

Barefoot in Babylon

The Creation of the
WOODSTOCK
MUSIC FESTIVAL, 1969



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A PLUME BOOK



Introduction to the 2014 Edition

It's taken all of forty-five years to get the mud out of our pores, but there are some things about Woodstock that won't wash away. Forget about the vibe; vibes come and go. The effects of the brown acid have finally worn off. Peace and love? A noble, albeit archaic, concept. They even managed to get traffic moving on the New York State Thruway again—though just barely. Yet for all the event's remnants eroded by time, Woodstock remains the cynosure of a generation with a conflicted identity.

A great many hippies morphed into a species that swapped their bellbottoms for a Prada suit, their VW vans for a BMW SUV, and spare change for a 401(k). Others craving more civil liberties became libertarians, while those prophesying free love wound up prostrate, in divorce court. Who of us vowing to share the land ever suspected we'd land a jumbo mortgage? Or vote for a guy who pledged to end welfare (well, maybe not him)? In any case, a lot of screwy stuff has come down the pike.

Boomers persist in embracing Woodstock as a warm, fuzzy keepsake; a special moment from their past that continues to burn in their loins like a first love. There is ample justification for it. Woodstock sets them apart from earlier generations that followed a narrow, buttoned-down script for their lives. It establishes them as rebels, lovers, *freaks*, allowing them to say to themselves (as mortgages and private-school bills pile up), "I'm the kind of person who once took off for three days to camp out in the mud, listen to music, and let it all hang out."

What a difference four decades make.

Real life distances us from what happened at Woodstock in August 1969. The festival that weekend was one of those cosmic markers that defined a generation. The fabulous sixties had a glutton's share of 'em—JFK, the Beatles, Dylan, Warhol, MLK, *Easy Rider*, Vietnam, sit-ins, be-ins, Jimi, the moon landing among others, but Woodstock celebrated it all. It brought the decade's true believers together for one last lovely blowout, where anything and everything seemed possible. All the rapturous idealism and exuberance that had been fermenting since the counterculture reared its scraggly head culminated in the free-form rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner" that all but capped the festival's program.

However, on Monday, August 18, 1969, when the clean-up crew moved in to clear away the detritus, the spirit of the sixties seemed set to disappear in the mists of time. What eventually became known as the Woodstock Generation said its good-byes, hit the road, and buckled in for a bumpy ride. The intervening years have not been kind. We may have been stardust and golden, as the poet proclaimed, but getting ourselves back to the garden has been one hell of a grind.

Music remains the touchstone. It was the promise of music that lured us to that field in White Lake, and it is the music that endows its legend. No lineup of acts has been assembled before or since that defined an entire generation, not only for its groove, its taste in music, but its attitudes and politics as well. Sure, the gods—Dylan, the Beatles, and the Stones—were absent, but their apostles certainly delivered the goods. Looking at the festival's roster of performers today, it becomes clear that the music is a soundtrack for the ages. But hold on a sec, I'm getting ahead of the story.

That Friday morning, August 15, 1969, I got up early to see two carloads of my friends off to points unknown in upstate New York. The Woodstock Music and Arts Festival was in everybody's ear. It seemed like the whole world was headed there. I was nineteen, a few weeks away from starting my junior year in college and smack in the middle of the rock and roll culture. An especially agile guitar player, I'd done my share of gigs and had a record collection that earned as much attention as my class books. There was a seat reserved for me in any one of those cars. All I had to do was say the word.

A note of full disclosure: I didn't go. That's right, the guy who wrote the book about Woodstock—the guy who, at the tenth anniversary party, was fingered by those responsible for putting the festival together as the only person in the room who knew the entire picture and had all the residual poop—was home, in Reading, Pennsylvania, that weekend, mowing the fucking lawn. And seething. Oh, was I in a deep, dark place! I'd spent hours

in front of the tube watching news reports of the most incredible event of my life go down . . . *without me*. Worse, I was going to hear about it ad nauseam from my buddies on the ground.

I can't tell you why I didn't go. Suffice it to say, Woodstock caught me flatfooted. Perhaps I didn't realize how big it was going to be—or how important. By the end of that weekend, following hours worth of soul-searching (and not the least bit of self-flagellation), I had a new perspective on the culture—and on my life. I fully understood Woodstock's significance and the transformative quality of the performances. There was something spiritual, otherworldly, about the festival's essence. The crowd, the scene—it was messy and loud and teetered on disaster. There wasn't a legitimate game plan from one moment to the next. But the chaos was its own kind of poetry. The vibe there, like our collective vibe, ran on its own good steam. No one knew where this was headed, nor cared. The audience, to borrow from Jack Kerouac, was made up of “the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time . . . but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles.”

Studying the news feed as it evolved that weekend, I saw in the faces of those on the screen a wide-eyed, irrepressible abandon. I know, I know—they were stoned (just for appetizers). But most of us that age had grown up under the threat of nuclear annihilation, hiding under our school desks and looking to the skies. At Woodstock, however, they were under the stars, looking outward, heaven-bound, just two weeks after the first men had walked on the moon. The cosmos from that vantage was limitless and secure. There was a feeling that things were moving in the right direction, that a sane and rational voice meant enough to matter.

So much had shaken us in the intervening years: the assassinations of JFK, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bobby Kennedy; a war in Southeast Asia that continued to claim our closest friends; civil unrest in our colleges and communities; the draft, protests, race riots, Agnew; the Chicago Seven; Chappaquiddick; the demonization of John Lennon by J. Edgar Hoover. Ideology pitted neighbor against neighbor, children against parents. America's soul, its fundamental quality, was turned inside out. Its Norman Rockwell image had grown ugly and nightmarish. No matter what, we weren't headed back in that direction. A new order would no longer be Rockwellian, but there was hope that it would be replaced by something equally upbeat.

Woodstock was certainly a legitimate template. The temporary community that formed on Max Yasgur's farm functioned on welcome, camaraderie, cooperation, respect, joy, and peace. It was utopian in every respect, a

pop-up society whose flash, spontaneous origin precluded status or disunity. Michael Lang, Artie Kornfeld, John Roberts, and Joel Rosenman were its perfect architects. Dipolar opposites—hippies and suits—they had come together, rife with suspicions about one another, and stumbled on this idealized scheme. From the beginning, their crew labored with harmony and purpose, and from that arose the festival's core. There is no doubt in my mind that their spirit was contagious. Max's farm was consecrated ground.

Years after the festival ended, I couldn't shake my sense of stupidity for missing the experience. It had become clear that Woodstock was a moment, an aberration, not the linchpin of a new world order. It happened—and it passed. Attempts to replicate the magic fell short. Woodstock was followed by Altamont, the breakup of the Beatles, Kent State, and the deaths of Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Jim Morrison. The society that formed in the aftermath wasn't the conformist society that preceded it, but valued passion, creativity, individualism, and freedom from stultifying restrictions. Yet it was beset by other conflicts. The "we" that was the Woodstock Generation began to splinter. Hippies fought for their own piece of the rock. There was still a sense of doing something important, working toward a goal, but it became individualistic, as opposed to an ensemble effort. All of which left me scratching my head.

I dearly wanted to attend Woodstock, I wanted in. In an effort to recapitulate those three days in August 1969, I decided to retrace the steps that led to the festival. Ten years after the last chord rang out over Max's farm, I set out on an odyssey—a personal reclamation project, if you will, that brought me into contact with practically everyone responsible for getting that remarkable weekend off the ground.

My timing couldn't have been better. Peoples' recollections of the event remained relatively sharp and, perhaps more important, free from the upholstery that often pads our memories decades later. Better yet, most were still alive and eager to talk. So many hands had contributed to the cause, and it wasn't until years afterward, when the shock of the festival had finally worn off, that they understood the important roles they had played. It was finally time for them to reflect, to make sense of this impact.

Two of the principals, John Roberts and Joel Rosenman, had already written a memoir about Woodstock, a funny little book called *Young Men with Unlimited Capital* that read like a CliffsNotes account of their experience. The cast resembled amiable cartoon characters; many were hidden behind pseudonyms. The narrative was humorous but myopic. I immediately gleaned this version was thin, at best, and had a bone to pick with their hangdog colleagues, Lang and Kornfeld.

Both Roberts and Rosenman were accessible. They were involved running a fairly successful New York recording studio that I had actually worked in on occasion, and a phone call brought them into the fold. They had offices in a building adjacent to the studio, on West Fifty-Seventh Street, which is where I found them one morning in 1979. Together—they were always together. This was no partnership of convenience, but something much deeper and true. They had the kind of friendship that I envied, lacking rivalry or ego. And they had each other's backs. Roberts was a big bear of a guy, more Gentle Ben than Smokey. He had a button-down conservative facade that clashed with his personality; the short Haldeman haircut, oxfords and chinos, and wire-rim banker's frames belied a playful self-image that endeared him at once. Rosenman, wiry and darker, had a harder outer shell. He struggled to play the *éminence grise*, but succumbed to an inner tug. While Roberts traded in common sense, Rosenman had the passion. He'd done some amateur acting and was a musician of note, and I got the sense those qualities constituted his demons in the venture-capital circle in which he and Roberts traveled. In any case, they made an enviable team.

They had also just emerged from an extended period of grieving. For longer than either man had expected, they'd shed tears over the ruins of Woodstock, which had cost them dearly. Roberts had lost his inheritance to its creditors. And the tangle of post-festival legalities, from licensing to endless lawsuits, short-circuited their livelihoods. Just when it seemed they could put it all behind them, I waltzed in the door.

"Gentlemen, prepare to relive the festival all over again."

I didn't actually say that to them, but you could see it on their faces. Instead of balking, they ushered me into a closet-size room down the corridor with wall-to-wall file cabinets. "Welcome to what's left of the Woodstock festival," Roberts said. "It's all yours."

Everything, they'd saved everything—all the memos, schedules, blueprints, ledgers, even the contracts with the bands. Tickets, thousands of them, lay wrapped in rubber bands. I had almost forgotten that tickets were superfluous. Ultimately, hardly anyone paid their way into Woodstock; John Roberts had picked up the tab. Sifting through folder after folder, I realized what a bonanza this represented. Collectively, it was a blueprint for the festival, from its inception to its last futile gasp.

But Roberts and Rosenman knew they weren't off the hook. If the story was going to be recounted with accuracy, they'd have to endeavor to walk me back through the details. It meant reliving the whole exasperating mess, at least from their points of view. They were willing, at last, to get it off their chests.