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Dans Revue française d'études américaines 2018/3 N° 156 , pages 91 à 104
Éditions Belin

ISSN 0397-7870
ISBN 9782410014037
DOI 10.3917/e.rfea.156.0091
Date de mise en ligne : 11/12/2018

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Keywords

R. Gordon Wasson; Valentina Wasson; magic mushroom; psilocybin; Robert Graves; Aldous Huxley; psychedelic drugs; *Life* magazine

En mai 1957, une série d'articles parus dans le magazine Life et nombre de grands journaux nationaux annoncent la « découverte » de « champignons magiques » hallucinogènes par un couple d'aventuriers. Robert Gordon Wasson et Valentina Wasson racontent comment ils ont fait usage du champignon dans un village indigène, un récit qui intensifie le tourisme de la drogue au Mexique de même que les ventes par correspondance de peyotl, une substance psychédélique aux effets similaires. Pour le couple, le champignon magique procure une expérience transcendante qui n'est autre que le fondement pré-moderne de la religion globale. Rejetée par les universitaires, cette théorie suscite un très vif intérêt auprès des journalistes et du grand public. Pour faire connaître sa découverte, R. Gordon Wasson mène une campagne comprenant des tournées de conférences, des expositions muséales et de nombreux entretiens avec des journalistes. Cet article s'appuie sur les archives du couple, conservées à la Harvard University Herbaria, pour comprendre comment leur initiative a contribué à la prolifération de théories idiosyncratiques sur l'expérience des drogues psychédéliques.

In 1957, *Life* magazine proclaimed that banking public relations man R. Gordon Wasson and his wife, pediatrician Valentina Wasson, had "discovered" psilocybin "magic mushrooms" by participating in a sacred Mazatec ritual in the hinterlands of Mexico.[1] The feature in America's leading pictorial

1. Wasson's *Life* article "Seeking the Magic Mushroom,"13 May 1957, included the earliest use of the term "magic mushrooms" identified by the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary.

magazine was just the start of a nationwide sensation largely choreographed by Wasson himself. Six days after the article in *Life*, Valentina's first-person account of the adventure appeared on the cover of *This Week*, a Sunday magazine inserted in 37 newspapers with nearly 12 million total circulation. Valentina Wasson died in 1958, but Wasson's promotional campaign continued with feature stories in magazines ranging in quality from the *New Yorker* to *True Crime* and *UFO*, as well as a university lecture tour and a traveling natural history museum exhibit entitled "The Quest for the Divine Mushroom: An Ancient Rite Rediscovered," featuring Wasson's artifacts and audio recordings, all before the dawn of the 1960s.

Wasson's most novel contribution, the hypothesized existence of a prehistoric, global mushroom cult, was grounded in discredited social theories. Although credited with identifying the hallucinogenic mushroom, the scientific establishment ignored his theories about its use and history. However, Wasson's ecstatic descriptions of drug fantasies drawn from Romantic literature made a profound impact in both the United States and in Mexico, which experienced an immediate boom in drug tourism.

This article draws on unpublished documents in the Tina & R. Gordon Wasson Ethnomycological Collection Archives at Harvard University Herbaria to explain how an untrained gentleman explorer publicized his role in discovering something that had been in continuous use in the Mexican countryside for hundreds of years. Although indigenous people's use of hallucinogenic mushrooms was well documented by sixteenth-century Spanish missionaries and conquistadors, in 1915 American botanist William Safford declared that the historical reports were wrong, based on his own failure to identify intoxicating mushrooms. Stafford asserted that the historical accounts actually described the use of peyote cactus buttons that contained the compound mescaline, which were used in religious ceremonies in the American southwest. Anthropologists and botanists working in Mexico challenged this conclusion, accumulating evidence that, by the end of the 1930s, included actual observation of sacred mushroom ceremonies. However, they failed to collect adequate samples to identify where the magic mushroom fit in the scientific taxonomy. Over the next two decades, a handful of established researchers, including mycologist Rolf Singer, launched expeditions to rural Mexico with the hope of conclusively identifying the species of the Indian's magic mushroom (Guzmán 405-406).

A growing scientific interest in hallucinogenic drugs like magic mushrooms exploded in the 1950s. Numerous clinical trials with mescaline and a new synthetic compound, lysergic-acid diethylamide (LSD), took place

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See "magic, adj. (and int.)," *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, January 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/112187. Accessed 25 February 2018.

alongside experiments with the first generation of effective anti-psychotic drugs. In clinical trials, the hallucinogenic drugs seemed to turn on a form of madness, which could be turned off again with new anti-psychotic drugs like chlorpromazine, persuasively demonstrating a link between chemistry and the mind. Researchers initially explored hallucinogenic drugs as educational tools to understand the experience of mental illness and, given to patients in psychotherapy, to come to richer understandings of the self. LSD was one of the most studied drugs of this period, with formal clinical trials that were frequently accompanied by informal experiments by researchers and their friends (Siff, 61-63). These drugs also had the attention of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, which by 1951 had begun funding research programs, including human experiments, on the use of drugs for interrogations, spy craft and coercing confessions. A scientist dispatched by the CIA to Mexico in 1951 to collect plants of "high narcotic and toxic value" returned with stories about magic mushrooms, but no samples. After learning that the Wassons' had found the mushrooms on an expedition in 1955, the agency had a chemist secretly working in its employ, James Moore, arrange a $2,000 grant to R. Gordon Wasson to support the subsequent trip described in *Life* (Marks, 106-107, 114). Declassified CIA documents indicate Wasson was unaware of the true source of the funds.[2]

Public awareness of the active and colorful research blossomed after 1954, when the celebrated novelist Aldous Huxley published *Doors of Perception*, describing how a dose of mescaline allowed him to enter the world that he believed only mystics and great artists could naturally see. The dramatic turnabout for a writer whose best-known work, *Brave New World*, reproved the use of a fictional drug "soma" to escape the pressures of a dystopian future world, was debated in national magazines and on the book review pages of local newspapers. Mainstream magazines were notably hostile toward ritual peyote use by members of the Native American Church when they were under threat of regulation by U.S. state lawmakers and the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the early 1950s. (Possession of drugs with the psychoactive compounds contained in peyote, magic mushrooms and LSD were not criminally prohibited under U.S. federal law until 1968). However, in the wake of Huxley's account, magazines including *The New Yorker* and *Look* published writerly first-person descriptions of peyote experiences by authors who explicitly referenced Huxley.

2. Declassified records of the MKULTRA program are accessible online through The Black Vault web site. Documentation of CIA funding for the Wassons' exhibition is at http://documents.theblackvault.com/documents/mkultra/mkultra4/DOC_0000017457/DOC_0000017457.pdf. Accessed 5 October 2018.

The editors at *Life* were trying to capitalize on the growing public interest when they contracted R. Gordon Wasson to "identify [himself] and members of the expedition and include among other things a description of [his] own sensations and fantasies under the influence of the mushroom" in the prospective article (Wootton). The former public relations man did not disappoint. Wasson turned his claim that he, along with photographer Allan Richardson, were "the first white men in recorded history to eat the divine mushroom" ("Seeking the Magic Mushroom" 102) into a level of public recognition that belied the incremental nature of the scientific discovery. Wasson's team was denied naming rights for the newly-recognized species of Mexican mushrooms, which went to American mycologists Rolf Singer and Alexander Hanchett Smith, who published an identification of *Psilocybe* in a 1958 monograph that relied on specimens that Singer had collected in Mexico the year before. Despite university speaking engagements and recognition from museums, Wasson's attempts to win foundation funding for further research were unsuccessful, and a fellowship at the Harvard Botanical Museum was funded out of his own pocket (Letcher 88-113). Indeed, Wasson's celebrity sprang not from his scholarly contributions, but rather the sensationalism of his claims and his skillfully coordinated, multi-channel communications campaign to promote them. This paper proceeds by outlining how the Wassons' came to search for magic mushrooms; Gordon Wasson's campaign to promote his role in the discovery; and its impact on the spread of this drug to Americans.

Mycophiles: The Wassons' Passion for Mushrooms

Robert Gordon Wasson was born in 1898, the son of an Episcopal rector who wrote a 1914 book, *Religion and Drink*, drawing on the Old and New Testaments to argue that there was an appropriate place for alcohol within the Christian faith. Wasson was educated in the public schools of Newark, New Jersey until age 16, when he travelled alone to Europe, living for a year in France and Spain and becoming fluent in both languages. In 1917, he enlisted in the American Expeditionary Forces and served for 14 months in France as a radio operator. After studying at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and the London School of Economics, Wasson joined the staff of the *New Haven Register* in 1922 as editorial writer and state political correspondent. In 1925, he became associate editor of the monthly *Current Opinion*, then moved to the *New York Herald Tribune* where he wrote a daily, signed financial news column. In 1928, he left journalism for a banking position with Guaranty Trust Company of New York that entailed postings in London and Argentina. In 1934, he joined J.P. Morgan & Company, where he "pioneered in banking public relations," according to an archivist's brief

biography ("Biography"). He was promoted to bank vice president in 1943, a position he held until retirement in 1963. He died in 1986.

In 1926, Wasson married Valentina Pavlovna Guercken, who was born in Moscow in 1901 to a wealthy family that fled the country following the Communist revolution. Educated as a physician at London University, she received her medical degree in 1927 and practiced pediatrics in New York. In 1939, she published *The Chosen Baby*, a book explaining adoption to children.

Wasson frequently explained that he and his wife began thinking about mushrooms during their honeymoon in rural New York, when he was repulsed by mushrooms that his new bride collected during a walk together in the woods. The couple speculated that her delight, and his revulsion, reflected their cultures' different attitudes toward mushrooms. "As the years went on and our knowledge grew, we discovered a surprising pattern in our data: each Indo-European is by cultural inheritance either 'mycophobe' or 'mycophile,' that is, each people either rejects and is ignorant of the fungal world or knows it astonishingly well and loves it," Wasson explained ("Seeking the Magic Mushroom" 113). The insight inspired the couple's seemingly Victorian pastime of scouring books, studying the etymology of mushroom-related words, spotting mushrooms in medieval artworks and corresponding with scholars, including the English poet Robert Graves. Valentina wrote to Graves in 1949 to inquire if the Roman Emperor Claudius, the subject of Graves' novel *I, Claudius*, could have been poisoned by mushroom. Gordon Wasson and Graves corresponded over the next several years, with Wasson offering financial advice and Graves directing Wasson to sightings of mushrooms across the span of Western history. The repository for the couple's decades of inquiry on this topic was to be a lavish, privately printed book *Mushrooms, Russia and History*. They explained it as "an absorbing work, perhaps rich in historical significance […] on the role of mushrooms in the life of the peoples of Europe" (V.P. and R.G. Wasson, vol. 1, 5). Work on the book was largely complete in September 1952, when a letter from Graves pointed Wasson to an article in *American Anthropologist* that summarized evidence of a mushroom cult in Mexico.

In August 1953, the Wassons took their research in a new direction, as they embarked on what turned out to be the first of four annual expeditions to rural Mexico in search of the magic mushroom. On this first trip, the Wassons, and their sixteen-year-old daughter Masha, were joined by Robert J. Weitlaner, a scholar of indigenous American languages at Mexico's National School of Anthropology and History who had collected specimens of the ritual mushrooms in the remote Mazatec village of Huautla de Jiménez, Oaxaca 1936. (Forwarded to Harvard University, the specimens were deteriorated too badly for complete identification.) After two days of travel,

first by chauffeured car, then train, then bus, and finally mule, the group arrived at the village and paid 55 cents to rent an empty house for the week. By asking around, they managed to obtain a disappointingly small number of mushrooms, which Wasson sampled, to no effect. On the final night of their stay, a *curandero,* or folk healer, named Aurelio, agreed to conduct a mushroom ceremony for them to observe the mushroom's divinatory powers. The couple reported asking about their eighteen-year-old son, who they believed was in Boston. Aurelio predicted their son was actually in New York, that he could soon be facing foreign military service, and that there would be a death in the family. Upon returning home, they learned that their son had indeed been in New York. Soon thereafter, he enlisted in the army, and a cousin of Gordon's died. "We record, as in duty we are bound to do, but without further comment, these strange sequelae to our Huautla visit," the couple wrote in *Mushrooms, Russia and History* (vol. 2, 265).

The following May, Gordon Wasson returned to Oaxaca with Allan Richardson, a New York society photographer who received expenses and payment in exchange for signing over the rights to his pictures. Earlier that year, Weitlaner had proposed an expedition to a different Oaxaca village, San Juan Mazatlan, where local *curanderos* reportedly used two kinds of mushrooms. Also on this trip were Walter S. Miller, a professional linguist who knew the local language, a local guide, and a boy to tend their horses and mule. When they arrived at the village, however, village elders "were invariably surprised to learn that such mushrooms existed, and showed themselves most curious and even envious as we described the divinatory mushrooms of the Mazatecs" (*Mushrooms, Russia and History* vol. 2, 280). Wasson tried to sell articles about the trip to two popular American magazines, the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Vogue*, but he was forced to inform Richardson that they were rejected (Letter to Richardson).

They returned to Mexico the following year. In June 1955, Valentina, Gordon, and Masha Wasson rented a comfortable villa on the outskirts of Mexico City. They were joined by Richardson, and the two men departed for Huautla de Jiménez. They again found amenable local hosts in the village, who directed them to an "immense" crop of mushrooms on the edge of a sugar cane field. They were also introduced to *curandera* María Sabina, who agreed to allow them to participate in an all-night ritual with about twenty others, who ate mushrooms, sang and sat entranced in a darkened room. This time Wasson and Richardson ate the mushrooms too, establishing their claim to be "the first white men in recorded history to eat the divine mushrooms." Although he had intended to stave off the effects, Wasson was overcome by ecstatic visions of fantastic "oriental" architectural structures that he said "seemed to belong […] to the imaginary architecture described by the visionaries in the Bible" (*Mushrooms, Russia and History* vol. 2, 293). Sabina

conducted a second ritual for the Americans a few days later. This time, Richardson ate no mushrooms so that he could better attend to flash photography in the darkened room.

The following morning of the second ceremony, the *curandera* sent a message to Wasson and Richardson. "We were welcome to the pictures, she said, but would we please refrain from showing those particular ones to any except our most trusted friends, for if we showed them to all and sundry, *sena una traidon*, it would be a betrayal," Wasson wrote in *Mushrooms, Russian and History,* which reproduced four of the photographs. He continued:

> We are doing as the Señora asked us, showing these photographs only in those circles we feel sure she would be pleased to have them shown. In order that she be not disturbed by the importunities of commercially-minded strangers, we have withheld the name of the village where she lives, and we have changed the names of characters in our narrative. On our next visit we shall ask for publication to publish our pictures for general circulation (vol. 2, 304).

Valentina and Masha joined the group in Huaulta around the time of the second ceremony, but appear not to have taken part. Although the group had intended to leave immediately, they were stranded by the onset of heavy rain. "Having nothing else to do," Valentina and Masha ate some of the mushrooms Gordon had collected on a Tuesday afternoon. They lay in sleeping bags on their hosts' floor, Valentina overcome by colorful and pleasant visions which became the core of her subsequent article for *This Week*. "This was the first occasion on which white people ate the mushrooms for purely experimental purposes, without the aura of native ceremony," the Wassons boasted in their privately printed book (vol. 2, 303). The group continued the 1955 expedition with visits to villages where they had heard reports that different varieties of mushrooms were used, and were allowed to witness the mushroom ritual conducted by another *curandero*, but not to participate. The Wassons returned home to New York with a collection of dried mushrooms, which Wasson discovered had maintained potency when he tried them again in his apartment six weeks later. "The effects of these mushrooms are beyond belief," he wrote to Roger Heim, professor of mycology and director of the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris (Letter to Heim).

With the success of the 1955 expedition, Wasson was able to secure a contract with *Life*, a magazine particularly known for its large format and photo essays, in which he promised to describe the experience of mushroom intoxication. For a culminating 1956 expedition, Wasson invited Roger Heim, an eminent mycologist and director of the Museum of Natural History in Paris. Also on this final trip were anthropologist Guy Stresser-Péan of the Sorbonne and Gary Moore, the chemist who was secretly employed by the CIA. Wasson's account for *Life* does not specify if Valentina was present. The trip was also a success. Heim departed with specimens that allowed

him to identify the species of the magic mushroom. Heim passed specimens collected on the trip to the Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann, who used them to isolate the active compound psilocybin, publishing his results in 1958 (Guzmán 406).

Publicizing the Mushroom

Per his editor's request, Wasson's first-person article in *Life* lingered both on the banker's tale of adventure and personal experience while partaking in Sabina's ceremony. His description of the experience, allowing access to the "visionary world" of "mystics and poets" (and particularly English poet William Blake) echoed Aldous Huxley. "For the first time the word ecstasy took on real meaning. For the first time it did not mean someone else's state of mind," Wasson wrote. "I felt that I was now seeing plain, whereas ordinary vision gives an imperfect view; I was seeing the archetypes, the Platonic ideals, that underlie the imperfect images of everyday life" ("Seeking the Magic Mushroom" 109). Although Wasson had corresponded with Huxley since 1955, he did not mention the writer's development of these views in the article for *Life*.

This article in *Life* presented his participation in the 1955 mushroom ceremony with Sabina (identified in the article as Eva Mendez) as the culmination of a lifelong scholarly quest, and confirmation of the theory that he and Valentina had begun interrogating during their honeymoon three decades before.

> Was it not probable that, long ago, long before the beginnings of written history, our ancestors had worshipped a divine mushroom? […] We were the first to offer the conjecture of a divine mushroom in the remote cultural background of the European peoples, and the conjecture at once posed a further problem: what kind of mushroom was once worshiped and why?" (114).

In a note attached to the article, Wasson acknowledged Robert Graves, among others, for providing "general advice," without elaborating on the writer's contribution to the theory that Wasson's global collection of mushroom trivia indicated the existence of a pre-historic mushroom cult. (The seemingly outlandish idea echoes the thesis in Graves' *The White Goddess*, first published in 1948, that there was a prototypical moon goddess behind various European and pagan myths). Pharand surmised that Wasson may have downplayed Graves' contribution because of the writer's "dubious reputation among academics and scholars as something of an unreliable eccentric." Graves complained both privately and in print that he did not receive the credit he felt due (Pharand 214). In any case, the way in which Wasson assembled his argument, by drawing connections between artifacts from civilizations widely separated in time and space, had fallen into disfavor since the 1940s.

By the time *Mushrooms, Russia and History* was published, scholars were aware that the approach was prone to confirmation bias, and mainstream anthropology had rejected the assumption that it was possible to make backward inferences about past civilizations from contemporary cultural practices.

To promote the article, *Life* contrasted Wasson's credibility as a retired banking executive against the strangeness of his story and the Mexican setting. An advertisement for *Life* on the CBS television program *Person to Person* emphasized not only that the current magazine had witnessed the mushroom ritual, but that the "weird and wonderous experience" was told through the eyes of "R. Gordon Wasson, a vice president of J.P. Morgan and longtime student of the strange ceremony" ("2nd Commercial—Mushrooms"). Six days after the exclusive story in *Life*, Valentina Wasson published her account on the cover of the newspaper supplement *This Week*. The article began with Valentina lying in her sleeping bag on the floor of an adobe hut, waiting for the effects of the "supposedly sacred mushrooms" to kick in. She wondered if the effects that the men had felt at the ceremony could have been the result of a "primitive psychological ruse." That was not to be the case. Under the influence of mushrooms, she experienced visions "all in 3-D and in fantastic Technicolor" of a prehistoric cave, the French court of Louis XV and a Spanish church. Like her husband, she awoke from the experience happy and alert, and set about writing notes from the "weird and wonderful experience" (V. Wasson 9, 36).

Wasson used the *Life* article to publicize the couples' expensive, privately printed book, which also benefited from the dramatic contrast between prestige and sensationalism. Although only 512 copies of the two-volume work were printed, "the book got almost that many reviews," a newspaper reporter observed in 1961. Wasson spent proceeds from the article to ship 100 of the $125 books (valued more than $1,000 each in 2018 dollars) to libraries and reviewers. "The latest novelty in the publishing world," the *New Yorker* described Wasson's book in a brief item painting Wasson as a dilettante who detailed fantastic theories over lunch in his bank's private dining room ("Mycophile" 25). "Probably one of the most expensive and certainly one of the most intriguing books of the year," said a 1957 BBC radio newsreel that briefly summarized its thesis about a widespread but forgotten mushroom religion (BBC). In the *New York Times*, a reviewer noted that "writing as amateurs in the various scientific disciplines, the Wassons are undaunted by settled conclusions of the pedants and eagerly welcome scholarly disputation" (Bird 185). Robert Graves expounded their theory of mushrooms as the sacred "food of the gods" in ancient Europe in glowing book reviews for *Saturday Review* (21) and *The Atlantic* (73) that lingered on evidence of a prehistoric mushroom religion. In Toledo, Ohio, the acquisition of such a rare and expensive book by the local public library

prompted an article in the local Sunday magazine. The student newspaper at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln similarly covered the purchase of a copy of *Mushrooms, Russia and History* by the university library. "I couldn't believe my eyes. How did it get that play" Wasson said. "I suppose we caught the popular fancy" (Pelletiere 64). Ironically, the limited print run and high cost of *Mushrooms, Russia and History* resulted in the marginal ideas it contained receiving more attention.

Between 1957 and about 1961, Wasson participated in dozens of newspaper and magazine stories about his discovery, in at least two cases furnishing the writers with mushroom specimens to fuel first-person descriptions of psychedelic drug trips. He embraced attention even from low status publications that specialized in tales of the strange. "The memories of the race of mankind may be unlocked by the tiny mushroom," Wasson explained in an issue of *Fate Magazine* featuring an illustration of a UFO on the cover (De Borhegyi 42-43). Wasson sat for an interview, licensed photographs, and provided a dose of magic mushrooms to the author for a 1961 account in *True, the Man's Magazine*. The journalist's experience with Wasson's mushrooms comprised the better part of the first three pages, as he described being entranced by daydreams of European castles and an Arabian camel train (Cole 54-57). In 1960 the fashion magazine *Cosmopolitan* suggested mystical effects from the magic mushroom in an article that described Wasson's expedition and quoted heavily from his account (Severus 43). Less intellectual publications seemed more prone to outrage over Wasson's discovery, drawing freely on anxieties about narcotic drugs and drug abuse generally. The magazine *True Crime* blamed Wasson for attracting attention to "deadly as dynamite" mushrooms (Gallivan 6), while *Uncensored* claimed their real power was "sex stimulation" (Meade 32). *Real for Men* claimed the mushrooms "can lead to sex crimes and cause visions, insanity and suicide" (Herald 16).

Wasson also presented his research to more rarified audiences, releasing a recording of Sabina's chants on Folkway records in 1957 and, in 1959, mounting an exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, "The Quest for the Divine Mushroom: An Ancient Rite Rediscovered." The exhibition received national press coverage and travelled to museums in upstate New York and Michigan. And in the years before his death in 1986, he published a handful of books with commercial publishers further developing his theory about a prehistoric mushroom religion. Wasson "jealously guarded his contributions," in the words of one associate, engaging in a lengthy dispute over credit for the discovery of magic mushrooms on the pages of *Mycologia* and *Ethnomycological Studies,* published by the Botanical Museum of Harvard. "He did not shrink from the controversy, but rather encouraged it in the way that people do who know they are right," read one obituary (Pfister 12).

Impact of Publicity

The letters to the editors of *Life* following the publication of "Seeking the Magic Mushroom" suggest different ways in which the Wassons tale was received. A Wichita reader declared that "your article about mushroom worship is an outrage against faithful Christians," while a Fort Lauderdale woman wrote: "Seeking the Magic Mushroom is without doubt the most fascinating article I have ever read." Another reader noted the similarities between Wasson's descriptions of mushroom hallucinations and descriptions of mescaline use penned by Havelock Ellis around the turn of the century. Perhaps most telling was the letter from a New York woman instructing readers how they could have similar experiences on their own:

> Sirs:
> I've been having hallucinatory visions accompanied by space suspension and time destruction in my New York City apartment for the past three years.
> The essential difference between Mr. Wasson's vision and my own is that mine are produced by eating American-grown peyote cactus plants. I first heard about peyote in Aldous Huxley's book, *The Doors of Perception*, in which he described this ancient "tranquilizer." The chemicals in peyote are known. A drug called mescaline is made from it which is already in use effectively for psychotherapy and research. I got my peyote from a company in Texas which makes C.O.D. shipments all over the country for $8 per hundred "buttons." It usually takes about 4 "buttons" for one person to have visions ("Letters" 16).

Although Wasson omitted the name of the village from his article in *Life*, the publicity transformed Huautla de Jiménez. Two months after it was published, Wasson observed in a letter to Richardson, "the village was fully alive to the *Life* article […] Mushrooms were offered to us by all and sundry as we went along the street. Huautla is having a hard time, because of a coffee crop failure, and mushrooms are a pleasant and profitable diversification" (Letter to Richardson). According to the press release announcing a 1959 museum exhibit, "Since the coming of the Wassons, life has changed in Huautla. Once reluctant to discuss their special mushrooms, the Indians today are involved in a brisk business of supplying them for scientific use" (Press release). By 1960, an English-language newspaper in Mexico City was advertising magic mushroom tour packages that included participation in a mushroom ceremony ("The Quest for the Magic Mushroom"). That year, future LSD guru Timothy Leary took his first psychedelic trip at a villa in Cuernavaca, on mushrooms that he and some colleagues purchased from an old woman at a village market (Leary 12-17).

The brunt of these changes fell on María Sabina. Sought out by many of the new visitors to Huautla, the folk healer suffered the backlash from other village residents. Her home was burned and she was accused of selling marijuana and briefly jailed. In 1970, a visiting anthropologist found her

impoverished and living in rags, the same year that a musical work inspired by her tragedy opened at Carnegie Hall (Hughes 33). That same year, Wasson reflected in an essay for the New York Times that "Huautla, when I first knew it as a humble out-of-the-way Indian village, has become a true mecca for hippies, psychopaths, adventurers, pseudo-research workers, the miscellaneous crew of our society's drop-outs." Defending the importance of his discovery, he conceded: "Yet what I have done gives me nightmares: I have unleashed on lovely Huautla a torrent of commercial exploitation of the vilest kind" ("Drugs" 21). Sabina died at the age of 91 in 1985.

Wasson craved recognition as a scholar, but his contribution to the history of psychotropic drugs was of this more concrete nature. Using his status, wealth and personal associations, Wasson managed to coordinate—and document—the remarkable moment when the Mazateca's sacred mushroom passed into Western scientists' hands. This transfer was inevitable, given the number of researchers conducting fieldwork toward this end. Indeed, other researchers collected and identified specimens of the mushroom around the same time. However, their work took place outside of the public eye. Wasson's genius was in transforming the moment of private discovery into a public spectacle.

The scientific community and general public were already fascinated by hallucinogenic drugs when Wasson launched his publicity campaign. With descriptions of mushroom intoxication derivative of Huxley, Wasson added a familiar fuel to that fire. He told a story about a personal quest that anticipated the spirit of the times, in both its superficial interest in non-Western shamanism and the ultimate conclusion that the trappings of mysticism and ritual were unnecessary to achieve the same results. Wasson's later books were published through commercial presses, attracting readers primarily within the drug and New Age countercultures.

Although not an innovative thinker, Wasson's broadly circulated story became part of the mythology of magic mushrooms for North American recreational users. The extent to which exposure to Wasson's theories and visions influenced the drug trips of those who followed can only be a matter of speculation. In a 1961 account in *Esquire*, Hollywood screenwriter and novelist Budd Schulberg described reading "Huxley, Wasson and others who had navigated these voyages to the end of the mind" in order to prepare to take mushrooms with friends in a remote Mexican village. His own drug experience was unremarkable, but Schulberg's confidence in those others' experiences—and belief in the power of the magic mushroom—was unshaken. As Schulberg wrote: "It is fascinating to contemplate those transplanted Mongolians who, in the most primitive of physical environments, discovered thousands of years ago a key to the gate that bars the way for most of us to the unknown country of the soul" (129, 316).

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