to give him direct access to the source. Perhaps the more experienced user had wisely recognised the sudden enthusiasm that Kilbey had developed for something in which he’d previously shown no interest. Kilbey says of McLennan, ‘Sometimes he became addicted. He got little habits, and then he’d refrain, but he wasn’t an addict.’ He found McLennan’s caution frustrating, because he refused to introduce his dealers. But the wealthy pop star saw no reason to hide his fondness for this drug from anyone. Around this time, some ‘bad characters’ started hanging around a house in Surry Hills that Kilbey had rented, which doubled as a recording studio. ‘Some of them were heroin addicts,’ he says. ‘They were buying heroin for me. Eventually, I met some dealers. I was off and running.’

One of those characters was a doctor who had been deregistered due to her addiction. One day, Kilbey was snorting a line. In response, the doctor clicked her tongue and shook her head. He looked up, surprised. ‘What’s wrong?’ he asked. ‘What a waste,’ she replied. Kilbey didn’t understand; he thought he was using the drug efficiently. She beckoned him over, found a vein on the back of his hand and injected him. It was then that Steve Kilbey decided he wasn’t going to waste any more heroin.

‘For a while, it seemed to me like, “Wow, how good is this? I’ve got a doctor very carefully doing all the right things, talking to me about my veins and my arteries, finding different veins and showing me how to do it. This is really legit,”’ he says. ‘So I learnt how to shoot up. *Bang*. I was off, and on the downward spiral.’

It wasn’t just the drug and the process of injecting it that gripped him. ‘I was fascinated with all of it. I’d go round some idiot’s house, and someone would be saying’ – here he adopts a nasal, strained voice, imitating a junkie – “‘Ahh, Jim is fuckin’ getting sixty mils of methadone now.’” His face perks up brightly, mimicking intense interest. “‘*Really?*” The junkie would reply, “‘Yeah, they said he can have more takeaways ...’” I was interested in all of this bullshit: who was in rehab; who was in jail; who was selling; stories of the great heroin of the past, from fucking Thailand or wherever. It was all I lived and breathed, this fucking rubbish world.’

He defines that year of his life, the beginning of his heroin habit, as ‘a slow erosion’. Kilbey’s creativity didn’t falter, though. ‘At first, I was super creative. I wanted to re-create the drug through music; I was trying to re-create this kind of languid, floating, deep, dreamy feeling.’ This goal was best captured on The Church’s 1992 album, *Priest = Aura*, a remarkable record that remains a fan favourite among the band’s twenty full-length recordings. On the opening track, ‘Aura’, Kilbey sings, ‘Where can a soldier fix himself a drink? / Forget the noise, forget the stink / And the opium is running pretty low / ’Cause when the pain comes back, I don’t want to know ...’ In ‘Nightmare’, the penultimate track on the re-release, he sings, ‘I wanna consume, I wanna smoke up a

forest / Shoot up a river, run up the bill / I want women and men / And when the whole damn thing is over / I want it all back again / Yeah, maybe I'll be happy then ...'

'That was a good one,' he says of *Priest* = *Aura*. 'That was the honeymoon. That's when you can hear it; you can hear it's working. You can hear that I achieved that thing. And then it went downhill after that. For ten or eleven years, I still made records [on it]. But I struggled a bit. When the gear arrived, I'd get so stoned I couldn't work, either. Working with people, producing records, I spent a lot of time on auto-pilot going' – here he slurs his voice, imitating a barely there shell of a stoner – “Yeah, great, great, mate. Yeah, that's a great take.”

The alternative was worse, though, when the drug was *in absentia* and the singer was hanging out for a fix. To demonstrate, Kilbey stands up from his couch, visibly shaking, and paces back and forth in an agitated state. He picks up my recorder from the coffee table and whispers into it, '*Where are you?*' Whether this is for dramatic effect or a genuine accident, mistaking it for a phone, I'm not sure; he apologises, puts it back down and then mimes talking on the phone, pacing back and forth again. '*Where are you? Are you coming? Are you coming?*' Still acting, he talks to an imaginary record producer, pretends to play it cool – 'Yeah, I'll be there in a minute. I'll come in and work for half an hour. Just give me half an hour ...' – then resumes his agitated whispering. '*Where the fuck are you?*'

He drops the act and sits down as if nothing has happened. 'So it was never the best place, but nonetheless I did work,' he states matter-of-factly. 'And I had to keep working to make

money, for the gear. I don't think the records I made during my heroin phase are the best records I ever made. The band were never very fucking happy about it, but there was not much they could do, either. They couldn't really kick me out. Whoever was there just had to put up with it. They became tired of, "Hey, can I borrow \$100?"

It's an understatement to describe Steve Kilbey as a gifted conversationalist. The tanned, silver-haired fifty-eight-year-old radiates intensity and engagement in the topic at hand. He is articulate, self-aware and funny. He uses simple adjectives such as 'idiot' and 'ratbag' at unexpected moments, which add to the humour of his storytelling. After he lets me into his bright, two-storey apartment off a quiet street in Bondi on a Thursday morning, I cast my eyes across his full bookshelves and striking artwork hung on the walls. Besides being known for his music, Kilbey is also a talented painter, with a small studio in his upstairs bedroom. Out the window is a view of the nearby hills; the ocean and Bondi Beach can be seen from the balcony.

Kilbey soon makes clear his problem with the volume of my voice. 'Listen, after forty years of rock and roll, I'm a bit deaf,' he tells me as we sit down in the living room. 'So speak loudly if you can, 'cause my ears are ringing so loud that to me you sound like ...' – he mumbles incoherently to illustrate the point. 'All the consonants are disappearing between my *wowooooo*,' he says, imitating the high-pitch noise that he now lives with. 'So you have to really enunciate it.'

'Tinnitus?' I ask, loudly.

'Screaming tinnitus,' he replies. 'Oh well. They told me I'd go deaf, and I did.'