



Conscious Life presents

From Counterculture to Psychedelic Renaissance

Guest: Dr Erik Davis

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[00:00:13] Alexander Beiner

Our next guest is Erik Davis. Erik is an author and an award-winning journalist. He holds a PhD in Religious Studies, and he's the author of six books, including *TechGnosis*, *High Weirdness*, and the upcoming *Blotter: The Untold Story of an Acid Medium*.

Erik, welcome.

Dr Erik Davis

Hey, great to be here.

Alexander Beiner

Erik, there's so many things I want to cover with you. The first one, I think, which would be quite useful to just place us in history. A lot of people might be familiar with the summer of love and the explosion of interest, in certain circles, around psychedelics in the '60s, and then this sudden prohibition that took place in the '70s. Now, of course, this renaissance in research. In your view, what are some of the legacies of that period that have impacted culture and that we're living with today?

Dr Erik Davis

I think to answer that, I want to pick up one step and think about something that superficially doesn't seem to be related to this, which is the calls we're hearing these days and in the past, to recognize the role that Indigenous communities and cultures play in psychedelics.

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The story is that most psychedelics were maintained, sometimes under great duress, by Indigenous communities, and they kept the wisdom of the mushroom alive. They kept the wisdom of peyote alive. They kept the wisdom of San Pedro alive under circumstances that were sometimes tough, and that we, being the West or the non Indigenous developed world, owe Indigenous people a debt of gratitude. But we also should really be paying attention to what they have to say.

It's not that Indigenous worldviews are instantly transmittable to a globalized multicultural, highly capitalized globe that's spinning off the edge of the cliff. But it's also a really really good time to listen closely. I think that within psychedelic culture, both today and in the past, there's long been an appreciation of this, even a longing. This has led many people to go and practice with Indigenous spiritual experts or Shamans, different communities.

You see this, particularly with ayahuasca, where people who are introduced around the world to ayahuasca often recognize that it's part of an Indigenous or mestizo tradition that goes back to the Amazon, and that that's part of the worldview that you're entering into, that has elements of animism or relationships with plants and animals, that it has a pre-modern quality to it.

I think that's a legitimate appreciation, and that part of what modern people, people who grow up in a in a modern, rootless environment, are getting out of this relationship with indigeneity, which can happen in good ways and bad ways, with appropriation, with confusion, with genuine love and connection and learning. I mean, it's the whole kit and caboodle.

But one reason that people are drawn to it is because it provides a sense of ancestral context, that there's a lineage, that this shaman learned from another shaman, learned from another shaman, learned from another shaman. They might change it along the way. They might remix things along the way. But there's a sense of continuity that we in the West, particularly coming to psychedelics, feel like we don't have.

So this is a long way of saying that one of the reasons to pay attention in a deeper and more complex and more personal way that I think many of us do to the legacy of the 1960s, and the whole counterculture tradition, is that for better, and to some degree for worse, these are "our" ancestors. I put quotes around it because who's a we, who's an us, who's a they, is very complicated, but meaning that these are the ancestors for the rootless moderns.

So understanding where they're coming from, what their experiences were like, what they have to say today, what they have to say in their art, in their stories, in their personal lives, in their architecture, et cetera, et cetera, is extremely valuable, not because it's the truth or the best way to think about things, but because it is the current out of which contemporary psychedelic culture comes in many ways.

Of course, it goes back farther than that. It's not just the counterculture, which we think about the 1960s and this anti-war movement and this this new youth culture that's resistant to the ideas of the 1950s. Really, when you start paying attention, you realize that these currents go back, back through Bohemia, back through the 20th century. There's a lot of ancestors that are hidden there.

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But if we turn to these stories, again, like we're hearing the stories of the ancestors rather than just a bunch of kids that were high on drugs and screwing around and having fun, which it also is, then I think it actually allows us to tune into the wisdom there as well as the actual social conditions of people, many of whom are still with us, although that generation is really aging out.

We're in a very precious time where I'm like an older Gen X, and I'm very aware of the difference between me and that generation and the fact that they're in their 70s and 80s, and they're leaving us, leaving the planet, and that it's actually a very precious time to tune into people who went through these experiences.

That's the way that I like to frame the importance of the counterculture particularly in understanding how people have interpreted psychedelic experience, how they've woven it into their lives, how they've allowed it to inspire other things. I think it's important to recognize those cultural dimensions at a time when the primary story about psychedelics today has to do with healing, and a certain medical or clinical approach to healing and the understandable and even glorious engagement with psychedelics as potential agents of that healing. That's really powerful stuff.

But if that doesn't happen within a larger cultural framework, and by culture, I mean esthetics, I mean how we relate to other people, sociology, literature, our understanding of history, that whole humanity sphere, if you will, then I'm afraid that it becomes a little bit disconnected and we lose a chance to actually grow a richer culture, and a culture that's also able to withstand a lot of the challenges that are here already and that will continue to come down the pike.

I'm afraid that there's a overly individualistic tendency towards the healing model. It's about your individual problem. Here's the individual pill solution. You come to the individual therapist and we work it out together and you're good to go, as opposed to building a worldview, a set of practices, an open-ended set of practices. I draw a lot of inspiration from the cleverness and foolishness and seat-of-the-pantsness that we find in the counterculture history.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, likewise. It's very close to my heart because like many people, my first entry point into the psychedelic world was not through... In fact, when I entered, there wasn't the medicalized aspect of it. It wasn't really around. You're Gen X, I'm millennial. And then, of course, there's Gen Z people who are now discovering psychedelics, and then the boomer generation. But the promise of psychedelics, when I became interested in them, was profound cultural change, a sense of real transformation.

I remember, actually, I was on early internet forums, pre-social media, when the first Johns Hopkins study came out in the mid-2000s, and we thought, Oh, that's cool. It wasn't like, this is the future. It was like, Oh, that's cool. That medical side is also good. As you say, it's gone much more on a medical route, which is also important.

But I think it would be great to paint a picture for people who might not be familiar with this of what was going on culturally between the early '70s when psychedelics were made illegal and the mid

2000s, when the renaissance slowly, in research, started coming back. People were still interested in this. So what was happening?

[00:09:57] Dr Erik Davis

Yeah, that's great. So, we're generally familiar with the 1960s when the LSD and related compounds weren't scheduled, so they were available. Then slowly, the clamp down happened as the youth culture exploded, but there was already a sense of the powerful, cultural and psychological transformative power of these things before, some people even wanted to hope that it didn't get into the hands of the kids so that they could keep using them for good purposes.

But then once the youth culture took off, and once the youth culture had an oppositional quality and that the drugs then become a way to control it, that was one of the motivations of Nixon's war on drugs was because, in a way, if you make drugs anathema, then you have a great tool to go after these communities, many of which also use drugs. It became polarized in a way that we should be very familiar with.

And then what happened? Well, it's like one of the stories in the '60s was the idea like, "All we need to do is put LSD into the reservoir, into the water system. Everyone will turn on and we'll have world peace", right? But in a weird way, acid did get into the water supply, in the sense that it got into culture and it got into a generation. In the United States, in the 1970s, there was far more widespread use of psychedelics than there was in the 1960s when it was relatively concentrated in a few geographic areas amongst a few underground scenes.

But by the mid 1970s, it's available everywhere. Throughout the Midwest, any high school, it's around. You actually have more and more people turning on, arguably without a really clear idea of what they're doing because you don't have the movement. It's just this widespread drift. There's a lot of challenging situations that people have. But at the same time, there's a lot of creativity.

You're going to find a psychedelic thumbprint on the environmental movement, on the movement in feminism to a degree, in Native American movement. All sorts of ways that people worked through the 1970s had this impulse. The New Age, for example, which is a mixed bag, but it still is a place where people came together for healing and for finding a new way to be spiritual in a very secular time, that is, in a way, just a psychedelic expression without the drugs or following the drugs.

It's very influential in a lot of zones. Then in the 1980s, in a way, the 1980s was the last great time for subcultures where there were tons and tons of subcultures, industrial music, punk and post-punk, and the zine culture. I mean, it's just a world of undergrounds. There's psychedelics mixed into the whole thing. In a way, it opened up this space for the underground. Then what you see then in the '90s coming forward is more and more coming together around these things.

But I think one of the most important things to recognize about psychedelics, in particular in this period, is something that I learned from doing the research on my book that's just about to come out. The book's called *Blotter: The Untold Story of an Acid Medium*. It's the first history and analysis of LSD blotter, the paper perforated squares, usually imprinted with some image, that was used to distribute LSD.

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It's a fascinating story. It's a medium that arises from the underground, and so everything about it is all underground, the imagery, the art, the manufacture, the distribution, et cetera, et cetera. It becomes more dominant as the visible LSD culture declines.

It's not a '60s medium. It's a medium of the 1980s. You can track what happens to LSD culture by looking at blotter because it's being distributed at a time when outside of the Grateful Dead, nobody really thought that psychedelic culture was alive.

But here's, I think, one of the most important things I learned from my research is that, and this is even the DEA recognized this, is that the people who are manufacturing LSD did so out of passionate belief in the value of LSD. They did it, so, yeah, they were making money. And yes, they were criminals. They were criminals who could have gone to, and sometimes did go to, prison for a very long time. But they did it out of some kind of belief, sometimes a messianic belief that this is how we were going to transform the world. Sometimes just out of their profound love of the experience, and sometimes because it was just their crazy culture that they wanted to perpetuate.

So then you had this very interesting situation, you have criminals who have to work under the law, against the law, with the law in mind, secretly, cleverly using all sorts of criminal methods. But they had heart. They were doing it out of... And they were also making money, and they also enjoy the adventure of crime. But what you have then is this weird culture that's actually trying to be a real heart-driven, emotional, social connection space. But it's in the shadow of the law and in the shadow of the mainstream.

So what does that do? It produces a certain way of connecting with people. And one of the things that people talk about, and you mentioned it yourself, is that if you got into a psychedelic culture in these years, one of the things you connect with was that you're part of a tribe. And you're part of a tribe where literally, you could get into a lot of trouble by being part of that tribe. There's an earnestness and a conviction that is required in order to continue to identify and work successfully in that domain. Those are all really extraordinary values.

It's not that I'm saying that was better. Obviously, people went to prison, that was a horrible thing. But there is something that is profoundly lost when anything becomes part of the market in a contemporary consumer environment, and it becomes available. It's easily available because the system, the capitalist system, replaces social relations. That's what it's designed to do. We benefit from that. It's convenient. It's nice in a lot of ways, but it takes something profound out of it, which is this process of entering into a set of social relations.

While we might not want to bring those years back again, and I would certainly be opposed to any turning up the volume, even though, of course, many of these things are still illegal, like LSD, I think it's very important to pay attention to the values that emerged from these communities in light of the danger that, again, they become disconnected from larger social possibility, the feelings of connectedness and collectivity, which are just valuable in and of themselves, even if they don't change the world.

Right now, we're suffering from a terrible sense of solitude and disconnection and aimlessness and pointlessness. It's really a very difficult time in a lot of ways. I really hope that the social dimension

of psychedelics gets more attention. I mean that not just in terms of the connections of people who are using or distributing or things like that, but that in a way, the most appropriate environment for psychedelics is social.

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We might say, "Oh, recreational use, that's not very good. We need more focused, intentional use". Yeah, I understand what that means. Recreational use can be silly, superficial, and dangerous. But the good side of recreational use, what are we talking about? Well, a lot of the time we're talking about people who are coming together and dancing for hours and getting to know each other, and connect with each other and each other's spirits through dancing, not through speaking, not through talking about politics, not through making a move, not even trying to pick somebody up. Maybe that happens later. But for those hours, you're in a space of convivial sociality that's incredibly transformative in that particular environment. So I think that's a great example of a lesson from the counterculture.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah. And just on that point, I mean, there's a few things, but on that point, there's a real world example from here in the UK. So people might remember the UK still has, but much less so than it used to, a football hooligan problem. Guys beating each other up at football matches. In some ways, Britain had this other revival in the late '80s and '90s of rave culture, where MDMA was the drug of choice.

There's, in fact, a documentary, there's documented examples of football hooligans saying, "We would go to these raves to find these other guys and beat them up. We would take MDMA and realize, actually, we had a lot more in common with them than we thought", and they'd end up becoming friends.

Some people have convincingly tracked this decline in football hooliganism with these deep, expansive moments of connection people were having in rave culture, facilitated by the MDMA.

I think there's another point I wanted to pick up on, which probably we haven't covered yet in this conference, which is just how unique the illegality of psychedelics makes them for what we're going through now as they become legal. When I was on internet forums in, I don't know, 2006, talking about psychedelics and we're all anonymous, although I actually had a podcast, so I was less anonymous. Some people chose to be anonymous, some people didn't.

There was this real sense of, I might go to an airport and not be allowed entry somewhere. Or there's all sorts of risks associated with it. But I think that brought together communities of people who, by and large, cared very deeply about the experience and the connectedness, and including a lot of researchers who dipped in and out of that space, but might not talk about it explicitly.

But so this idea of community is, I think, a really interesting one. There's a lot of talk of, obviously the disconnection of capitalism you mentioned, there's a lot of questioning of, is there such a thing as a psychedelic community now? As we're going, all this mainstreaming, where do you see the aspects of psychedelic community, some sense of cohesion that people share that brings them together.

[00:21:48] Dr Erik Davis

Yeah. I also don't know anymore, I'll be honest. I don't use that phrase anymore to talk about the contemporary situation because it's so obvious that there are many communities. Communities, and some of them aren't even really communities. They're people trying to make a buck or they're people trying to put out a product and even for some good reasons. So I'm not sure.

And one of the other things you see happen is because people enjoy the signs of these subcultures, meaning... And we're in this situation where with social media, in particular, it becomes very easy to represent subcultural affiliation with a Shipibo cloth from the Amazon or a Burning Man rave hat or whatever you got.

We're at a time where all these signs are loose, so you can't rely on the signs anymore to mean anything. In my generation, when I was a kid, tattoos meant that you were at least in these somewhat marginal communities. If you saw a tattoo, that was that person making an identity move. "I'm that far away from the mainstream that I have a tattoo on my neck". And now you can't assume anything. It doesn't mean anything.

I mean, it's a cool surface. This is the way culture works, I accept that. So we're in a funny place where the signs of psychedelic community that came from these various undergrounds don't mean as much in that sense, but something else is coming up. I think it's going to involve what happens with diversion. I think it's going to involve what kids do. I think it's going to involve things that are pushing the boundary of what is acceptable psychedelic use.

While that would be of concern, and would be of concern to parents, and I understand that it's a mixed bag, there is something vital about that marginal activity. We're in a weird crux where you don't want to say it's groovy, but you also don't want to do everything you can to crush it, because I think you need some space of informality, and maybe even of invisibility, in order to create some of these connections that we're searching for. I also hope that there will be new kinds of collectives that emerge that are driven by the need and the interest of doing something special that requires some veils of secrecy.

For example, there are some dance party collectives that are very secretive about what they're doing so that they can have the time and space to develop a particular subculture, and then if it's successful, more and more people come and whatever. But they've had the time to develop something because if you just put it out there on the internet, boom, it's gone. There's no space to make something special happen. I think that the inherent creativity and sociality of these experiences will foster some of this. It might take more time and more effort.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, I really love that. I think the psychedelic-using communities and subcultures, I think they're very diverse and distinct. But one thing that I think largely share is a level of creativity and playfulness. This idea that you can't see where the cutting edge of culture is these days because the cutting edge of culture is not to be seen.

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In an age where everything is spectacle, everything's plastered over social media, for me, that's a very refreshing thought, that there's interesting experiments happening that are not on social media. I think we'll probably start seeing that more and more culturally. There's this phrase, 'the great unplugging', which I like, that will increasingly be unplugging to get away from this very online world.

I thought it would be nice to talk a little bit, get your sense of a state of the disunion, if you will. If you have to give a state of the union of the way psychedelics are evolving right now. We spoke about this back in 2020 when there was this big influx of investment into psychedelics, a couple of billion dollars coming into the space. That era seems to have dipped and become more modest now in the last few years. I sometimes have a hard time figuring out, okay, where are things moving? What's the vibe effectively? What's your sense of that?

Dr Erik Davis

Yeah, I'm also not going to pretend like I have a picture of that because I think it is fundamentally unclear. It's also almost philosophical, how do you identify what the edge is, or where the action is happening? There's so many questions about legality and things like that.

I think for me, what I pay the most attention to is religion, broadly stated. That's partly because my training is in religious studies. I've always been interested in it. I'm not talking here specifically about formal organized religions, although I'm also talking about that, because that's a big thing that's happening now is the liberal wings of Judaism, Christianity, Catholicism, and even a little bit of Islam are experimenting with, well, actually, maybe psychedelics properly framed can be a help to people in their spiritual search, and maybe even in their recognition of the dimension of reality that religion speaks to.

That's a reasonable bet that if you take people who are raised secular, and then they have some very big psychedelic experiences. Maybe once they just thought they were getting some therapy done, but they walk away with questions that they'd never had before. Well, that's like a new space for religious explanations.

That space, I think, is very interesting. I already mentioned the Indigenous call, which is the call both to share prophets, but more broadly to really connect in with Indigenous wisdom, Indigenous leaders, ideas that come out of these communities in a way, a psychological and cultural act of reparations, to the degree that it's possible given the Holocaust in the past. But that there's a window now for a different connection and a different conversation that I take very seriously and that I also think is where the action is.

And then finally, I would say that people... It's like we got to grow up fast. One of the things about the psychedelic underground is that there were rules of thumb that were developed. How do you deal with inflation? Sometimes people go through and then they come away and they think they're a Messiah, or they have the answer to everything. Well, what do you do if you see this happening to yourself, if you see this happening to your friends, and you don't have anyone to call from, people aren't going to too many psychiatrists who are dealing with this issue.

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There are ways, not perfect, and sometimes there's big failures, but there are ways to modify this, not taking people... Humor comes up a lot. Like, "Yeah, okay, great. We're going to change the world tomorrow. Okay, whatever. Come on, come on, come on. We got to go do this other thing". There are ways of engaging that, that now when there's way more people who are turning to this for the first time, including many of the therapists who are the experts, but they're not really that... A lot of them aren't really that trained with long experience, with seeing all the messiness that can happen.

We're in a real rapid speed up for wisdom at the moment. And so any way that people can get out some of these, or even develop these, rules of thumb, I think, is really, really important as people turn on.

But I think the one thing that's really important, and then I sit with a lot, is that psychology has a tendency to pretend like it has all the answers. And so you have, let's call it a psychological problem, and you go and you get a pill that treats the physical dimension of it or a psychiatric problem, let's call it. And there's some therapeutic ideas about how that might work. And all that's fine and well, it can be very effective. But the reality is that psychedelics open up dimensions, questions, and aspects of being that are not containable in a secular psychological framework, full stop.

And so everybody, the psychologist, the pill manufacturer, the individual who's going into it, the culture at large, has to be ready for that gap and for that crack. It can be a very powerful one. It can be a transformative one. It can be a confusing one. It can be a very difficult one. But the idea that I still sense, because it helps a lot of institutions and a lot of professions, is that "We got this covered, don't worry about it. We've got the bad trips covered. We have the existential crisis covered. We have the, Is there a God? question covered". They don't.

We have to just keep paying attention to that and doing the best we can to prepare people for questions and concerns and conundrums that can be really life-changing.

Alexander Beiner

Erik, that feels like a really natural and great place to draw to a close. I think that's a really important message. Thank you so much for taking the time.

Dr Erik Davis

Thanks, Ali. It's always great to talk to you.