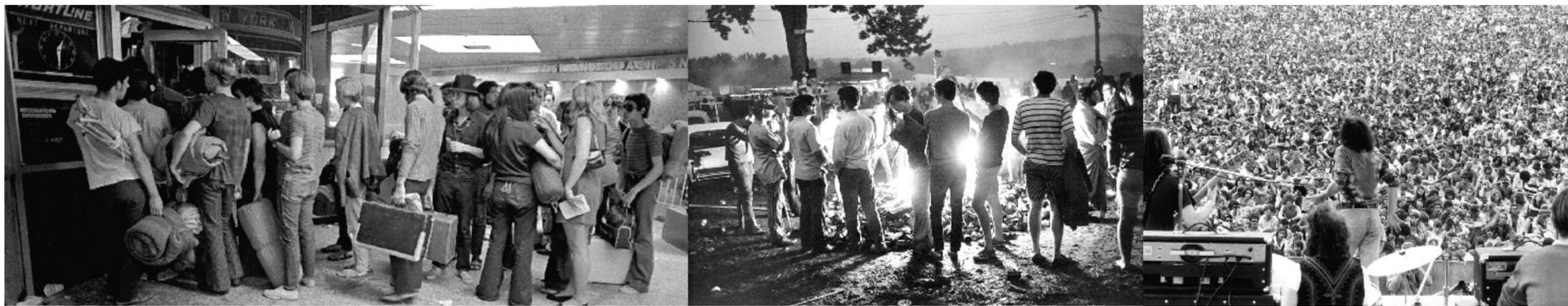


## SUNDAY FEATURES

SUNDAY, AUGUST 9, 2009

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From left: People at New York City's Port Authority bus station on their way to the Woodstock Music Festival on Friday. A crowd gathers around a fire during the original Woodstock Music Festival in August of 1969. Joe Cocker performs on the final day of the 1969 Woodstock Music Festival.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

# The enduring appeal of Woodstock

*After the buzz wore off, the utopian communal aura of a Woodstock Nation gave way, almost immediately, to the reality of a Woodstock Market*

BY JON PARELES  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

**B**aby boomers won't let go of the Woodstock Festival. Why should we? It's one of the few defining events of the late 1960s that had a clear happy ending.

On Aug. 15 to Aug. 17, 1969, hundreds of thousands of people, me among them, gathered in a lovely natural amphitheater in Bethel (not Woodstock), New York. We listened to some of the best rock musicians of the era, enjoyed other legal and illegal pleasures, endured rain and mud and exhaustion and hunger pangs, felt like a giant community and dispersed, all without catastrophe.

A year after the riots at the Democratic convention in Chicago, expectations about large gatherings of young people were so low that this was considered a surprise. Although the festival didn't go exactly as planned, it was, as advertised, three days of peace and music. That made Woodstock an idyll, particularly in retrospect, even though it was declared a state disaster area at the time.

"Notwithstanding their personality, their dress and their ideas, they were and they are the most courteous, considerate and well-behaved group of kids I have ever been in contact with in my 24 years of police work," Lou Yank, the chief of police in nearby Monticello, told the *New York Times*.

Yet for all the benign memories, Woodstock also set in motion other, more crass impulses. While its immediate aftermath was amazement and relief, the festival's full legacy had as much to do with excess as with idealism. As the decades roll by, the festival seems more than ever like a fluke: a moment of muddy, disheveled, incredulous grace. It was as much an endpoint as a beginning, a holiday of naivete and dumb luck before the realities of capitalism resumed.

Woodstock's young, left-of-center crowd — nice kids, including students, artists, workers and politicians, as well as full-fledged LSD-popping hippies — was quickly recognized as a potential army of consumers that mainstream merchants would not underestimate again. There was more to sell them than rolling papers and LPs.

With the 40th anniversary of Woodstock looming — so soon? — the commemorative machinery is clanking into place, and the nostalgia is strong. There's a Woodstock Festival museum now at the Bethel Woods Center for the Arts and a recently built concert hall at what was the concert site, Max Yasgur's farm (though the original Woodstock hillside has been left undeveloped).

A new, much expanded anthology of music recorded at the 1969 festival has been issued: the six-CD *Woodstock 40 Years On: Back to Yasgur's Farm* (Rhino). Complete Woodstock performances by Sly and the Family Stone, Santana, Janis Joplin and others have been released by Sony Legacy. Cable and public television channels have their Woodstock specials scheduled, and there's yet another batch of commemorative books, including *The Road to Woodstock* (Ecco) by the festival's instigator, Michael Lang, which includes tidbits like how much the bands were paid.

*Taking Woodstock*, a comedy directed by Ang Lee (李安), is due for release this month.

A summer package tour, *Heroes of Woodstock*, features musicians who

appeared at Woodstock — including Jefferson Starship (playing Jefferson Airplane songs), Levon Helm from the Band, Tom Constanten from the Grateful Dead, Ten Years After, Canned Heat and Country Joe McDonald. It arrived at Bethel Woods precisely yesterday (Aug. 15).

Unlike previous anniversaries in 1994 and 1999, however, there's no big festival this year bearing the Woodstock name — reflecting, perhaps, the dismal memories of Woodstock '99 in Rome, New York, where a hot, pent-up audience, angry at high vendor prices, set fires and looted and vandalized the site.

While the original Woodstock showed how much discomfort an audience would put up with for the sake of sharing an event — something promoters were happy to learn — Woodstock '99 breached the limit of fan exploitation.

Yet the original Woodstock still



Jimi Hendrix performs at the Woodstock Music Festival in Bethel, New York, on Aug. 18, 1969. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

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has a rosy glow. It was finite and all smiles — far different from the Vietnam War, the racial tensions and the much-discussed generation gap of the same era. Woodstock became free in both senses of the word: free as in liberated (from drug laws and dress codes) and free as in gratis, not collecting tickets and handing out, as Wavy Gravy said, “breakfast in bed for 400,000.”

A cynic might see the festival as a prime example of how coddled the baby boomers were in an economy of abundance. The Woodstock crowd, which arrived with more drugs than camping supplies, got itself a free concert, and when the people responsible could no longer handle the logistics, the government bailed them out. Some people took it upon themselves to help others; many just freeloaded.

Still, Woodstock gave virtually everyone involved — ticket holders, gatecrashers, musicians, doctors, the police — a sense of shared humanity and cooperation.

Trying to get through the weekend, people played nice with one another, which was only sensible. Musicians performed for the biggest audience of their lives. Townspeople and the National Guard pitched in to keep people fed and healthy. No one, the *New York Times* reported, called the cops “pigs.”

One lunatic with a gun could have changed everything. The Altamont Festival, marred all day by violence, took place only four months later. Miraculously, at Woodstock, there was none.

Seemingly within minutes after it ended, Woodstock was the stuff of legend: a spirit, a nation, an ideal, amorphous but vivid, with an Oscar-winning documentary film, the 1970 *Woodstock*, to prove it wasn't all a hallucination. (The film was also an early lesson in how profitable ancillary rights could be; the festival itself lost money, but the film recouped it many times over.)

Sheer size made Woodstock consequential. It was huge. The Beatles had played to 55,000 people at Shea Stadium; the 1965 Newport Folk Festival spread about 71,000 people over four days. Had Woodstock drawn the 100,000 to 150,000 people that its promoters planned for, it would simply have been one in a string of big rock festivals dating back to Monterey Pop in 1967, which had an estimated total of 200,000 people over three days.

After Woodstock gave up on collecting tickets — abandoning flimsy fences and declaring itself a free festival — it grew to what was variously estimated as 300,000 or 400,000 people, more than double the attendance of previous rock festivals. That number would have been considerably higher if traffic problems hadn't turned some away; many people walked for kilometers to the site.

When the hippie subculture surfaced en masse at Woodstock, two years after the Summer of Love, it was still largely self-invented and isolated. There were pockets of freaks in cities and handfuls of them in smaller towns, nearly all feeling like outsiders. For many people at the festival, just seeing and joining that gigantic crowd was more of a revelation than anything that happened onstage. It proved that they were not some negligible minority but members of a larger culture — or, to use that sweetly dated term, a counterculture.

At Woodstock hippiedom simultaneously reached its public peak and opened itself to imitation and trivialization — one more glimmer of rebellion to be deflated into a style statement.

For true believers Woodstock was about cooperation and mutual aid, and about making love, not war. (At a time when Vietnam had divided America into hawks and doves, that was a peace dove sitting on the guitar in the festival logo.) But Woodstock was also a whole lot of people getting stoned at a rock concert, which was much easier than working to change the world.

Politicos like Abbie Hoffman, who is widely credited with coining the phrase Woodstock Nation, wanted to claim Woodstock as a symbol of resistance to repression. But Pete Townshend batted Hoffman off the stage with a guitar when Hoffman interrupted the Who's set to protest the imprisonment, for drug possession, of a fellow activist, John Sinclair.

There was antiwar fervor in some



Peter Franklin, an actor, and Susanna Barta wait at the New York City Port Authority Bus Terminal for a bus to the Woodstock Rock Festival on Friday. This month marks the 40th anniversary of Woodstock.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

songs, like Richie Havens' *Handsome Johnny* and McDonald's *I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag*. Joan Baez spoke about her husband, in jail for draft dodging, and sang *We Shall Overcome*. There was also, in much of the music, that particular late-1960s aura of imminent doom or enlightenment, in songs like *Wooden Ships* performed by both Jefferson Airplane and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young) and the Who's *Amazing Journey*. And there was Jimi Hendrix's *Star-Spangled Banner*, with its screams of feedback and its divebombing glissandos, brash and dire, angry and insistently American. But Woodstock was no earnest rally; it had love songs, blues and extended guitar jams.

After the buzz wore off, the utopian communal aura of a Woodstock Nation

gave way, almost immediately, to the reality of a Woodstock Market: a demographic target group about to have its dreams stripped of radical purpose and turned into commodities. A wider audience realized it was possible to enjoy the music, drugs and fun without the ideological trappings.

Soon enough everyone was a quasi-hippie; long hair on men no longer signaled anything about what they stood for. FM radio, which was the pipeline for underground rock, traded quirky, exploratory disc jockeys for consistent formats that advertisers could depend on. Now that it was clear how large an audience was at stake — that it wasn't just a few freaks — professionals were back in charge.

Woodstock and other late-1960s

festivals changed the scale of rock concerts. Bands eagerly moved up to arenas from theaters; a week before Woodstock, for example, two of its acts, the Jefferson Airplane and Joe Cocker, shared a bill at the Fillmore East, which had all of 2,700 seats. Music soon expanded, or bloated, to fill its newfound arenas. The early 1970s were the era of noodling jams and 10-minute drum solos that would have to be torpedoed, a few years later, by punk rock.

Woodstock would prove something to the world. What it proved — that for at least one weekend, hippies meant what they said about peace and love — was fleeting and all too innocent; it couldn't stand up to everyday human nature or to the pragmatic workings of the market. But 40 years later the sensation lingers.