

**David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Journalist/Author, Tom Shroder**  
(transcribed from [www.ShrinkRapRadio.com](http://www.ShrinkRapRadio.com) by Yann Derobert)

**Introduction:** On today's show I'll be speaking with Tom Shroder, author and former editor of the *Washington Post Magazine*, about his latest book: *Acid Test: LSD, Ecstasy, and the Power to Heal*. For more information about Tom Shroder, please see our show notes on ShrinkRapRadio.com. Now here's the interview.

**Dr. Dave:** Tom Shroder, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

**Tom Shroder:** Well, thank you David.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, I'm thrilled to have you on the show to discuss your new book: *Acid Test: LSD, Ecstasy, and the Power to Heal*. And this is a topic my listeners will know that I have some long standing interest in, and I conducted some other interviews about psychedelics, and I happened to see an ad for your book in the *New Yorker Magazine*, you know one of the inserts, and right away I thought: “Hey, I'd better look into this, a new book on psychedelics, let's see what's going on here!”.

**Tom Shroder:** Oh, good to know that ads have some positive impact!

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, right, sometimes they do! You know the title kind of caught me and so I went online to, went on to Amazon to kind of see what I could find out about the book and I said: “Yeah, this is going to be right up my alley!”. So, how did you come to write this book?

**Tom Shroder:** Well, I mean, actually that's a story I tell in the foreword of the book and it's kind of long but interesting story I felt.

**Dr. Dave:** We've got lots of time!

**Tom Shroder:** Okay! When I was a student at the University of Florida in the early 1970s, to mid-1970s, they... I had my introduction to psychedelics as many people in that time frame did...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Tom Shroder:** ... and we would go out into the calf pastures that surrounded this campus in central Florida and we would slip through the fences and find - not that I'm recommending this but - find in the calf pastures these mushrooms growing, psilocybin mushrooms, and we cloaked them out, and you know, boiled them and drink it with tea. And I had some really interesting experiences. And even from the beginning, even back then, you know, I was doing this for self-knowledge, I wasn't doing it as a party, you know, thinking that was going to be a party drug or anything like that.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay.

**Tom Shroder:** I was really interested in self exploration and I had some experiences that really stuck with me. And just to give you the example that I use: there was one time as the drug took effect, as often happened, you know, it was uncomfortable at first, and I began to feel, you know all these, very acutely, all these little fears and anxieties that had been going around in my head, and they became accentuated to the point where I felt like there is this giant boulder around my chest and I could barely breathe. And it almost became as palpable as

to hold this weight that was crushing me, and that all I had to do was let my arms apart and the weight would fall away. And that's what I did and I had that experience of simply deciding to let go of these fears and anxieties, and having the experience of seeing them just disappear, and that insight, that to a certain degree, we chose to feel the negative feelings that we have, that it's a choice we make, and that we can chose just to let them go. That stayed with me my whole life, and even though, you know, after college I got a job, I had a family and I, you know, I stopped doing psychedelic drugs, both because, you know, they were less available and because, you know, I had responsibilities and it was still illegal. So I stopped doing them. But I never forgot that insight and others that continued to inform my life in a positive way. So I knew that, you know, despite this sort of, you know, decades of vilification, that these drugs sort of experienced in a wider culture, I knew that they had value. So, okay, that's part of the story. But at the same period, when I was in college, I'd grown up in Sarasota, Florida, and I was home on spring break or something, and somehow I heard about that there is this like hippy who was building this magnificent house in the woods, not far from where I lived. And I was the editor of this college newspaper there, and I decided, for whatever reason, that this would make an interesting feature. And, so I went out and I found this guy, working on his house, and he had... you know, he's like this guy with this head of curly hair and he was working bare-chested and he had this pet wolf...

**Dr. Dave:** Wow! (laughs)

**Tom Shroder:** ... tied up in the yard that he would go and play with... and he'd like stick his jaw in the wolf's mouth. He was quite a character and hum... so, you know, and I thought his philosophy was really interesting and I still have that story and I went back and looked at it and it doesn't ever mention anything about psychedelic drugs. But I think my interest in it at the time and certainly, you know, my thought that student readers of the paper would be interested had to do with the fact that he was like trying to make the sort of insights you get on psychedelic drugs manifest in normal reality. And that his whole house he had these like gigantic stained glass window with a white beard man releasing a dove over a rainbow and, you know...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah (laughs).

**Tom Shroder:** Everything in that house sort of was a concrete expression of this kind of tripping philosophy.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Tom Shroder:** At least that's the way it struck me, so I thought that was really interesting. So I wrote the story it ran, and ten years later, I was the editor at the *Miami Herald's Sunday* magazine, called "*Tropic*", and I just saw a story in a Tampa newspaper about this sort of perpetual college student who was sort of declaring that this new psychedelic drug called "ecstasy" was the key to renewing psychotherapy and that this was the future of psychotherapy and it was this sort of wonder psychotherapy drug. And as I'm reading this, something about it sort of rang a bell, and then I looked at it more closely and I thought: "Oh my God! That's the guy who was building the house in the woods!".

**Dr. Dave:** The author of the article ?

**Tom Shroder:** No, no, he was not the author, he was the subject of the article!

**Dr. Dave:** Oh! He's the subject, okay.

**Tom Shroder:** Right, and I said: "That's unbelievable!". I just couldn't believe it was the same guy. So, I assigned a very capable reporter to go over there and he did a cover story on him. And I think that, you know, the headline inside was: "A Tim Leary for the Eighties".

**Dr. Dave:** Okay.

**Tom Shroder:** Except, you know, except that he had like, you know, read about this and... Anyway, so... Then another fifteen years go by and by this time, I'm the editor of the *Washington Post Sunday Magazine*.

**Dr. Dave:** Congratulations!

**Tom Shroder:** And so, you know, I'm looking in the *New York Times* and I see the story about how Harvard has approved the first psychedelic research since they drove Leary out the door. And I'm reading through it and who's sponsoring this research? That same guy, only now he's a PhD in public policy from the *Harvard Kennedy School* of public policy. And he's the head of this non-profit called the *Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies*. And I said: "This is unbelievable!". I can't believe this guy, you know, twenty five years later is still popping up! So this time I decided I was going to do the story myself. And I called him up and not only did he remember me, and not only... he had both the stories that I had written in college and the story from *Tropic* fifteen years earlier, and not only did he still have them but he had just shown them to his board of directors, and the point being how far he'd come from a renegade Tim Leary of the Eighties to somebody who was dealing with the most respected, you know, institutions of research in the country. And successfully getting psychedelic research a new look, after basically thirty years in the deep freeze.

**Dr. Dave:** You know, that's an incredible story and I think there are many similar examples of the... of people who came of age during that period and who are close countercultural who went on into academia to research and establish things that were considered to be far out on the fringe at that time such as, well, meditation is a really big one that comes to mind, all kinds of research now on meditation and the impact on the brain and so on, so I kind interrupted you mid-flow...

**Tom Shroder:** No, no, but that's a good point! Because as I discovered as I began to investigate this was that there are all these highly credentialed, I mean, people with impeccable credentials, who had tremendous careers and huge resumes, you know.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Tom Shroder:** And none of them wanted to admit this but as I began to work on the book later I finally got them to be honest about it. But, so many of them were just like me in that they had early personal experiences with psychedelics that informed them, that told them there's something of real value here. And as they went on and became very successful in their science careers they never forgot that but for a long time they never thought it would be possible to use their science to investigate this because it was so stigmatized.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Tom Shroder:** And expressing any interest at all was a career killer for them.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Tom Shroder:** But, you know... And now the really amazing thing was this one guy who wasn't a scientist, Rick Doblin, who is the guy, the hippy in the woods, and the "Tim Leary of the Eighties", and the head of this non-profit, a totally self-made. And... I mean he'd gone to get his PhD specifically because he thought: "Well, you know what, science isn't the problem here, it's politics that is the problem. So, I need to learn about, you know, how things are done so that I can deal with them. Because I refuse... I don't want to be an underground person. I want this to be mainstream". And it was really because so much because of Rick's efforts that these

from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with severe and very difficult to treat PTSD. Well the early trials using psychedelics, MDMA in particular, to treat PTSD are probably the most promising trials of a novel treatment out there, and yet... and even though, you know, we as taxpayers owe a debt of support to all these returning combat veterans who suffer from this, to the tune of like a trillion dollars over the next thirty years between disability payments and medical treatment for all the related conditions that happen when people have PTSD, they haven't spent a single dime on helping this research along. So as a result even though, you know, it's in phase 2 trials, they're getting to the point where they're getting to phase 3 trials, which is, you know, when they have, you know, that's the most expensive part because that's when they have hundreds of subjects over, you know, dozens of locations and that is what leads to it being approved as a prescription drug. Well, you know, they're making such good progress and they're having such promising results that's almost inevitable, that that's going to happen but that is going to take, I don't know, maybe ten or fifteen years. And we really can't afford to wait that long, that's the tragedy of the situation.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, I'm totally in agreement with you about everything that you've said here. What's the... is there anything that surprised you when you researched this book?

**Tom Shroder:** Well, yeah, I mean, I didn't... you know, even though I had that personal experience where I saw the value... you know, it's one thing for someone to have a good experience, and it's another thing for someone with a really... really pernicious, deep seated, psychological illness to be cured. And so... you know, and also, you might think that people who, you know, who are psychologically... might not be good candidates to have this experience, that it could be actually bad for them. That's certainly, you know, the kind of sense that was out there in the mainstream. And yet, when I began to observe tapes and videotapes of these clinical... you know, people gave me permission to see the tapes of their sessions, and to interview them about the sessions, and it was just astounding to me how, in many cases, people were almost completely cured. I mean they really... it really got to the root cause of these problems. It wasn't just treating symptoms. And it wasn't like they had to keep taking these drugs. They took it a few times and they were... you know, they were almost completely cured. And, you know, they did... an outside psychiatrist would test them on the standard tests for PTSD and he'd do it before and after, and their scores went from severe to they wouldn't even have been diagnosed. In the matter of... you know, instantly.

**Dr. Dave:** Wow.

**Tom Shroder:** I mean in the matter, you know, the treatment happened several times over the period of a number of weeks, and as soon as they were done with the treatment, you know, they wouldn't even have been able to be classified as having PTSD. And not only that but even without any further treatment whatsoever, most of these people hold on to these gains over a period of, you know, up to six years.

**Dr. Dave:** Wow.

**Tom Shroder:** So... that surprised me.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Tom Shroder:** I wasn't really expecting that to happen.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. Well maybe we can go into more detail about that as we go on. I was very struck by a lot of the background information that the book starts off with, even though this is an area I've... you know, read a lot about over the years, still there was a lot of new information for me, and also the way that you put everything together, weaving all together was very very skillful.

**Tom Shroder:** ... sort of reads almost like a novel, which is what I was going for.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah it does. And for example, you give background information on Albert Hofmann, the LSD's inventor, early in the book...

**Tom Shroder:** Oh yeah, that was... what really amazed me about Albert Hofmann, which is so another one of these amazing sort of synchronicities and ironies, is that when Albert Hofmann was a boy... he went out... you know, he lived in Switzerland and, you know, he'd go for these walks in the woods, and suddenly he had this experience in which... everything suddenly began to glow with a strange light and it was like... suddenly he saw this sort of almost indescribable beauty of the woods in a way that seemed almost magical to him, just spontaneously. And it so moved him that he decided that he really wanted to be an artist or a poet or something, so he could get this across because it was so hard to describe... But then he very bitterly decided he didn't have the talent for that, so he kind of went on a 180° and he became a scientist, he became a chemist. And he was working in these like, you know, early twentieth century labs...

**Dr. Dave:** He was a pretty young man when he started out as a scientist at Sandoz laboratories...

**Tom Shroder:** Right. And this was early in pharmaceutical research. It was really the beginning.

**Dr. Dave:** And he was in his early twenties as I recall?

**Tom Shroder:** Yes. And he began... and so, he was looking for... you know, drugs that would like stimulate respiration and the cardiovascular system... and possibly stimulate neural activity... and by sheer accident, he came upon a drug which he synthesized, which had the effect of creating the type of experience that he had... that had so moved him by happening spontaneously when he was a boy.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. That's an incredible story. I mean the synchronicity of that happening is mind-blowing.

**Tom Shroder:** I know. So instead of being a poet or an artist who could kind of manage to convey this experience, he created a drug that could actually provide the experience itself, you know. And I don't think anybody ever made that connection before.

**Dr. Dave:** That's amazing that that connection wasn't made before. And he was working on a rye mold called ergot, which has a very interesting history too. So maybe you can give us a taste of that...

**Tom Shroder:** Yeah, ergot... It turns out that, you know, back in the Middle Ages and before... really as soon as large scale agriculture of grains began... you know, every once in a while, there'd be this mold that'd grow on the rye, and people didn't even know it was there but when they ingested the rye, it caused hallucinations, it disrupted circulation to the point where limbs would turn black and drop off... it could cause convulsions and cause people to writhe around and act insane... so... and this killed hundred of thousands of people over, you know, over many generations before they even knew what it was.

**Dr. Dave:** And they called it Saint Vitus' dance, is that right?

**Tom Shroder:** No, no, no, no, no, no. They called... it was "fire".

**Dr. Dave:** Okay.

**Tom Shroder:** It was called. And so they... so what happened was... but at the same time, somehow, the... the sort of

extract that... called diethylamide that he combined with... He basically... he was playing God here by combining these substances just to see what would happen. And so the German acronym for lysergic acid combined with diethylamide was LSD. And this particular compound was the 25th that he had been experimenting with, so... The lab designated it as LSD-25. And so he did this in... in the... and what he discovered was... not much! It wasn't as good as some of... the principles they were looking for was something that had an effect on circulation or something that had, you know, some kind of muscular effect. But the effect wasn't as great as some of the other compounds they came up with. And aside from this sort of odd, sort of restiveness in the test animals that they noticed... they found nothing remarkable about it so they just kind of dumped it off. And here's the other really sort of eerie part about this. Hofmann, in spite of this, in spite of the fact that this was another one of the many compounds that he'd done, and that it just didn't do... it just didn't sort of ring any bells for anybody, he however had what he described as this "odd presentiment", that there was something special about LSD-25 to the point where five years later, he resynthesized it. And... you know, and he can't really explain why he felt that this was significant.

**Dr. Dave:** Oh wow! I didn't realize it was that five year...

**Tom Shroder:** Yeah! It was five years later!

**Dr. Dave:** Wow...

**Tom Shroder:** He just kept it in his mind all that time. And he resynthesized it and when he was in that process, he suddenly started feeling very odd, to the point where he had to leave work. And he ended up lying on his couch and having these like weird visions and seeing all these colors and everything. And he didn't know what it was and he couldn't believe it was the LSD. Because he'd been exposed... you know, it was minimal... you know, he worked with it with great care. And that the only exposure he could have had was to just a minute amount, you know, through his skin. And he didn't think that, you know, that it could have possibly give an enough exposure to cause these effects so he was looking at like the formaldehyde that was in his lab, he was like sniffing it, no, nothing happened and everything. And when he'd eliminated everything else he decided it had to be the LSD. So he decided without telling anybody except his lab assistant, that he was going to experiment on himself. So he took what he thought would be, you know, like maybe a thousand times less dose than anything that would have an effect... because, you know, that's the way, when you're doing self experimentation, you take a fragment of what you think will be active and then you increase it very slowly until you feel something, just in sort you try out not to totally poison yourself...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Tom Shroder:** Well, he took this tiny fragment, what he thought was a fraction of anything that could possibly have an effect. And suddenly he wrote one sentence in his lab notes and then he couldn't write any more. And he had to get his lab assistant to take him home. And since this was in the middle of World War II, they didn't have cars, there was no cars available. So they had to ride back to his place on bicycles, which has become known as "Bicycle Day" among "Acid aficionados".

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Tom Shroder:** And... and when he got... He thought he might have poisoned himself and he might be going permanently crazy. And these fears influenced... you know, what he would learn later was that your mindset going into a psychedelic experience is very important in shaping the experience itself. And because he went into it uncertain and fearful... he had kind of a scary experience. And he thought he'd poisoned himself and he was gulping milk which is sort of a generic antidote for poisons. But a doctor came when he was in the high throws of this and he had no physiological issues at all, you know. His eyes were a little dilated and his heart

and, you know, again this is a long and complex story but eventually psychiatrists realized that this could, you know, that they've been doing like Freudian psychoanalysis for years and this was a long, slow process that very often never really had any kind of dramatic positive results. I mean, it went on for years, famously. And very often, people just never got better. And there was one psychiatrist in particular, a guy named Stan Grof who was...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. I've interviewed Stan as a matter of fact.

**Tom Shroder:** Well, and Stan was like thinking about getting out of the biz, because he felt, you know, that it was so long and expensive a process and the results were so paltry. When he was a monitor in one of these early experiments, where they gave people LSD, and he decided he really wanted to do it himself but he was still a student, he was prohibited. So as soon as he graduated he volunteered for one of these trials and he had this experience, this life changing experience... that set him on a course to become the single person who had the most experience in anybody in using psychedelic drugs for psychotherapy.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. He was... he came up in Prague. And you pointed out that actually he had more experience than I did realize. You report that he had treated some 15000 people using LSD for various psychological issues...

**Tom Shroder:** Yes. Which is almost certainly more than anybody else alive or in history.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. He could do that because he was in Prague, right?

**Tom Shroder:** Well, I mean, in the early... and that's the other thing that was surprising to me... maybe the main thing but I didn't know! Because it's almost been completely forgotten, which is that, you know, between the early 1950s, which is when Sandoz sent out all those samples and people began to use it for psychotherapy, into the early 1960s and even to the mid-1960s, that psychedelics were being used with great success to treat all sorts... a whole variety of psychiatric conditions with huge success. And people really felt that this was revolutionizing psychiatry and that it was the future. And the results were almost universally positive. They were using it to treat alcoholism in Canada, depression, all sorts of neuroses, with great success. You know, even autism, eating disorders, things like that, it was being used in marriage counseling... And the thing was that it was not... it wasn't like penicillin where you have an infection, you take penicillin and the infection goes away and you have no idea why, I mean, it just happens without... This was actually... people were changing as the result of the experience itself, and the insights that they had. So, this might have been affecting biochemical conditions in the brain, but the ways people were experiencing it were that they were having these insights and these experiences that were changing them in really fundamental ways. And so this was going on for 15 to 20 years...

**Dr. Dave:** Right.

**Tom Shroder:** ... before suddenly it got out in the counterculture and the society had this kind of fear reaction to it, and they shut it down and they made it a Schedule I drug like heroin and, you know, they were like trying to stamp out all recreational use which of course they failed to do, however all these laws that came up around 1970 was remarkably effective in stamping out research to the point where, as one researcher told me, it was almost as if psychedelics had been undiscovered. And then as little... now, you know, 30-40 years later, most people don't even know that there ever was a period where it was actively being used for psychotherapy, much less that it was being used with tremendous promise.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. Yeah. I was surprised to read, if I understood correctly, that Hofmann actually got on to the importance of set and setting before Timothy Leary did, who was... sort of famously attached to the importance of set and setting?

important with this drug.

**Dr. Dave:** Now, another historical bit that you cover is the contributions of Osmond and Hoffer, in Canada, and those were two names that I was familiar with, but you give a lot of details that I wasn't familiar with, give us some of the highlights of their work.

**Tom Shroder:** Well, Humphrey Osmond was a British psychiatrist and he believed that, as many people originally did, was that maybe this very puzzling, you know, this very puzzling disease, psychosis, might be caused by a chemical in the brain. And the fact that LSD had such huge impact on one's perceptions, and in fact, originally people thought it kind of mimicked psychosis. So this was very exciting to him because he thought: "Oh, well, this might be proof that I'm right", you know, that something akin to LSD is causing the psychosis. But when he began... But they weren't interested in pursuing that in England. So he went all the way to Saskatchewan, to this like remote mental hospital, basically in the wilds of Canada, where he was able to do the research he wanted to do. And when he started having... First of all he just investigated the effects of the drug itself. And when he began to see these sort of positive, spiritual, almost religious experiences, as the result of the drug... he realized that this really wasn't the same as psychosis at all and that, in fact, that experience might be very healing. And he began to use it to treat alcoholism, which, you know, was a notoriously difficult... to get an alcoholic to be, you know, permanently free of that. And yet, they had great success, to the point where the government of Canada said this was no longer an experimental treatment, it was a proven treatment for alcoholism. And he has another interesting place in history, which was his work caught the attention of Aldous Huxley. And Huxley, you know, the author of *Brave New World* and other... he was a world famous author at that time...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Tom Shroder:** And he had created this fictional drug called "soma", which, if you read the description of it in *Brave New World*, it almost sounds a little bit like a psychedelic drug. And so, of course, he was very interested in this so he wrote Osmond a letter and volunteered to come and be part of his research. And Osmond happened to be... and Huxley lived in California and Osmond happened to be going to a conference there. So he told him I'm going to come and I'm going to bring some mescaline, which is another naturally occurring psychedelic, you know, from peyote cactus, and he brought some synthetic mescaline and turned Aldous Huxley on for the first time. And Huxley had this amazing experience in which he sort of felt like he saw, you know, the wellspring behind all of creation. And he wrote a very famous book about it, called *The Doors of Perception*... which was interesting. And then there's this great thing where Osmond and Huxley have this... afterwards, have this correspondence in which they're kind of competing to think up a name for this class of drugs. And not only are they thinking of it, but they're doing it in rhyme. And Huxley came up with something like "phanerothyme" or something like that, and then Huxley... I mean and then Osmond... and you wouldn't think you'd want to get in a literary competition with Aldous Huxley...

**Dr. Dave:** Right.

**Tom Shroder:** Humphrey Osmond... But Osmond then wrote back this little ditty, you know, about how to... you know, "plumb the depths of hell or soar angelic, just take a pinch of psychedelic.". And, you know, so, oddly, Osmond was the one who won that competition.

**Dr. Dave:** That's how psychedelic got to our language.

**Tom Shroder:** Yes. And it means... it's actually perfect. Because what it means is "mind manifest". So, you know, so the experience of psychedelics is really not an experience in your physical body so much as it is you know, an experience in your brain and in your mind and perception. So it kind of was the perfect name for it.

also... you know, they had come across... You know, in the early twentieth century, Westerners discovered that these... that some cultures in South America, Central America, in Africa, and India used various substances to create this kind of religious states. And one of them was mescaline in Central America, and there was a brief moment of real interest in this but it kind of flagged. But the Nazis got hold of the stuff and they wondered whether it could be used as an interrogation drug. And so they did it and they had mixed results. But of course after the war when the Allies captured all the Nazis' scientific research, they saw this, and the new organization called the CIA decided... and as well as the army, well decided... they spent years researching this as some kind of weapon, you know, see if they could weaponize it somehow. And it got to the point where the CIA had... they actually were operating a brothel in San Francisco and they would attract men in and then dose their drinks without telling anybody with LSD and then observe them. And you know this is, again, set and setting comes in because if this happens to you, you don't know why and you don't even know you had a drug acting on you, it could create a tremendous fear to the point of suicide in some cases. And certainly people had bad reactions, they were unscreened so that some of them might have had psychiatric problems to begin with. So this caused a lot of havoc and it did a lot of damage but at the same time it created a black market because... you know, they were just basically handing the stuff out and dosing people all over the place without any controls and they were also funding research in universities secretly. And so this was creating, you know, scores and scores of people who had this experience, many of whom had positive experiences in spite of the fact that there weren't good settings for it. And one of them was a guy named Ken Kesey.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Tom Shroder:** And Kesey was, you know, he was also a writer and he wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and in fact he was inspired to write *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* while taking acid and he actually wrote the first few pages of it during an acid trip. So... the popularization of this drug, it's a really... And then another person who had the experience through CIA funded research was a guy named Owsley who was so impressed with the drug that he decided he was going to learn to synthesize it himself. And he spent three weeks at the Berkeley Library, thought himself how to synthesize the drug and then made thousands of doses of it and he fueled this whole sort of "Summer of Love" psychedelic party in the Bay area. And this exploded... you know, it got popularized and this is what... and then there was, you know, this rash of people sort of doing it in foolish situations and ending up in emergency rooms. And then of course the press got hold of this and sort of blew it up out of all proportions. And just the very nature of the psychedelic experience was sort of, you know, connected with the whole idea of the counterculture, it was perceived as trying to tear down everything that America was about etc., all that stuff. And to point where Richard Nixon famously said that Tim Leary was the most dangerous man in America. And Leary, by the way, who had started off as a research scientist, just like so many other people who were working very productively in that area, ended up deciding he was going to throw away all the rules of science and become an advocate for everybody using this drug and, you know, he became this popularizer instead of a scientist. And so that was what, in the end, provoked this backlash that ultimately shut down all legitimate research.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. So we've been talking about some of the background history of psychedelics and in your book this only takes up a chapter or so. But the rest of the book has a very interesting structure, kind of focusing on two or three people's experiences and I guess psychological issues so tell us about the structure of the book...

**Tom Shroder:** When I was writing *Acid Test* this is what really preoccupied me for a long time was, you know, how could I structure it. Because, you know... And eventually I just sort of found that really this could... the whole story with the background history and the science could be told through the lives of three people. And one of them was Rick Doblin, you know the guy... the hippy in the woods who...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

who had overdoses, etc., and, you know, he felt like he may be jamming breathing tubes down their throats or stitching them up. And he felt that the real problem was not what he was presented with in the emergency room. The real problem was this whole sort of pathological lifestyle that they led that got them there in the first place. So he decided he really wanted to be on the other end of that, on the preventative end, to help people sort of deal with the life problems that they had and the psychological problems that, you know, that would eventually get them into this sort of, you know, life threatening situations. And he also didn't want just to be doing things to people, he wanted to be collaborating with them. So this led him to psychiatry and of course, as I said earlier, he was one of those people who had this powerful experiences with psychedelics when he was a college student that always were in the back of his mind and made him think that maybe there's some real power there, a kind of a healing power. And he became interested in all these examples of, you know, non-Western cultures that did use altered states of consciousness in their healing procedures. And he discovered Stan Grof as well. And at this point, after, you know, research with psychedelics was made illegal, Grof had sort of looked around and made that same conclusion that it wasn't the drug that was doing the healing, it was the altered state of consciousness.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Tom Shroder:** And he was looking for a non-drug way to create an altered state of consciousness and of course, you know, non-Western cultures have long been doing this, even Western cultures, you know... And things like chanting, or breathing, you know, heavy breathing...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Tom Shroder:** ... loud rhythmic music, have gotten people into altered states of consciousness for thousands of years. And so he sort of developed this technic that he called Holotropic Breathwork, where a combination of kind of hyperventilation and loud rhythmic music would get people into altered states of consciousness...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Tom Shroder:** And he'd observed many of the same effects as people who were undergoing therapy with LSD. So Michael Mithoefer studied this and decided he wanted to be part of that and he became a psychiatrist instead of an emergency room doctor. And he began treating people, a lot of people with trauma... with PTSD in fact, using Breathwork. But he also knew that that didn't work for some people and he knew that these, you know, that the psychedelic drugs had a lot of power and he felt that it was sort of crazy to just rule that out. And he wanted to research that. And so he met Rick at a conference and he said, you know, he said: "I really want to research psychedelics but I know I can't do it in this country so can you tell me what country I may be able to do it then?". And in the meantime, Rick was having trouble finding anybody with proper credentials who was even willing to risk working with it because it was such a career killer. And so, here's the... And he said to Michael: "Well, are you a psychiatrist?". Michael said : "Yes!". He goes: "Well, then you could work with me and we can do it here". And so that was the kind of the beginning...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Tom Shroder:** ... Of course they had to go through an unbelievable ordeal to get it off the ground. But that was the inception. So, then the third person, I focused on, was a vet who had horrible combat experiences in Iraq that gave him PTSD that almost killed him when he got home. He felt that he was going to have to commit suicide and you know, in fact, he got to the point of like holding a service revolver to his temple and getting ready to pull the trigger... And he was, you know, he was at the end of his rope, basically, when he just happened just to see this notice that Michael and Rick Doblin had put up that they were doing trials, clinical trials for PTSD... for veterans with combat related PTSD.

**Tom Shroder:** And then, it took years for them to get an institutional review board, which is required for all sorts of human experimentation with drugs to approve of it. And they got like four or five of them back out on them. Again because of political pressure. So it just... you know, that whole process is a big part of the story and it shows how, you know, how incredibly stigmatized and how long it's delayed this research. But anyway, the veteran whose name is Nicholas Blackstone, he's a big part of the book... and I wanted people to really experience what he experienced in Iraq and how that manifested itself in PTSD and how awful PTSD really is. As I felt that for this to have the necessary impact, I couldn't just... you know, that too often stories like this would just sort of treat the... you know, the people with PTSD almost as if they're, you know, a priori they have a problem and they don't really get into the causes of the problem and make you feel it but... So, anyway, he's a big part of the book and ultimately his sessions with MDMA, with Michael Mithoefer and Mithoefer's co-therapist is his wife, Annie, and they were remarkable, the sessions. And you could see Nick having these insights that were unbelievably dramatic. And that's kind of the climax of the book is when he undergoes this treatment and how that affects him.

**Dr. Dave:** Could you give an example of one of those insights that were transformative for him?

**Tom Shroder:** Oh ! Tremendously, I mean... And again, he had very severe PTSD and by the time he was done with this treatment, he wouldn't have even qualified as having a mild case.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. No. I'm not sure if you heard me correctly. I was asking if you could recall an example...

**Tom Shroder:** Oh yeah ! Well, yeah. I mean on the very first... his very first session out of three... he had this vision where he was... you know, he was using a meditative technique where you kind of went to this comforting place. You imagine yourself...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Tom Shroder:** Only under the influence of MDMA, this imagining became... sort of took on a life of its own. And so, he was like going down to... you know... to this place where he felt he's fully comfortable and he... He got down there and the landscape was kind of scary instead of comforting. And he was like being led to this prison and he was like really scared. And felt there was something horrible in there. And then when he gets to the prison door, he sees this monster. Only the monster is wearing a Marine uniform and it's him. Him as a monster.

**Dr. Dave:** Wow.

**Tom Shroder:** As a killer.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Tom Shroder:** And so he's looking himself and then suddenly he realizes that he's the one who put that monster there and that it wasn't... And he wasn't really evil. It was just this... this... you know... he just had to do these things cause he was in a war. And he was in a situation where it was either kill or be killed. And so, he decides that he has to unchain him. And he unchains him and then he embraces this... this thing that he's kept locked up in the basement, in his mind all this time. And it was this tremendously liberating thing where he kind of forgave himself for what he had to do in war.

**Dr. Dave:** This is almost like your story at the beginning of discovering that you were carrying this huge stone of anxiety and that you had a choice and could let go of it.

going to be, you know, fighting professional soldiers and jihadists and terrorists and such. Not twelve year old kids.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Tom Shroder:** So he felt... part of him felt like he was a murderer and then, you know, maybe he didn't have to do that. Or, another time, a car came out of an alley right after... in the middle of a fire fight and, you know... the mantra is "do tires, grill, kill". In other words: "shoot at the tires at first", then if that doesn't work, "shoot out the engine block", and if that doesn't work, then you go for the driver. Well, on a .50 caliber machine gun, and during... in the middle a fire fight, these are pretty fine distinctions to make. So it's "tires, grill, kill all at once!".

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Tom Shroder:** And he didn't know, you know, he thought he was suspicious of this guy came out that he sure heard the fire fight and why would he be coming out? He didn't have a bomb or something but he never knew for sure. And so many of... you know, so many of the trauma in war is from those ambiguous situations where, you know, you don't know whether, you know, you really are killing innocent people or what. And he also got blown up himself. His Humvee got hit by a rocket propelled grenade and his close friend, the driver, who was right at his feet... you know, when he got out, he sort of jumped out and he was injured. But he yelled at the guy to get out and he said: "I can't move". And he watched his best friend like bleed out right in front of him.

**Dr. Dave:** Oh...

**Tom Shroder:** So, all of these really, really horrible experiences are very difficult to process.

**Dr. Dave:** And yet you say it only took three sessions of a psychedelic treatment?

**Tom Shroder:** Yes, really! I mean, you know, he's still working at it. But it gave him the tools. You know, one subject in one of these studies said: "Well, it wasn't like I was instantly better but I felt like I kind of lifted above myself. And I saw that I was in the middle of the woods but, unlike before where I just felt lost, I suddenly saw that there was a path out of that woods. And that if I followed that path, I'd eventually get free of it." Well, you know, so, what it did was it showed them that there is hope and that there was a path that they could follow to sort of deal with... and from then on... You know, instead of sort of freaking out when they ran into obstacles, they were able to use the tools that they sort of saw during their sessions that helped them deal with them.

**Dr. Dave:** A fair number of people are going down to South America again these days, this time for ayahuasca, which... then I just wondered if in your research you found... if you found out anything about ayahuasca?

**Tom Shroder:** Yes! In fact the emergency room physician turned psychiatrist, he's the chief researcher in some of these MDMA trials. When he was... you know, he was persuaded that it was altered states that were the healing influence. He went down to Peru to do this, you know, week or two week long series of ayahuasca sessions with the shaman down there...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Tom Shroder:** ... to experience what that was like and had some really profound experiences. The culmination of which was that, you know, he was having this really, sort of feeling of desperation and everything... He was feeling like he was down in a pit, which resonated for him because he had a bad LSD trip in college where he felt he was in this pit and trapped and was never going to get out. And so once again there he was back in this

**Tom Shroder:** Yeah. So a lot of people are, you know... Again, it's just frustrating to think that the research is going so slowly here and that, you know, that the access of... and that's why people do things like go down to South America to do this. Because it's just not available on a legal way.

**Dr. Dave:** Is this starting to open up? Where do you see it going? I've kind of heard rumors but I haven't really investigating it, that there are some labs that are doing legitimate research...

**Tom Shroder:** Oh no! They're the best part... a big part of the book is that there's legitimate research is proceeding apace. Places like... Harvard is doing it, Johns Hopkins, NYU, UCLA... a lot of very prestigious institutions. You know, Johns Hopkins just did a pilot study of using psilocybin, which is magic mushrooms, the element that's in magic mushrooms...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Tom Shroder:** ... to help people quit smoking. And they, you know, had an 80% success rate, which is almost unheard of, after six months... which is almost unheard of...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, right.

**Tom Shroder:** ... in smoking cessations where the best sort of drug aided treatment that they have currently does well to do 35%. Also, they've been giving it to people who have terminal cancer, whose... you know, who are paralyzed by fear and bitterness over, you know, over their diagnosis. And, you know, the kind of transcending experiences that people are having helped them to see their... you know, their remaining life as what's important as opposed to their impending death. And to understand that, you know, we all are living with a death sentence on us and that shouldn't stop us from being able to appreciate the moment. And so they're finding that that is having a very high success rate in greatly diminishing anxiety and refocusing people on, you know, the time they have left rather than on their impending death. It's being used... there's a new trial beginning now where they're giving MDMA to adults with autism, social disorders. And that anecdotally has tremendous promise. So... I mean there's a lot of... and it's also, you know, being used to treat addiction. Ibogaine is another psychedelic drug that has a natural... that has a part of it that diminishes or eliminates withdrawal symptoms. But then it's coupled with the insight gained, that changes the way people perceive how they're treating their bodies. So that they just naturally don't want to take drugs any more. So there's a tremendous amount of stuff and these are all... you know, these are all like... There's three phases of clinical trials. The first phase establishes whether it can be given safely under medical supervision. You know, that's all of they're concerned with. Can they treat people without killing them or injuring them. And then the second phase, actually tries to see whether it has an effect that seems to be positive. In small groups of people you know, ranging between like a dozen or two dozen subjects. And that's what they're completing now. You know, they've completed one such study with MDMA for mainly female victims of sex abuse or rape. And now they're nearing completion of the veterans study that Nick Blackstone was in. You know, they've got twenty one of twenty four subjects. But when the... And there are other phase 2 trials going on in multiple states and other countries... And when they got enough of those, you know, maybe a couple hundred total people, then they go ahead with the phase 2, which as I said is, you know, several hundred subjects in, you know, maybe half a dozen locations. And that's what leads to prescriptions but, you know, it's very expensive. And as I said, no government funding is forthcoming. So... you know, MAPS, which is Rick Doblin's non-profit, is doing things like Indiegogo campaigns stuff, it's absurd! You know, the phase 3 trials will probably, you know, cost ten million or more and so it's very slow to raise that kind of money and the lack... you know, the fact that they're doing it in dribs and drabs stretches it all out. So, yes, because this works... you know, I'm not a scientist, so I just can say flat out: "it works". You know, if I was a scientist, I'd have to edge and say: "Well, you know, you can't tell until you do all the... you know, until you do the phase 3 trials, etc.", which is often true in drugs where positive early results don't translate to results when you do it with a lot of people.

longer than everybody thinks it's going to take. In fact, this study that's... that they've now done twenty one out of twenty four subjects, originally, he thought that he was going to be done and publishing a paper on it by the time my book came out, which was in September 2014 and they still have three subjects left. And then it takes like another, you know, nine months to a year to get a paper written and published.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. Well, Tom, I know that you've got to run on to another interview and so, you might want to mention your book and where people can get it and any last words that you want to close with...

**Tom Shroder:** Yeah. The book is called *Acid Test. LSD, Ecstasy, and the Power to Heal*, and you know, of course, the easiest thing to do is just go on to Amazon and look it up and do that "One Click" thing. And, you know, I just... I really hope that, you know, I've already seen evidence that this has elevated the discussion and got more people talking about it. You know, I've been on *NPR*, *Time Magazine*, *Psychology Today*, at *The Atlantic*... it's been all over the place. And I really feel that people are learning about this. And I hope that that continues. But thank you very much David. It was good talking to you.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, me too. Tom Shroder, I want to thank you for being my guest on Shrink Rap Radio. And I'm sorry that all those other publications got you before I did but I'm really glad the word is getting out there!

**Tom Shroder:** That was a pleasure."

I hope you found this interview to be as fascinating as I did. There's so much more in the book than we were able to cover. As you heard, Tom Shroder, the author, experimented with psychedelics in his youth as so many of us did in the mid-60s and early 70s. I've already been pretty open here that, as one of that generation, I also explored them and, as with Tom, my interest was not driven by a desire to party but rather I felt, as a graduate student, psychologist, that it behooved me to explore what I was hearing was a potentially powerful therapeutic tool. It's been about fifty years since I've taken a psychedelic so I figure the statute of limitation has plenty run out by now, and I can afford to be open about it. Fairly, both Tom and I were able to go on and lead productive lives, as did so many others who have enjoyed successful academic research and therapeutic careers. There was a small percentage who did not fare well as a result of their experimentation. However, because of the illegality of these substances, we have no way of knowing for sure what they took, its potency, purity, and so on. Neither Tom nor I are advocating that you experiment with these powerful substances but I do think we both are advocates for high quality research that may lead to powerful interventions which are adjuncts to more conventional psychotherapy. It seems to me that the whole trend towards legalizing medical marijuana may be an important step along the path of backing off from the demonization of these potentially healing plant based medicines. Just last night I was watching CNN and the second hour long special by neuroscientist and author Dr. Sanjay Gupta on medical marijuana, he described important research going on in Europe and Israel. It's still very hard to mount the needed research here in the US because approval involves obtaining approval not only from NIMH, that's the National Institute of Mental Health, but also various law enforcement agencies. He points out the paradoxical situation in the case of medical marijuana in which the government has taken out a patent on one strain while declaring it illegal. University based researchers in this country are intimidated by the legal risks that they might incur by mounting research studies on marijuana. So here in the US we're stymied by a kind of catch-22 in which medical marijuana is legal in a growing number of states, but illegal nationally. We can only hope this situation will continue to change for the better. I definitely recommend *Acid Test: LSD, Ecstasy, and the Power to Heal* by Tom Shroder. And as always let me remind you that you can order that book using our Amazon.com widget in the right hand side bar on the Shrink Rap Radio website.