

Woodstock: Two Score & 10 Years Ago

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This year we mark the 50th anniversary of the Woodstock Arts and Music Festival. I'm sure that the number of "those who were there" will expand, like Kennedy voters of 1960, to significantly more than the 500,000 people who actually attended.

When you talk about Woodstock, you're talking about more American history than you realize. Woodstock demonstrated that the ideals of the civil rights era, the acceptance of anti-Vietnam patriotism and the loosening of conservative thought in the USA had already gone mainstream by 1969. It's a misunderstanding to say that values of Woodstock attendees have gone "middle class." Most were middle-class kids, and they were many like them in every town in America.



The Woodstock era Roger Latzgo

the next day and wondered if I wanted to go along. I was 19 years old, a student at Rutgers, and jumped at the chance. My parents didn't object; perhaps if they knew (did anyone?) what Woodstock would become they might have. But I always agreed with Dylan: "Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command."

It may be difficult for some to believe, but the country was far more divided then than it is now. And the popular press was keen to label anyone with the slightest non-conservative leaning as a hippie (although Nixon still favored "communist"). In fact, there were relatively few true hippies, which one might define as a young person able to avoid work and indulge in drug-related pastimes while mom and dad paid their rent and groceries.

Today we speak commonly about ecological concerns, about locally-sourced food, about problems of carbon footprints and about the immorality of yet another war. These Woodstock-inspired ideals have changed the texture of this country.

Fifty years later, our country is still grappling with these issues. What does that say about us? Probably that too many have their heads and ears buried in the private playground of the Internet and their iPods. But the military-industrial complex has evolved. It has learned that Americans don't mind a war too much as long as it is not on prime time TV, as long as they can still shop for and consume gadgets. And as long as those who serve are not drawn from their socio-economic group, but rather from those for whom the military provides one of the few viable job or career choices.

Nixon did not end the war in Vietnam. The 18 year-olds — old enough for war, but not for votin' — did not end the war. The nation finally got sick of the war. The kids sitting in the mud at Woodstock, people finally realized, had a good point. Walter Cronkite agreed. Vietnam just did not make sense anymore.

From Pennsylvania to New York State

My personal experience of Woodstock began in Pennsylvania on the Friday night of the festival. Organizers of a concert where I played that evening were making the trip to Bethel New York

My personal situation was different. I was in college and had a summer job as a carpenter. I was going back to Rutgers in a few weeks where I would sing college songs in the Glee Club. Hardly the profile of a hippie. And most of the young people I knew who were at Woodstock had similar backgrounds.

But there certainly were hippies at Woodstock. One prime example may have been the Hog Farmers. Led by Wavy Gravy, they handled low-level security and drug-related damage control at the festival. They supervised the bumper-tent, where trippers on bad acid went to simmer down.

And Max Yasgur was not a hog-farmer but the real-life dairy cattle farmer who provided the festival site. Max wasn't particularly pro-or con-all this fuss, but in the great American tradition of tolerance probably figured, "What the hell, for that much money they can trash my corn field."

As we approached Bethel, we hit gridlock on a clogged two-lane road about four miles from the stage. Walking to and through the action, I ran into some fellow Rutgersmen who, despite the revelry, were already unhappy campers to varying degrees. I had outdoor experience and was an Eagle Scout — skilled in manly arts like camping and carpentry, so I looked with some amusement at suburban kids who could not start a fire or cook a can of beans (hint: take the lid off first).

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When I look back on it now, it was surreal, like a Fellini film. Yeah, there was stage activity, but there was so much more going on elsewhere in mini-encampments of friends and strangers playing music and dancing, with improvised mud-sliding fun. There were plenty of costumed theatrics, and a revival of the old American tradition of skinny dipping to cool off and clean up.

All of it felt remarkably benign, like a neighborhood block party for 500,000 with thrift-store attire or any attire optional. It was an odd sight: revelers in various states of euphoria but otherwise looking like refugees. For all the excess, drinking water was the dearest substance, and the most desired trip would have involved indoor plumbing. Who knows? Maybe the bad weather kept thing relatively subdued.

More Than Just a Music Festival

It was clear to me that Woodstock was not about the music alone. Woodstock was a manifestation of a parallel reality in American society: a reality that rejected the barbaric violence in Vietnam that was supposed to maintain the stultifying boredom of the nine-to-five lifestyle. It was a difficult time to be young—challenges like the war, the pill, the drug culture (all amid relative wealth) forced dramatic choices on people. It was a noble thing that so many young people would dare to choose the ideal. What a bold attempt for middle-class kids.

In an amazing juxtaposition, the USA landed on the moon only weeks before in a spacecraft called Apollo. And here in rural New York was a festival seemingly dedicated to Dionysus.

The alignment is too delicious to ignore. Apollo, also god of music, had landed in his golden chariot in rural New York State and made alliance with Dionysus, the god of merriment and song. Woodstock, in essence, rebalanced that relationship. And it challenged you to make it personal.

I do not see the 50th anniversary of Woodstock with nostalgic eyes. I see it as an extension of the civil rights struggle and the fight for ecological rights, and it is not over. We are still fighting for beauty and balance in this country and in the world.

Last fall for my birthday, my partner Rachel took me to the festival site at Bethel. We went there at the recommendation of Richie Havens who told us about the wonderful new Bethel Woods museum. It was the first time I had been back since 1969. It was a remarkably similar feeling to walking around the battlefield at Gettysburg or some other site where mighty events turned.

It was dusk as we stood at the top of a ridge near a modest bronze plaque. I closed my eyes and I could hear Hendrix and his amazing transformation of The National Anthem. The poetry of that moment two score years ago I will never forget: Hendrix's intoning "Oh say can you seeeeeeeeee by the dawn's early lllllllllight" in the language of Strat. It was early morning, "and the flag was stillllllll there." America's kids had done it!