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Peyote to LSD: A Psychedelic Odyssey **(Docu; History Channel, Sat. April 19, 10 p.m.)**

By BRIAN LOWRY

Produced by Gryphon Prods. Producers, Sheera von Puttkamer, Peter von Puttkamer; co-producer, Wade Davis; director, Peter von Puttkamer; writers, Peter von Puttkamer, Davis;

Hey, something actually snuck onto the History Channel that's actually interesting and about history -- a connection the channel often struggles to achieve. In this case, it's an intriguing look at scientist Richard Evan Schultes -- who roamed the Amazon investigating the plants and "magic mushrooms" used by local populations that became the hallucinogenic base for the 1960s. Explorer Wade Davis characterizes Schultes as a kind of mind-expanding Indiana Jones, but the spec's most salient point is a broader view of drugs that provides welcome context in contemplating the U.S.' "Just Say No" policies.

Davis introduces the term "ethno-botanist" into my vocabulary, citing how Schultes and others explored the Amazon, where peyote and other hallucinogens had been used in rituals dating back to early man. He also notes how the psychedelic era that eventually followed -- as these drugs found their way into the counterculture movement -- were in Schultes' eyes "the unwanted child" of his discoveries.

Shot in various locations, including the Amazon, Davis and filmmaker Peter von Puttkamer provide a refreshingly nonjudgmental approach to drug use, while revealing plenty of interesting tidbits -- such as the CIA's role in popularizing LSD as a recreational drug by studying its potential cloak-and-dagger applications.

Because of the emphasis on recreating Schultes' exploits, the doc gives relatively short shrift to the juiciest parts of the story -- how artists, from the Grateful Dead to John Lennon to Aldous Huxley (author of "The Doors of Perception"), wove the consciousness-raising aspects of hallucinogens into their craft.

That said, the Dead's Bob Weir is among those interviewed in a project that also incorporates clips of psychedelic pioneers Timothy Leary and Ken Kesey as well as Davis witnessing modern ceremonies involving various kinds of exotic flora. The net effect reinforces man's enduring quest to get high despite persistent attempts to stigmatize those efforts.

"Peyote to LSD" isn't perfect, but it does weave obscure history into a timely theme, as opposed to the bastardized concepts ("Ice Road Trucker" comes to mind) that History has programmed in its flailings to reach younger demographics. A bigger mystery is why the project is being buried at 10 p.m. on a Saturday night -- unless the subject matter made someone a trifle uneasy.

If nothing else, it's a good question. Remind me to ask it again when the room stops spinning.

camera, Bill Mills, Randall Peck, Peter von Puttkamer; editors, Peter von Puttkamer, Donald J. Paonessa; music, Michael Richard Plowman. 120 MIN. Narrator: Wade Davis.