



William S. Burroughs loathed it, Timothy Leary loved it, but most people scarcely know it exists. It's DMT, a powerful hallucinogen that offers a mind-blowing and sometimes terrifying high ... as well as a possible explanation for everything from schizophrenia to alien encounters.

# The freakiest trip

*"Right here and now, one quanta away, there is raging a universe of active intelligence that is transhuman, hyperdimensional, and extremely alien."*

— Terence McKenna,  
*Tryptamine Hallucinogens and Consciousness*, 1983

*"It begins on the second toke – a snapping-to as if the earth and sky have drawn closer together. There is a bright, metallic edge to things, and there are voices – they whisper, Are you going? Is she going? I exhale into sound – an ascending tone, a tearing, and a voice (mine?) replies, Yes. White light."*

*"The last to go under, I search the faces of my fellow travellers for some sign of what is to come, but nothing will prepare me for the experience. The breaking through into another place. The others."*

— Account of a DMT experience, Byron Bay, 2003

**I**T IS ONE OF THE STRONGEST hallucinogens known to man. A single hit of DMT (N,N-dimethyltryptamine) transports the user into a fully psychedelic state for about 15 minutes, during which reality, as we know it, ceases to exist. Stunned, speechless, it is as if body and spirit are torn asunder. Yet, even among veterans of the psychedelic '60s, it remains an enigma.

Despite its low profile, DMT is found in thousands of plant species worldwide, including common varieties of Australian acacia. The earliest documented use dates back to the 15th century, when Columbus wrote home about a mysterious "powder" – known as *cohoba*, used as an intoxicating snuff by the Amazonian Indians.

So-called "god-revealing" plants, or "entheogens" – such as the peyote cactus and

fly-agaric mushroom – have been part of the spiritual life of ancient cultures for millennia. The shamans of South America make a potion known as *ayahuasca* to blast them through the outer skin of this reality into the spirit world – often combining plants high in DMT with those that contain the MAO (monoamine oxidase) inhibitors that prevent DMT being broken down in the gut before it can reach ground zero: the brain.

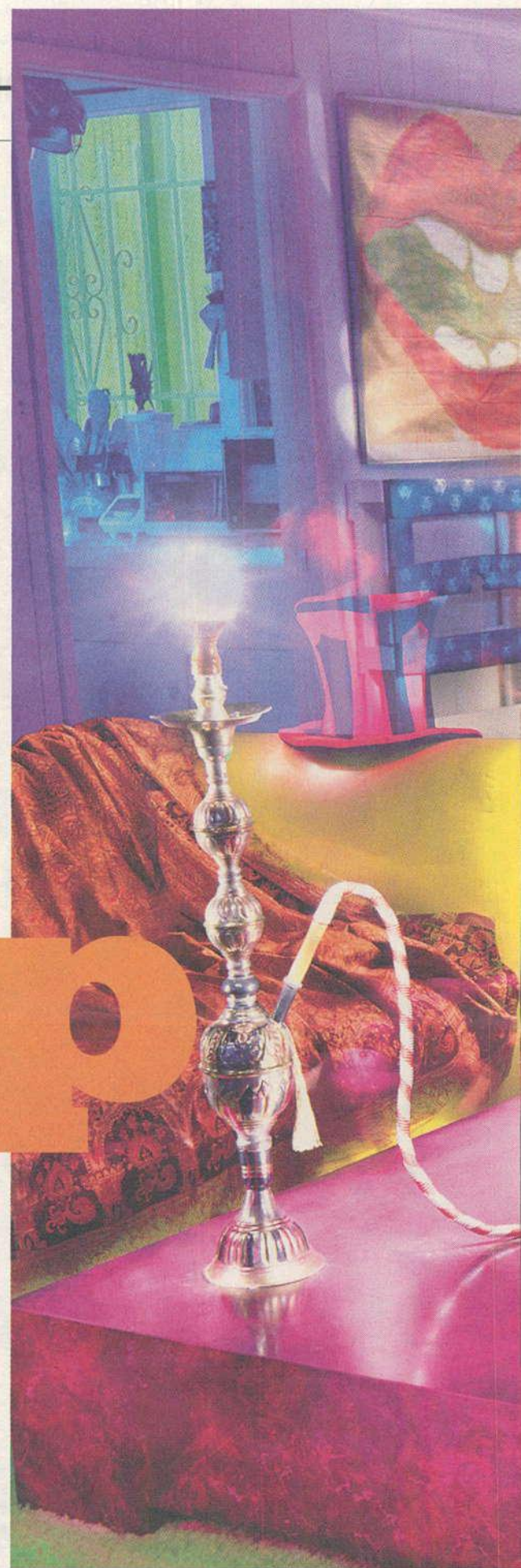
But in the West, entheogens have long lain dormant, despite the explosion of the psychedelic experience into popular culture in the second half of last century, and the New Age revival of interest in archaic spiritualities. DMT exists on the fringes of the psychedelic subculture, an experience beyond mainstream imagining.

"It's extremely accessible but most users find it too intense," says Paul Dillon, spokesperson for the government-funded National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, based at the University of NSW. According to Dillon there are no statistics on DMT use in Australia, however a survey on national youth radio station Triple J revealed interesting results. "It's the only drug that every single caller said they would never use again," says Dillon. "It's a very, very select group of people who would enjoy it."

While plants that contain DMT are easily found, making the smokable freebase crystals is complex and messy, requiring large amounts of raw material. A recent trawl through DMT World (one of dozens of internet sites

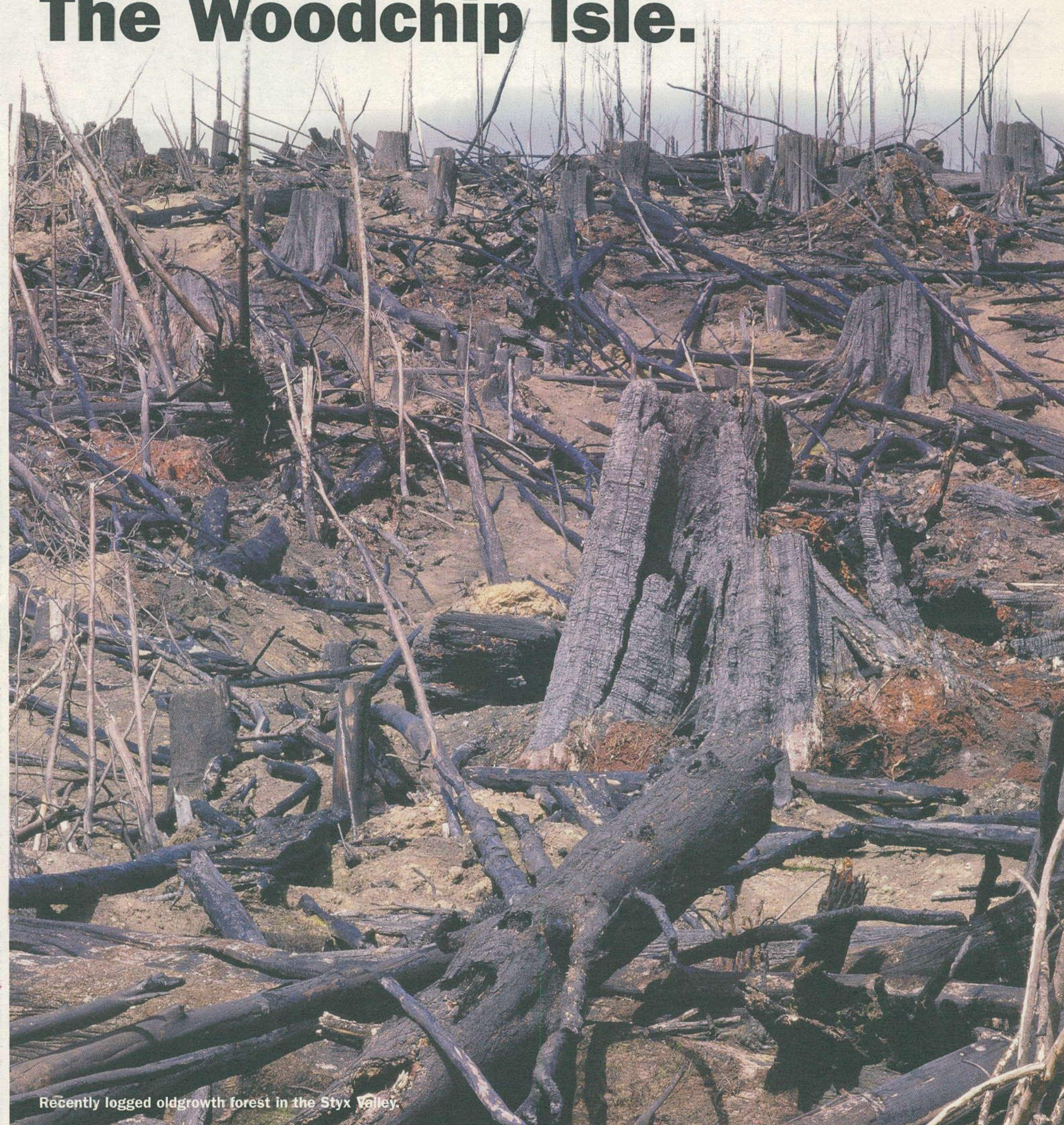
specialising in entheogens, and ranging from serious scientific research to seriously tripped-out psychobabble) revealed 3391 posts to the extraction methods chatroom. There, DMT nerds, called "gateway", "shapeshifter" and "meme", converse in complex chemical jargon.

When it was first synthesised in 1931, by British chemist Richard Manske, DMT's psychoactive properties were unknown. It wasn't until 1954 that it was found to be the active ingredient of the Amazonian *cohoba* snuff. Two years later, inspired by Albert Hofmann's accidental discovery of the mind-altering qualities of LSD more than a decade earlier, Hungarian chemist and psychiatrist Stephen Szara began his own research into





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the chemistry of consciousness. He synthesised a batch of DMT, and after orally ingesting the substance failed, he began injecting himself and his friends.

The accounts of Szara's group were the first glimpses into the DMT universe by the psychonauts of the West. One colleague described her mystical encounter with "two quiet, sunlit Gods": "I think they are welcoming me into this new world. There is a deep silence as in the desert ... I am finally at home."

However, not all of the DMT pioneers were welcomed as warmly. In 1961, William S. Burroughs, the author of *Naked Lunch* and *Junky*, who had been carrying out his own well-documented personal experiments with

yage (as *ayahuasca* is sometimes called), became one of the first users of DMT outside the confines of the lab.

Despite his psychedelic credentials, Burroughs was terrified by the intensity of his experience, unleashed by a 100 milligram overdose. He wrote a letter to Harvard University professor Timothy Leary, sounding "a word of urgent warning" against any further experimentation with DMT.

Leary and his associate Richard Alpert (who would later take on the Sanskrit title Ram Dass) were at the time involved in a high-profile series of experiments with psychedelics at Harvard, including LSD and psilocybin (the active ingredient in one class of "magic" mushroom).

**"It's the only drug that every single caller [to a Triple J survey] said they would never use again": to psychedelic guru Timothy Leary (above), DMT (shown in crystal form, opposite) was a "wondrous alkaloid", but not everyone who has tried it agrees.**

Undeterred by Burroughs's attack of the horrors, Leary would go on to sing the praises of "this wondrous alkaloid". (The drug even became known, incongruously, as the "businessman's trip", after a 1966 *Playboy* interview with Leary plugged the possibility of a "lunch-hour psychedelic session" with a hit of DMT.)

As the Harvard experiments gained notoriety, it wasn't long before LSD leapt over the laboratory walls, its promise of visionary, ecstatic experience spawning the psychedelic counterculture that swept the West. Amid a wave of public hysteria, based on exaggerated claims of emergency room visits and brain damage, Leary and Alpert were kicked out of Harvard, accused of abandoning scientific protocol, and the US Controlled Substances Act of 1970 was born, labelling all hallucinogens, including DMT, as Schedule 1 drugs, along with heroin and amphetamines.

The UN Convention on Psychotropic Substances the next year brought pressure on foreign governments to follow suit, spawning the Australian Psychotropic Substances Act of 1976, which also classes DMT as Schedule 1.

With the US-backed war on drugs leaving little room for manoeuvre, psychedelics research came to a standstill. However, a handful of investigators continued to fight their way through a labyrinth of bureaucratic red tape. Rick Strassman, clinical associate professor of psychiatry at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine, has recently published the results of his groundbreaking experiments injecting high doses of DMT into live human subjects. Carried out between 1990 and 1995, Strassman's research marked the first time in more than 20 years that the US Drug Enforcement Authority (DEA) had approved research into the effects of psychedelic drugs on humans.

As Strassman points out, DMT not only occurs in plants; it's also made by the human body. Discovered in human blood in 1965 and human brain tissue in 1972, DMT, a close chemical cousin of serotonin, is the only endogenous (meaning made inside the body) human psychedelic. Not only is DMT made by the body, "[the body] hungers for it" says Strassman, quoting the work of Japanese scientists who, 25 years ago, discovered that the brain actively transports DMT across the blood-brain barrier, an almost impenetrable shield that protects the brain from unwelcome substances in the blood.

"There are precious few chemicals the brain allows into its sensitive tissues," says Strassman. "And even fewer it uses valuable energy to bring in: glucose is one, essential amino acids are another. DMT is yet another."

Strassman believes DMT may be necessary for normal brain function. "Give a normal person an anti-psychotic drug [which blocks many of the effects of DMT and other psychedelics] and things get flat, dull and lifeless," he says. "Give people a lot of DMT and things become extraordinary. So, I'm wondering if this consensual reality is maintained, in most of us, through an exquisitely controlled set point



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pressure of operating under the watchful eye of the DEA, not to mention the problems associated with the clinical setting.

According to Strassman, the set (the psychological state of the user) and the setting (the external environment) are as vital to the DMT trip as the drug itself. The sounds of "jet planes, laughing and debating medical personnel, crash carts, groaning and screaming patients, the overhead duct fan, and roaring compactors" in the university medical centre had a major negative impact on people's DMT sessions and contributed to Strassman's decision to end his research.

Saul, a 42-year-old scientist, and a DJ/musician in the underground psychedelic trance scene on the east coast of Australia, agrees with Strassman on the importance of setting.

"I've seen DMT used in the most appalling, sterile or ugly city locations, far from its origins," he says. "Once it gets sold on, it ends up getting used by people who don't know what to expect, or how to smoke it properly, in which case the magic is lost. Ideally, I think it should only be given away by the people who extracted it."

"My best experience was in a rainforest with my feet in a stream. Only then can you feel the profound and

peaceful connection with plants and nature, when you finally open your eyes."

Saul, who first took DMT about seven years ago, found the physical effects of the drug frightening. "The sudden rise in blood pressure caused my ears to sing and my heart to pound. The tightness in the chest feels like a clamp, so breathing can be difficult, and the noxious smoke smells and tastes like burning plastic."

"But the 'trip' itself was staggering," says Saul, who despite his initial fear, began to experiment "with gusto", taking DMT more than 10 times over the next two years.

"Giving over to the onset of the DMT trip always felt like dying to me ... intelligences of uncertain form beckoning me through a lighted tunnel. The belief that the DMT tuned me into some intergalactic telepathic gateway, through which I could commune with 'higher' alien life forms, was so strong and fascinating. When I caught myself slipping into this alien philosophy at my then workplace, I thought it was time to stop. But the impression of being in the presence of a curious gentle alien intelligence has never left me."

AND THAT'S SOMETHING THAT STRASSMAN'S RESEARCH also revealed. Beings. The DMT universe is, quite

clearly, inhabited. Non-human entities interacted with Strassman's volunteers, time and again, in increasingly bizarre ways.

Strassman's book chronicles a series of tales from the perilous realm in which "the beings started testing, probing, inserting things into, [and in the most extreme encounters] eating and raping our volunteers" – leading Strassman to the radical conclusion that spontaneous "alien abduction" experiences are yet another phenomenon brought about by surges of pineal DMT.

"Clearly, the most mind-blowing aspect [of the research] was the stunning frequency of reports of contact with non-material beings." Far from being hallucinations, Strassman suggests these worlds, these beings, *exist*.

"I believe, more than I did then, that DMT provides access to realms that are not 'just in our heads'. This is not provable or disprovable with current technologies, but I feel strongly it shouldn't be rejected out of hand. I think we 'view' those perceptions in our heads because that's where consciousness, as mediated by the brain, is located. But I think that they are a perception of something freestanding, outside us."

"I know this puts me in a real minority of scientists, but believe me, I've wrestled with the idea nonstop for years. And I am willing to see evidence disproving this hypothesis."

Wading through theories in an effort to ground his findings in the scientific, Strassman turned to theoretical physics – parallel universes, dark matter and quantum computing. In *The Spirit Molecule*, he uses the analogy of the brain as a receiver, like a television, tuning into different channels, or levels of reality.

"Perhaps just the right amount of DMT ... keeps our brains tuned in to Channel Normal ... It only takes a second or two – the few heartbeats the spirit molecule requires to make its way to the brain – to change the channel, to open our mind to these other planes of existence."

Despite his fascinating results, Strassman was plagued, during the final months of his research, with doubt as to its value. As a practising Buddhist, with a decades-long association with a Zen monastery, he was searching, in his DMT work, for something beyond the bizarre – proof that the profound experiences unleashed by the spirit molecule would have some lasting therapeutic effect. However, follow-up interviews with the volunteers left him unconvinced.

"DMT and other psychedelics provide access to material that's otherwise hidden or unavailable, either within us, psychologically, or outside us, in these non-material realms. But what we do with that information is not dependent upon the drug, it's dependent upon us. Without a suitable framework – spiritual, psychotherapeutic, or otherwise – in which to process their journeys with DMT, [the volunteers'] sessions became just another series of intense psychedelic encounters."

However, many users do report shifts in consciousness – a greater appreciation of life, less fear of death, heightened creativity, a stronger connection with the natural world. Ben describes a series of deep revelations that stemmed from his DMT experiences and still resonate throughout his life. "The understanding I came to that first time is still very clear," he says. "As long as I'm a true person, it doesn't matter if I die today."

While Saul felt his alien encounters distracted him from living in *this* reality, he reports a lasting sense of wonder. "The complexity and the depth of colour of my DMT visions have left me with a new respect for the power of the human mind. If we can see these worlds in the mind's eye, maybe they do exist. If not, there is a power and beauty in the mind that I never tapped into before."

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for the proper amount of DMT. Sort of like a reality thermostat."

Based on a lifetime's research, and hundreds of sessions with more than 60 volunteers, Strassman's 2001 book, *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, seeks to answer the question: what is DMT doing in our bodies?

After measuring the effects of externally administered DMT on consciousness, Strassman has put forward the theory that DMT is produced by the pineal gland (described by René Descartes as the seat of the soul, and pinpointed, in Hindu texts, as the site of the seventh chakra), to facilitate the soul's movement in and out of the body – a kind of biological interface between body and spirit. It's a proposal that takes him way out into the field of neuro-theology, where science and spirituality meet.

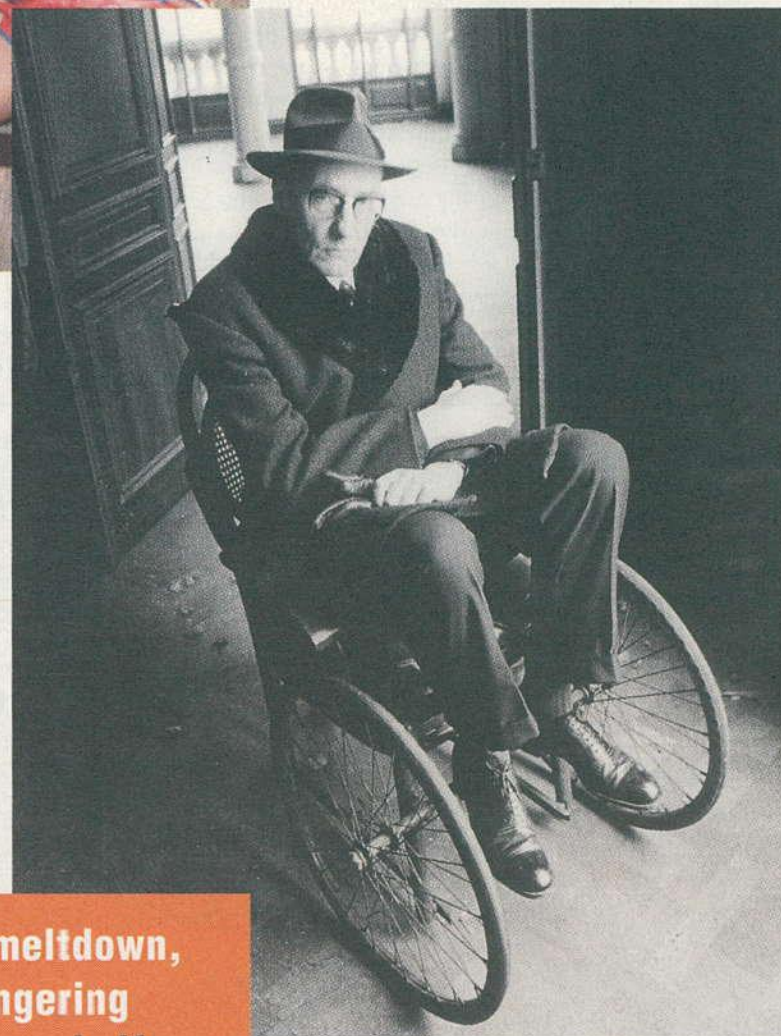
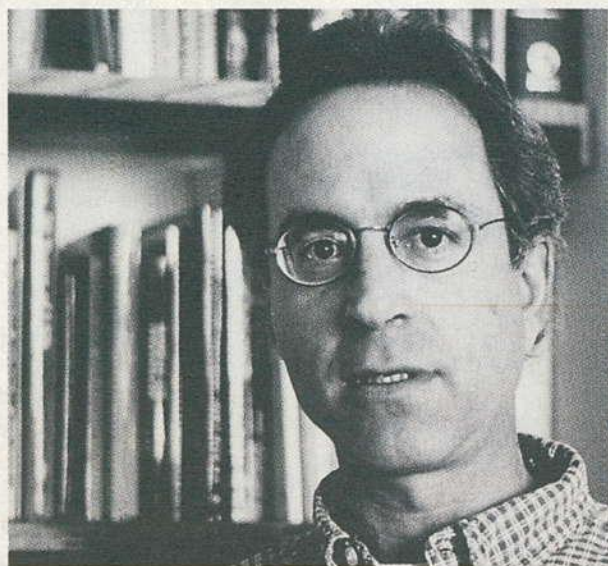
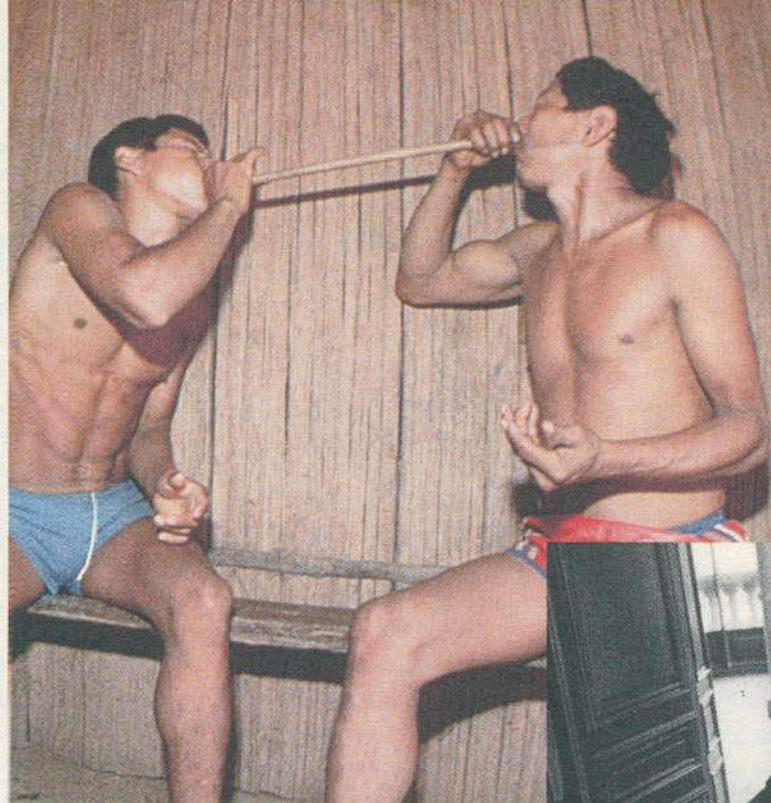
According to Strassman, endogenous DMT is released during naturally occurring psychedelic states, such as birth, death and near-death experiences, as well as deep meditation or prayer, extreme sports, sex and ascetic practices. The highly unusual states of consciousness reported by people who have come close to death, including those whose bodies have actually begun to die, are strikingly similar to the experiences some people have while under the influence of outside-administered DMT. There is also a suggestion that the psychotic states of mind experienced by schizophrenics may be the result of an overactive pineal producing consistently high levels of DMT – an out-of-whack reality thermostat, as it were.

Above all, a "spirit molecule" would elicit the kinds of psychological states we consider spiritual, says Strassman. "These are feelings of extraordinary joy, timelessness, and a certainty that what we are experiencing is 'more real than real' ... a knowledge that consciousness continues after death; a deep understanding of the basic unity of all phenomena; and a sense of wisdom or love pervading all existence."

*"It pours through me like purest joy; like coming home. Now do you see? And I am filled with understanding. I am made whole again. Then there are voices, calling to me from a great distance and I realise, with a throb of fear and sadness, I am dying. I am tangled in a sticky web that tightens as I struggle. They call my name. Just breathe, they say. That's good. I surrender. And with each exhalation the web loosens its grip, sending me rolling over and over, until, in the darkness, appears a spiral of interlocking geometric shapes.*

*"I reach out my hand and someone takes it and all the forest rises up in a jewelled wave around us. There are stone gods among the trees and everything is sparkling. The stillness and beauty saturates every cell of my being as the breath courses through me. This place. I am here."*

**A** 29-YEAR-OLD DESIGN STUDENT WITH a longstanding interest in entheogens, Ben was first given DMT by a friend in 1996. While he'd taken magic mushrooms more than 100 times and LSD at least 30 to 40 times, he describes the DMT experience as "mind-shattering".



## The risk of psychological meltdown, or at least some kind of lingering existential crisis, can seem a knife-edge possibility after a dose of DMT.

"It was the first time I had the revelation that time isn't linear – that it's a conglomerate mass that we travel through, and we only perceive this small string of what's actually going on. So while I thought, 'I'm going to die today', I also realised 'today is every day'."

Twenty doses later, Ben now takes DMT once or twice a year. "For me, it's what [Aldous] Huxley described as 'cleansing the doors of perception'," he says. "Too much talk about enlightenment gets boring. Entheogens give you the experience of seeing the god in everything. I like to see things through wondrous eyes."

Described by Leary as akin to being "fired out the muzzle of an atomic cannon", the effects of DMT can be life-threatening. While its impact on blood pressure and heart rate can be extreme – at least one of Strassman's volunteers narrowly skirted a medical emergency when, unusually, his blood pressure dropped precipitously minutes after take-off – the risk of psychological meltdown, or at the very least some kind of lingering existential crisis, can seem a knife-edge possibility in the days and weeks after a dose of DMT.

Paul Dillon recalls an incident several years ago in which an adolescent boy from a north

coast NSW town was killed when he fell off a cliff after taking a homemade DMT substance with a group of friends. "They found a recipe on the net and made a batch of DMT, then went out into the bush, where they had some kind of ceremony, and totally freaked out," says Dillon. "The boy who died started running and just didn't stop."

Jonathon Ott, in his comprehensive 1996 guide to entheogenic drugs, *Pharmactheon*, warns DMT may be more likely to trigger paranoia and panic reactions than other drugs

**Seeking altered states:** experimenters with hallucinogens include (clockwise from top left) Peru's Matsigenka tribesmen, who use them to induce hunting visions and increase strength; writer William S. Burroughs; psychiatrist and author Rick Strassman, who in the '90s injected volunteers with high doses of DMT.

– "a consequence, doubtless, of the extreme rapidity with which the user is torn out of his everyday consciousness and thrust into a swirling, screaming visionary state".

Despite extensive psychological screening, a number of Strassman's volunteers had trouble integrating their experiences. While there were no recorded incidents of drug-induced psychosis, two people with a history of depression had relapses, and Strassman said he wouldn't be surprised if there were cases of DMT-related psychosis out there. "Some people were traumatised," he says. "Even fairly hard-core psychedelic veterans, which many of our volunteers were."

Flashbacks, in which the user's mind re-creates parts of the experience after it has ended, can occur for weeks, even years after taking DMT, says Dillon. "In this situation, when you're unprepared, it can be even more frightening."

*"Each night for a week, on the precipice of sleep I am wrenched awake and upright, heart pounding. It is as if I am being sucked back there, but I hesitate at the doorway. Are you going? Is she going? My fear is hard as stone."*

In 1995, STRASSMAN QUIT THE RESEARCH project at the University of New Mexico, exhausted by the demanding nature of the trials, the lack of peer support and the constant