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Feeling Like a Champion: Hi-Hops Chemical Romance With Ecstasy

When Hotlanta rapper-turned-movie star T.I. was arrested on drug possession charges earlier this month, there was a feeling of “haven’t we all been here before?” But also genuine surprise.

From ODB to DMX, Kanye to 'Pac, hip-hop performers have a chronic habit of getting busted for stupid stuff. Identity theft. Cruelty to animals. Wearing a bulletproof vest after being convicted of a felony. Rappers behaving badly have become one of popular culture’s most numbing constants. After all, T.I. was already on probation when L.A. County sheriff’s deputies stopped his \$600,000 Mercedes Maybach on the Sunset Strip for what they said was an illegal U-turn and then detected what they said was “a strong odor of marijuana emitting from the vehicle”; earlier this year, he served a seven-month prison sentence for attempting to buy a cache of automatic weapons and silencers.

But celeb watchers began scratching their heads after deputies reported that Clifford “T.I.” Tip Harris and his new wife, Tameka “Tiny” Cottle, were also in possession of “a small amount of Ecstasy” (in addition to weed and testing positive for codeine).

Since when do gangsta rappers dabble in designer drugs?

His bust arrives at a moment of renewed public scrutiny of Ecstasy, just three months after teenager Sasha Rodriguez’s overdose death from the drug at downtown Los Angeles’ Electric Daisy Carnival helped reestablish E’s reputation as a potential killer. The recently released annual report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration reveals that Ecstasy consumption has jumped 37% in America over the last year. Meanwhile, rave culture has made significant moves toward the mainstream, with bleary, Euro synth beats becoming the dominant sound of both hip-hop and Top 40 pop. Coincidence?

But T.I.’s legal case also underscores another cultural groundswell, coming at a time when Ecstasy is reaching a kind of critical mass in hip-hop.

In the last three years, it’s been shouted out in songs more than ever and, increasingly -- if lyrics are any indication -- washed down in the VIP room by some of rap’s best and brightest. Just don’t go looking for them to shout out Ecstasy by name. Codified references to “X pills” and “double stacks” (as extra large tablets are known), being “geeked out” or “feelin’ myself” allow them to hide the drug’s usage in plain sight.

Not that all rappers -- or, at least, the "characters" in their songs -- take pains to cover his or her tracks.

In 2008, hip-hop's most crazily free-associative and prolific MC, Lil Wayne, was arrested on cocaine and Ecstasy possession charges. Facing possible incarceration, Weezy nonetheless made his penchant for the drug known in 2009 with the paean "Pill Poppin' Animal." "Stickin' on a double stack, you're rollin' wit a rich boy!" Wayne exclaims (in one of the song's few lines suitable for publishing on a family newspaper blog).

Likewise, Atlanta trap rapper Gucci Mane has never disguised his fondness for Ecstasy, extolling rolling on a number of different cuts over the years. On 2007's "Pillz," he instructs the listener to "put that bean on your tongue," adding later: "I'm off three double stacks and I'm lookin' for that action."

Meanwhile, on his 2007 collabo with Young Jeezy, "Geeked Up," rapper Fabo vividly describes the borderline hallucinatory effects of taking X while driving through one of Atlanta's most famous neighborhoods: "I'm startin' to see spaceships on Bankhead / I roll with gangstas, pill poppers and dank heads."

Jay-Z says he's never tried the designer drug — also known by the call letters for its chemical name methylenedioxymethamphetamine. And yet on his smash single "Empire State of Mind," he gives Ecstasy an explicit shout-out: "MDMA got you feeling like a champion / City never sleeps, better slip you an Ambien."

Or consider the recent efforts of Brooklyn rap Barbie Nicki Minaj. On her club banger (featuring Lil Wayne) "Higher Than a Kite," Minaj devotes a throwaway line to Ecstasy's accessibility as well as its ubiquity. "You getting ill, I bet, poppin' a pill again," she raps. "I'm the island and I'm lookin' for Gilligan."

Time was when the drug of choice for rappers was either weed or booze (or, in certain cases down South, sippin' on "sizzurp"). And the notion of ingesting a powerful love drug — one known to overwhelm a person's inhibitions, eliciting bro hugs and feelings of cosmic interconnectivity that are distinctly at odds with rap's dog-eat-dog mentality -- would have been as improbable as an MC wearing tight jeans.

But things began to change when Eminem burst on the scene.

In a 1999 Rolling Stone interview, the hard-rhyming pill-popper consumed no fewer than three Ecstasy tablets in the presence of an interviewer and then bragged, "I wrote two songs for my next album on Ecstasy."

Within two years, more and more references to the drug had spread across the mainstream. On Missy Elliott's 2001 hit album "Miss E ... So Addictive" (um, get it?), the rapper devotes the slow-burn chill-out cut "X-tasy" to articulate certain conditions associated with consumption. Such as feeling "so energized" and describing the artificial love vibes that accompany the drug. "Ecstasy, I'm willing to do all the things I said I wouldn't do / On Ecstasy, the feelin' makes me feel like I'm in love with you," Elliott raps.

That same year, on “X,” his collaboration with Elliott, rapper Ja Rule framed the drug’s merits in a different way: “How we relieve that stress? X / You know, pop them thangs, get extra horny, girl.”

More recently, such hip-hop subgenres as Southern California’s jerkin’ dance movement and hyphy in the Bay Area made widespread references to taking Ecstasy (“thizzing” in hyphy parlance). And this year, on-again-off-again A Tribe Called Quest frontman Q-Tip portrayed an Ecstasy dealer in the Sundance Film Festival official selection about Hasidic X pill smugglers, “Holy Rollers.”

But when it comes to laying bare the swirl of physical side effects, social ramifications and potential health ills associated with the drug, Tech N9ne’s chopped and screwed ode to Ecstasy, “T9X,” comes as close to an exegesis on the subject as any rap song has to date.

“10 minutes, 20 minutes, 30 minutes, feelin’ butterflies /My eyes dilate another size /Overwhelming sense of love got this nut so sprung / Walk up to a stranger, ‘Can I suck your tongue?’ ” N9ne raps over an ominous beat.

After detailing how he has taken “five pills” over the course of an eve, the rapper catalogs certain physical sensations: “Tingling baby, got me feelin’ like mingling, baby /This is hella ‘Higher Learning’ than Singleton, baby /One minute I’m cold, the next I’m heat /Get me some Big Red so I don’t grind my teeth.”

In the end, though, Tech N9ne pays lip service to the inherent dangers of taking too much. “It’s pills and mo’ thrills,” he raps. “I’m lucky if I survive. I’m high!”