



LIVE FROM . . . WOODSTOCK

by Graeme Boone

They say that if you remember the 1960s, you weren't there. But one of the greatest here-and-now moments in American history took place on Max Yasgur's farm in Bethel, New York, from August 16 to 18, 1969: the Woodstock Festival. Officially called the "Woodstock Music and Art Fair, an Aquarian Exposition," it drew half a million fans to 600 acres of rolling countryside for three days of music, community, and sheer psychedelic ecstasy.

In the months leading up to the festival, "Are you going?" seemed a universal question among the hip tribes, but no one knew what to expect, because Woodstock was a risky bet on unknowable odds. Could the East Coast counterculture really pull off a West Coast-style "happening" on such a massive scale? A horde of fans bet that it could, and they were right. For a moment, the counterculture became the culture, and the diverse strands of '60s radicalism seemed to fuse together, with all varieties of celebration and rebellion converging in a great river—not of violence and destruction, but rather of celebration and sharing.

In February 1969, when planning for this huge event began, the logistics quickly grew into an unprecedented complexity. Organizers Michael Lang, Joel Rosenman, and Artie Kornfield probably never would have continued if they had realized how difficult their task was going to be. But they soldiered on toward their dream as obstacles arose over and over again. Negotiations proceeded fitfully and at astronomic expense over the dizzying array of utilities, services, and infrastructure, all of which had to be brought in or constructed on the spot; public opposition proliferated; and permission to use the site was denied just a month before the festival, so another venue had to be located. During the festival itself, catastrophe loomed at every moment: mind-boggling traffic jams; a complete breakdown of ticket-taking; thunderstorms and rivers of mud; bad drugs and bad trips; food, sanitation, and medical crises; and other logistical nightmares of every description. The governor of New York declared it a disaster area, and emergency help was provided from all directions, ranging from local stores and medical services to the National Guard and the army. But for the fans, such realities paled before the triumphal Woodstock vision of peace and harmony in action and adversity, soaring on a flying carpet of sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

One of the many uncertainties about the festival was whether musical groups would actually agree to participate. Many bands initially refused to play or demanded stiff fees, and even after the festival began there were holes and question marks in the three-day schedule. Scheduling problems were exacerbated by the fifty-mile traffic jams that made it necessary to fly every band in and out by helicopter. Ultimately, the majority of those who were invited did play, and they represented a remarkable cross

section of the late-1960s counterculture in music. On the first day, folk and acoustic performers were highlighted in a set that included Richie Havens, Country Joe McDonald, John Sebastian, Sweetwater, the Incredible String Band, Bert Sommer, Tim Hardin, Ravi Shankar, Melanie, Arlo Guthrie, and Joan Baez, as well as a spiritual lecture from Swami Satchidananda. The second day highlighted psychedelic, hard, and blues rock, with Quill, Keef Hartley, Santana, Canned Heat, Mountain, Creedence Clearwater Revival, the Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin, Sly Stone, the Who, and Jefferson Airplane. The lineup for the third day was even more eclectic, featuring Joe Cocker; Country Joe and the Fish; Alvin Lee; the Band; Blood, Sweat & Tears; Johnny Winter; Paul Butterfield; Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young; and Sha Na Na. Jimi Hendrix was given the supreme position of closing out the festival, but by that time, 8:30 A.M. on

Monday morning, most of the fans had already left for the long trek home.

The release of a film documentary in 1970 and a two-album LP in 1971 helped to transform Woodstock from a fleeting experience into a classic document of late '60s culture. While lacking the enveloping tribulations and epiphanies of those three days, the documentary and album do provide a vivid account of the music, which still sounds fresh today. And some of the performances—notably Jimi Hendrix's rendition of the "Star Spangled Banner," which went relatively unnoticed at the time—are now counted among the finest in '60s rock.

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