

## Supporting Sobriety in a Musical Community

### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Who are the Wharf Rats, and how do they exemplify the practices of sobriety, peer support, and community building within a musical fan culture?

#### OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students investigate strategies the Grateful Dead fan community known as “Wharf Rats” employed to maintain sobriety within Deadhead fan culture. By investigating the Wharf Rats, students will have open discussions about sobriety, and divorce the relationship between drug use and musical fanship.*



Born out of the countercultural revolution of the 1960’s, the Grateful Dead and the Deadhead community has long been associated with drug use. Drugs were woven into the fabric of the Grateful Dead’s music and community since their early performances as the house band for the Acid Tests, a series of experimental LSD-based gatherings held within the burgeoning counterculture of Northern California before LSD was criminalized in 1968. During the intense social duress of this period—the escalating Vietnam War, ongoing Civil Rights struggles and increasingly violent civil disobedience, and a seemingly insurmountable generation gap—the Grateful Dead, its fanbase, and Timothy Leary’s famous call to “Tune in, turn on, and drop out” synergized into what must have seemed to many an attractive alternative to the American mainstream. However, as the counterculture waned, the Grateful Dead continued to rise, and drugs of all types permeated the massive Deadhead fanbase known to follow the band around the country. Many fans who hoped to enter a utopian subculture ultimately found themselves struggling with the dystopian reality of addiction.

In the time since the late 60s, drugs and music have become synonymous to many. Indeed, the verb “to party,” so often associated with any live music or nightclub experience, means, to many, “to get wasted.” And as chemical substances have gotten stronger, the repercussions have become only more lethal. From 2017-2019, young rappers Mac Miller, Lil Peep, and Juice WRLD have all died of overdoses. Grimly, all three from substances they mentioned in their songs.

But drugs never truly defined the Grateful Dead or the Deadhead community, nor must they define any musical community. Within the Deadhead community, members who sought to abstain from drugs or recovered from addiction formed an influential support group known as the “Wharf Rats.” Named after a Grateful Dead song about an aged, addicted hobo, the Wharf Rats sought to create a safe space for Deadheads who wished to see their favorite band while resisting the drug scene that had grown around them. The tight-knit community vowed to be drug-free and use the Grateful Dead concert experience as a way to wield the power of sobriety without giving up their fundamental identities as Deadheads.



The Wharf Rats would watch shows together and hold meetings during the set break of each concert. These meetings, based on the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) rubric, gave members a chance to reiterate their pledges to sobriety, discuss mutual hardships and foment powerful relationships with other Wharf Rats. At concerts, their signature yellow balloons identified their location to other Wharf Rats and regular Deadheads alike, signaling their intent and asking for others cooperation and support.

The Grateful Dead has come to be celebrated for their innovations. Many of their ideas that seemed unheard of at the time, from sound system advancements to allowing fans to tape and freely trade their music, are now viewed as visionary. Rarely, however, is sobriety touted as a Grateful Dead accomplishment. Yet the Wharf Rats' legacy can currently be seen across all genres of live music. Their rubric has been used to create similar support groups for fans of other bands who share the same goals. Support groups and safe spaces for concertgoers in recovery are a fixture in modern live-music culture, largely due to the successful and powerful legacy of the Wharf Rats.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The founding purpose of the Wharf Rats
- How the Wharf Rats built a strong community and peer support network
- The issue of addiction in the music industry
- The basic tenets of the Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) 12-Step Program

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to openly discuss the culture of drug use in music and divorce the relationship between drugs and music by analyzing the history and practices of the Wharf Rats.

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Tell the students that this lesson will critically examine the culture of drugs in music. Then ask:

- Have you ever heard of Juice WRLD, Mac Miller, or Lil Peep? What do you know about them? Do they still record and perform? Why or why not?
- What are your thoughts on the relationship between drugs and music? How is this relationship seen in different musical mediums like live concerts, lyrics and music videos?
- Can you think of any musical artists that promote drug use as a part of the concert experience?
- Why, among some communities and artists, do drugs and music seem to be so closely connected?

## PROCEDURE

1. Tell students they will be examining the use of drugs among fans of the band Grateful Dead, otherwise known as “Deadheads,” and also looking at the ways some fans resisted drug culture and maintained their sobriety.
2. Play **Clip 1, Acid Tests** and ask students:
  - What was the purpose of the Acid Tests? What occurred at these events?
  - In the clip, Jerry Garcia says, “People came to the Acid Tests for the Acid Tests, not for us.” What does this quote tell you about the environment in which the Grateful Dead was first formed?
  - How did the group mentality of the Acid Tests inform the group mentality of Deadhead culture?
  - In what ways might it be challenging for a sober person to attend a Grateful Dead concert? What kind of support might be helpful for them if they wanted to attend?
3. Distribute **Handout 1 - “The Wharf Rats: Concert-Goers and Drug-Free Culture.”** Have students read the handout individual or as a group. Then ask:
  - What is the purpose of the Wharf Rats?
  - Why were they formed?
  - What does the Wharf Rats community say about the greater Deadhead community?
  - Why might it be important for the Wharf Rats to fly yellow balloons at a concert?
  - Why might it be helpful for people living alcohol and drug free to congregate at concerts, and through social media?
- Why might it be important for members of the Wharf Rats to share their stories with others during concert breaks?
4. Distribute **Handout 2 - “Wharf Rats”** lyrics. After reading lyrics, ask students:
  - Describe the character the song is about. What are his addictions and how have they affected him?
  - How does the Wharf Rat’s experience with drugs differ from what was promoted during the Grateful Dead’s Acid Tests?
  - How would you describe the mood of the song? Does the song end on a positive or negative note?
  - Why might it have been appropriate for sober Deadheads to adopt the name “Wharf Rat”?
5. Show **Image 1, Wharf Rat Pins**. Then ask:
  - What do you notice about these pins?
  - What do you think the phrase “One Show at a Time” means? Why is that phrase appropriate for the Wharf Rats?
  - What might have motivated the Wharf Rats to create these pins? What function do they serve?
6. Distribute **Handout 3 – Alcoholics Anonymous 12-Step Program**. Explain to the students that Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is a non-religious group, and they encourage its members to replace the concept of God, should they choose, with another “Power greater than ourselves.” Ask students:

- What might a Deadhead use to replace the concept of God as their “Power greater than ourselves” if they were to follow the AA 12-Step Program?
  - Which step of the 12-Step Program may have influenced the creation of the Wharf Rats?
7. Show **Image 2 - Sober Support Group Logos**. Explain that the images are logos for sober support groups for both bands and musical festivals. Like the Wharf Rats, these groups meet during live concerts and provide a safe haven for fans committing to sobriety. Ask students:
- Why might have other groups adopted the Wharf Rat’s model?
  - Based on these other support groups, do you think that the Wharf Rats concept is only applicable to the Grateful Dead?
8. Pass out **Handout 4 - Peer Support Group**. Either individually or in groups, ask students to create their own peer support group for an artist or festival of their choice.
9. Have individual students or student groups share their completed handouts with the class.
10. Pass out **Handout 5 - ‘It’s a war zone’: why is a generation of rappers dying young?’** Ask students to read it aloud or to themselves individually. Then ask students:
- According to the article, what factors have led to the death of the artists profiled?
  - How is drug use promoted by these musicians?
  - Do you think the musicians themselves are promoting drug use, or simply responding to “the culture”?
  - What pressures might these artists be under to use drugs?
  - How are musicians, fans, and managers addressing the issue of addiction among this group of rappers?
11. Display **Image 3 - Music Industry and Sobriety Discussion Questions**. Divide students into groups and have them discuss each question. Then, have each group present a summary of their discussion to the class.

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Ask students to think about their favorite musicians or bands. Then ask:
- Is drug culture represented in the music that you listen to? In what ways?
  - Do you advocate lyrics and behaviors that glorify drug culture? Do you feel pressured to participate in drug culture when listening to certain artists?
  - Is it possible to enjoy the music while abstaining from drug culture?



## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. One of the Wharf Rats slogans is “High on Music.” Sit and intently listen to one of your favorite artists without doing anything else for at least 30 minutes. Afterward, write a reflection on how you felt while listening, and if your mood changed. Is it possible to get “high” on music?



## STANDARDS

### NATIONAL HEALTH EDUCATION STANDARDS

S1: Students will comprehend concepts related to health promotion and disease prevention to enhance health.

S2: Students will analyze the influence of family, peers, culture, media, technology, and other factors on health behaviors.

S5: Students will demonstrate the ability to use decision-making skills to enhance health.

S7: Students will demonstrate the ability to practice health-enhancing behaviors and avoid or reduce health risks.

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)*

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Craft and Structure 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Craft and Structure 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)*

Text Types and Purposes 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Text Types and Purposes 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Production and Distribution of Writing 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.



Research to Build and Present Knowledge 8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)*

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Language 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in a word meaning.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)*

Comprehension & Collaboration 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.



## **SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)**

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions





## RESOURCES

### VIDEOS

- *Long Strange Trip* - The Acid Tests

### HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 – “The Wharf Rats: Concert-Goers and Drug-Free Culture.”
- Handout 2 – “Wharf Rats” lyrics
- Handout 3 – Alcoholics Anonymous 12-Step Program
- Handout 4 – Peer Support Group
- Handout 5 – ‘It’s a war zone’: why is a generation of rappers dying young?

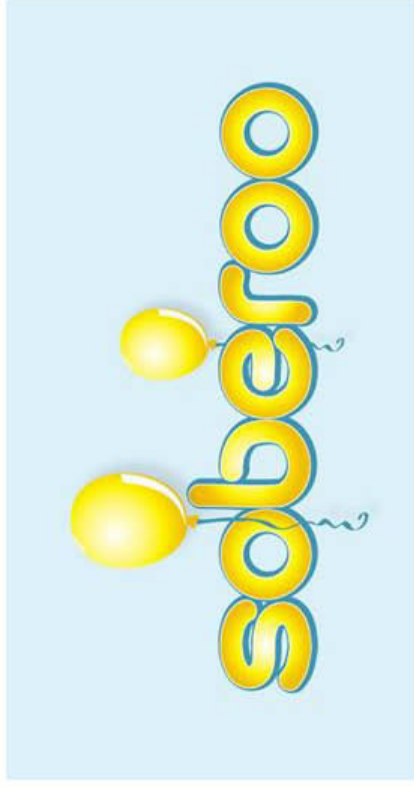
# Lesson Materials



**Image 1, Wharf Rats Pins**



# Image 2, Sober Support Group Logos



**SOBERCHELLA**

# **Image 3, Music Industry and Sobriety Discussion Questions**

**The Wharf Rats was a fan-led, voluntary movement. Do you think managers and other music industry figures also have a responsibility to keep artists sober and healthy? Why or why not?**

**What sort of practices or policies might the music industry develop to prevent drug use, addiction, and overdosing?**

**All of the artists featured in the article you read died from prescription drugs. What responsibilities do you think the pharmaceutical has in preventing recreational use of these drugs?**





## Handout 1 - "The Wharf Rats: Concert-Goers and Drug-Free Culture"

*From Mountainside.com*

For music-loving, concert-going folks in recovery, the idea of setting foot in a music festival or any concert arena feels uneasy. It can be a tough environment to navigate with all the triggers for a major setback. After all, rock 'n' roll and drugs have always walked hand-in-hand. But, it doesn't have to feel that way. Follow the "yellow balloon" and you might discover a whole new way to enjoy the music you love, find sober living support, and experience kind fellowship.

It all started in the '80s, with a small group of Grateful Dead fans (aka deadheads) in recovery. They had given up the binge drinking and the high but weren't ready to give up the music. With Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotic Anonymous meetings under their belt, they started getting together at concerts to support each other's sobriety. The group would hold meetings inspired by the 12 Step program right in the middle of a concert's intermission, signaling its presence by flying yellow balloons marked with the letters NA or AA. The group's name is a reference to a 1971 song from The Grateful Dead called "The Wharf Rat," which sings the story of a down-and-out dockside alcoholic.

Fast forward. Today The Wharf Rats are a well-established group of concert-goers, with more than three thousand Facebook members who have chosen to live alcohol- and drug-free. They define themselves as "a group of friends sharing a common bond, providing support, information, and hope in a rather slippery environment." They are not affiliated with AA, NA, or any other 12 Step group. However, their concert break meetings are about sharing experiences in the same ways, without some of the formalities established by these other fellowships. The yellow balloon goes around, and you may or may not share your story. The core mission of the group is that they are there to support your sobriety in "whatever way it works for you," said a table volunteer in a recent Phil Lesh concert at the Capitol Theater, in Portchester, NY.

Don't forget you will be out in the open, letting a medley of concert-goers know that you've had a drug problem, which for many is one of the most rewarding aspects of the group. It takes courage to let the world know you can enjoy the music sober. You can set an example to others that are right there next to you struggling with their addictions, because it's true: music culture is fueled by drugs. It's not groundbreaking news. What might be news for some is that you can enjoy it and have lots of fun completely sober.

The Wharf Rats can be found in all major Grateful Dead-related concerts and other jam bands, where a volunteer will always be available to greet you and let you know how the concert intermission meetings work. They offer a great deal of support to those who seek to "get high" simply through music. "We Don't Need Dope to Dance," "Wharf Rats High on Music," and "A Show at a Time" are some of the cool stickers you can find on their information table, which is signaled by lots of yellow balloons.

In light of the example set by the Wharf Rats, other similar support fellowship groups have also emerged, and are now known as the "yellow balloon" groups. These groups allow you to enjoy the full concert experience and forge new friendships while taking your sobriety to a new level. "I have found a whole new joy in going to shows and festivals through Wharf Rats and the many other yellow balloon groups that have been cropping up all over," wrote Brian S. in his testimonial for The Wharf Rats' newsletter, which can be found on their website.



## Handout 2 - "Wharf Rat" Lyrics

*Old man down  
Way down, down, down by the docks of the city  
Blind and dirty  
Asked me for a dime, a dime for a cup of coffee  
I got no dime but I got some time to hear his story  
My name is August West, and I love my Pearly Baker best more than my wine  
More than my wine  
More than my maker, though he's no friend of mine*

*Everyone said  
I'd come to no good, I knew I would Pearly, believe them  
Half of my life  
I spent doin' time for some other's crime  
The other half found me stumbling 'round drunk on Burgundy wine*

*But I'll get back on my feet again someday  
The good Lord willin'  
If He says I may  
I know that the life I'm livin's no good  
I'll get a new start, live the life I should  
I'll get up and fly away,  
I'll get up and fly away, fly away*

*Pearly's been true  
True to me, true to my dyin' day he said  
I said to him  
I said to him, "I'm sure she's been"  
I said to him, "I'm sure she's been true to you"*

*I got up and wandered  
Wandered downtown, nowhere to go but just hang around  
I've got a girl  
Named Bonnie Lee, I know that girl's been true to me  
I know she's been, I'm sure she's been true to me*



## Handout 3 – Alcoholics Anonymous 12-Step Program

*From Alcohol.org*

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is a global, community-based program that was created to help those struggling with problematic drinking get sober with the support of their peers through daily meetings and discussions surrounding addiction. AA gives men and women a place to come together and share their experiences, recover from alcoholism and maintain sobriety. Its concept revolves around that premise that alcoholism is an illness that can be managed, but not controlled.

AA was founded by Bill Wilson and his physician, Doctor Bob Smith in 1935 and eventually grew to include two more groups by 1939. That same year, Wilson published *Alcoholics Anonymous*, a text which explained its philosophy and methods. We know it today as the 12 Steps of recovery. Over the years, the 12 Steps have been adapted by other self-help and addiction recovery groups, such as Gamblers Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, to those struggling with other forms of addiction. Additionally, many groups have changed the explicitly Christian overtones of the original 12 Steps to reflect more secular or agnostic philosophies.

There are no other requirements to AA other than having a desire to quit drinking, and it is not associated with any organization, sect, politics, denomination, or institution. Those attending AA make a commitment to join either voluntarily, as a continuation of therapy or via court-mandated rehab.

Given the number of individuals struggling with or at risk for an AUD, it is understandable that AA has grown to what it is today—an organization with more than 115,000 groups worldwide.

### **The 12 Steps of AA**

AA's 12-Step approach follows a set of guidelines designed as "steps" toward recovery, and members can revisit these steps at any time. The 12 Steps are:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.





## Handout 4 - Peer Support Group

<p><b>Support Group Name and Slogan:</b></p>	<p><b>Logo Design:</b></p>
<p><b>Affiliated Artist/Festival:</b></p>	
<p><b>Focus (Addiction, Depression, Anxiety, etc.):</b></p>	
<p><b>Description:</b></p>	



## Handout 5 - “It’s a war zone’: why is a generation of rappers dying young? ”

Sirin Kale, *The Guardian* (January 31, 2020)

*Overdoses or violent crime have claimed Mac Miller, Juice WRLD and Nipsey Hussle. ‘It’s not a fairytale lifestyle,’ admits an insider – but should the business do more to protect its stars?*

It might sound callous, but Jacob Thureson’s parents, Erik and Judy, were not too worried when they heard about his latest overdose. It had happened a couple of times already and the 18-year-old rapper had always made it out of hospital in one piece. Thureson, who performed under the name Hella Sketchy, was among the wave of emo-influenced trap rappers who came up using the music platform SoundCloud. He had recently relocated from the family home in Texas to Los Angeles after being signed to Atlantic Records.

As Erik drove to work, he cycled through a mental list of options: more inpatient treatment? Thureson had already been to rehab, twice. Ketamine therapy?

There would be no further plan of action. Shortly after Erik left for work, Judy received another phone call. Things were very bad, and they should come to the hospital now. Fourteen days later, on 27 June 2019, Thureson died.

Many young rappers have died in the past few years. Mac Miller died in 2018 aged 26 after consuming cocaine and counterfeit oxycodone containing the synthetic opioid fentanyl. Lil Peep died at 21 in 2017 – an accidental fentanyl and Xanax overdose. Juice WRLD died late last year after a drug-induced seizure aboard a private jet. It is believed he swallowed multiple Percocet pills in an attempt to hide them as police raided the plane. On New Year’s Day, a rare female death: Minnesota rapper Lexii Alijai, the victim of yet another accidental fentanyl overdose.

Alongside these deaths by misadventure, there are the victims of violent crime. Despite being accused of horrific abuse by an ex-partner, XXXTentacion enjoyed massive popularity before being killed in 2018 aged 20 as he was robbed outside a Florida motorcycle dealership. Pittsburgh rapper Jimmy Wopo – touted as the heir to local forebears Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller – was killed in a drive-by shooting the same day. Two weeks later, 21-year-old Canadian rapper and Drake tourmate Smoke Dawg was killed outside a Toronto nightclub. In March 2019, Nipsey Hussle was shot dead outside his Los Angeles clothing store.

Many of these rappers engaged with their own mortality in lyrics that talked about death, drugs and depression. Death is everywhere in SoundCloud rap: the genre’s unofficial logo is a teardrop. Smokepurpp posed in a coffin in the artwork for his mixtape *Deadstar*, and Peep – often called the Kurt Cobain of his generation owing to his cherubic face, placid manner and dedication to his ever-spiralling nihilism – intoned: “Everybody tellin’ me life’s short, but I wanna die,” on his 2017 track *The Brightside*.

Looking at such lyrics, you might reasonably conclude that these rappers wanted to die. But while some of them did experience mental illness and addiction, their death wish was as much of an aesthetic as the pink hair and facial tattoos. So why did the nihilistic pose become a self-fulfilling prophecy, ending the lives of young people barely out of their teens? And what can be done to arrest it?

One problem lies in the way these rappers’ careers have built with unprecedented speed. While earlier generations of musicians might spend years gigging before being spotted, DIY rap stars have circumvented the record industry’s gatekeepers to accrue wealth and success – often while still in their teens – leaving them struggling to adapt to sudden fame. “Peep went from having no manager to being managed by a very large company that deals with high-profile artists, and with that came more money and more pressure,” says his friend and collaborator Adam McIlwee, who performs as *Wicca Phase Springs Eternal*.



In an industry that is ruthlessly dedicated to discovering the hot new thing, pastoral care can be nonexistent. Record labels often don't care about these rappers. "They know that when they're done, the next SoundCloud or Instagram rapper is behind them," says Calvin Smiley, an expert in hip-hop and social justice at Hunter College in New York. On an even more cynical note, he questions why Juice WRLD was carrying his drugs personally. "I've been around hip-hop artists, and the rule of thumb is that there is a friend who holds the drugs and takes the fall," Smiley says. "You wonder: where were his handlers? Where were the people giving him direction?"

The role of management is also coming under scrutiny. Peep's mother, Liza Womack, is suing First Access Entertainment, who managed the rapper. She claims that they encouraged drug use on Lil Peep's final tour, would obtain drugs for him, and pushed the rapper beyond the limits of "what somebody of his age and maturity level could handle emotionally, mentally, and physically". (First Access Entertainment did not respond to a request for comment, but in a legal filing has said its dealings with Peep were "purely of a business nature and not the type of special relationship giving rise to an independent duty of care".) Mcllwee claims that Peep had a fight with his management shortly before he died. "I know there was a show he did not want to play for whatever reason – and [the drug-taking] was him just showing the world he didn't really care."

Mcllwee says that labels and management should give artists time to recover. "If your artist is in trouble, you have to step in and say it's time to take a step back or re-evaluate the release schedule, the touring," he says. "So the artist can get healthy and have a long career. But that doesn't happen much, because long careers are boring."

There are signs that lessons are being learned. Giuseppe Zappala of Galactic Records manages Lil Tecca, the 17-year-old SoundCloud wunderkind whose track Ransom reached No 4 in the US and has amassed more than 650m plays on Spotify. He has learned to read Tecca's moods carefully: if the young rapper appears overtired, Zappala will clear the schedules. He ensures that Tecca has at least a day off between shows and that tours last no longer than five weeks. Sometimes he brings chefs on the road to ensure he is eating healthily. Sleep is another priority, although there is a limit to what Zappala can do, given that Tecca is a teenager. "There will definitely be times when Tec wants to go to the studio until 8am," Zappala sighs. "I say: 'That may not make the most sense, because you've got a show tomorrow at 1pm.' It's about trying to instil routine in him."

But young rappers can face just as much pressure from outside the industry: "The environments where these kids come from – it's not a fairytale lifestyle," says Taylor Maglin, who discovered Wopo and managed him until his death. "It's a war zone, you know? Rivals get created, enemies get created." He believes that Wopo was murdered by disaffected members of a rival gang, who were envious of his success. (Wopo was allegedly a member of the Hill District gang 11 Hunnit, and was name-checked in a police indictment shortly after his death.)

XXXTentacion's lawyer, David Bogenschutz, says the rapper had "been concerned that someone would kidnap or kill him. He was generating money and notoriety." The day XXXTentacion was shot, it is believed he was stalked from his bank to the motorcycle dealership.

"The rap game isn't like any other industry," says producer Jimmy Duval, who worked with XXX. "There are a lot of guns and bullets flying around."

Smiley says that hip-hop's relationships with drugs has changed "absolutely". Earlier generations of rappers used drugs as a tool to accrue wealth, speaking about selling them as a way out of poverty, rather than using narcotics themselves (bar weed and alcohol). Once success arrived, drugs were used as a social

signifier: music videos depicting tables groaning with bottles of Hennessy and cocaine-dusted mirrors. That reality has shifted to a more flagrant form of glamorisation.

A turning point came at the turn of the 2010s, when rapper Juicy J helped popularise lean, then the drug of choice in Houston's chopped and screwed music scene. An addictive and dangerous concoction of soda, candy and prescription cough mixture containing codeine, references to lean oozed into rap: Lil Wayne celebrates it, Young Thug freely drinks it during interviews, and Juice WRLD said he was inspired to try lean after listening to Future. Roddy Ricch's hit track *The Box*, currently the US No 1, has an anthemic chorus with a line about drinking lean to "get lazy".

Rappers also began hitting party drugs such as MDMA and cocaine, as well as the prescription drugs OxyContin, Xanax and Percocet. Future celebrates "molly, Percocets" in his 2015 smash *Mask Off*. ("That is a horrible combination of drugs," says Duval of *Mask Off*: "The whole hook is you having a fucking heart attack.") The rapper Lil Pump posed with a Xanax-shaped cake to celebrate reaching 1 million followers on Instagram, a particularly brain-dead stunt given that counterfeit prescription drugs containing fentanyl have been blamed for the 10-fold increase in opioid-related deaths in the US between 2013 and 2018.

A culture of performative excess began to strangle the scene, viewed through the panopticon of social media, which encourages risk-taking behaviour, says Smiley: "You have to be on 24/7, because everything is about likes, shares and counting how many followers you have." Thureson posted videos of himself drinking lean on Instagram; when his parents confronted him, he claimed it was purple Gatorade. "He told me it was just the culture," his mum, Judy, says. Peep posed with prescription pills on his tongue hours before he died.

Braden L Morgan, known as producer Nedarb Nagrom, was Peep's roommate for three years. He believes Peep abused drugs to alleviate the pressures of touring, which he hated, and that hangers-on offering him drugs made things worse. "He was really nice and would say yes to everything, so he'd do whatever anyone offered him. And as he got more popular, more people wanted to be his friend, so they gave him the stuff more." He calls Peep's death a horrible accident. "He got unlucky. I have no doubt that if he hadn't passed away, he was going to chill out."

After so many deaths, a brutal comedown. "After Peep died, a lot of people stopped partying every day," says Morgan. He has seen drug use tail off among the young rappers he produces; Lil Pump and Smokepurpp announced they were quitting Xanax following Peep's death. "The younger kids don't do stuff as much, because they see all the shit that happened in the last few years." For those who do still indulge, drug-testing kits are becoming common. "No one was testing drugs before Peep died," says Morgan.

There are promising indications that the rap scene is beginning to course-correct. "There's enough of a bad taste in everyone's mouth that saying, 'go pop a molly' doesn't feel right now," says Duval. The backlash has been rumbling for a while: J Cole's 2018 diss track *1985* was scathing about SoundCloud rappers. "They wanna see you dab, they wanna see you pop a pill / They wanna see you tatted from your face to your heels."

As the narcotic aesthetic becomes less fashionable, rappers are becoming more mindful of the message they are sending to fans. Artists including Isaiah Rashad, Lucki, Travis Scott and Danny Brown have spoken out about prescription drug addiction. Sacramento rapper Mozzy has urged his followers to quit lean. Lucki, considered by some to be the father of SoundCloud rap, talks in *Freewave 3* about his mother looking up the effect of lean on his kidneys. Even Lil Xan, easily most cavalier artist in this group, has considered changing his name.



As Miller sang in his biggest hit, it is time to finally start practising some self-care. But the burden should not fall to individuals: as labels and management cash in on this wave, they must take greater responsibility for artist wellbeing. “You have to prioritise their health and happiness before music or fame,” says Zappala. “It’s tough being a successful artist, not knowing whether the people around you have genuine intentions.”

His goals for Tecca are clear. “I’m going to develop Tec into an artist who has a 10, 15-year career,” says Zappala. “When he’s 30, he’s still going to be relevant.”