

Woodstock Nation: What Created Famous Mud-Filled Festival

By EMILY FRIEDMAN

Generation X and Y may think Woodstock was just about the sex, drugs and rock and roll, but to our parents' generation, it was far more.

For them, Woodstock was a chance to let their freak flags fly, their hair grow long, and perhaps most important of all, define themselves as a generation that didn't want anything to do with the values of their uptight, middle-class elders.

Today, this self-described Woodstock nation has morphed into the very beings they rebelled against during that August weekend in 1969: Straight-shooting, buttoned-down, stressed-out parents.

But on the eve of the 40th anniversary of Woodstock, it doesn't seem to matter what they've become in the four decades since they stormed upstate New York for a three-day music festival that stunned the nation.

After all, they're the ones, and not us, who wear the badge of honor that comes with being a part of the most spontaneous and successful outdoor festival in American history.

"People were delightfully shocked if they were related to Woodstock, and absolutely horrified by it if they were anti-hippie," said Pete Fornatale, the author of "Back to the Garden: The Story of Woodstock," and a long-time disc jockey who began his career in the music business three weeks before Woodstock.

"These kids who went to Woodstock in 1969 didn't know how different they were from everyone else and how like-minded they were with each other until that weekend," Fornatale told ABCNews.com. "They came for the music, but found something much larger than the music in those three days."

"And that was their own power in their own numbers, and they turned it into a celebration -- a celebration with minimum violence, even in the harshest of conditions," said Fornatale.

The idea for Woodstock was born six months prior to the festival by friends Michael Lang and Artie Kornfeld, who had dreams of building a recording studio in upstate New York to cater to musicians who were growing tired of city life in Manhattan.

Max Yasgur's Farm

Lang and Kornfeld joined forces with John Roberts and Joel Rosenman, two budding entrepreneurs, and together the four men -- all in their 20s -- decided to put on a music festival to raise money that would fund the construction of the recording studio.

"And the rest, as they say, was history," said Joel Makower, author of "Woodstock: The Oral History."

When the original Wallkill, N.Y., location set for the festival fell through just a month before the concert was set to begin because of problems with local zoning laws, the concert promoters secured an alternate venue, Max Yasgur's farm in nearby Bethel, N.Y.

The four planners realized that relocating the event would turn out to be the least of their problems. The profit-making scheme, dubbed "Woodstock Ventures," quickly turned into a free concert when the number of attendees grew by hundreds of thousands, far more than the planners had anticipated and enough to turn the New York Thruway into a parking lot.

Nearly half a million people showed up to see 32 bands -- including the Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and The Who -- perform from Aug. 15 to Aug 17, 1969.

"Word spread quickly and you had all these people coming and causing traffic jams that paralyzed miles of highway which meant nobody was able to bring in extra food or medicine or supplies," said Makower. "People were crowded, it was hot and humid and then it rained and rained and rained."

The rain quickly turned the dairy-farm-turned-concert-arena into a muddy, slippery swamp, putting at risk the electrical equipment and the attendants camping on the crowds.

"Everyone was sitting on the ground where the lighting and sound cables were running underneath them while it was raining and nobody was sure if the canvas over the stage covering hundreds of thousands of dollars of electrical equipment that was filling with water was going to hold," said Makower.

And, of course, there were the drugs, mainly marijuana, LCD and mushrooms, said Makower, mixed with plenty of alcohol.

Woodstock's Lasting Legacy

"Woodstock created a can-do spirit among the generation," said Makower. "People came together under the unpleasant circumstances and helped everyone else and survived what everyone outside the festival grounds dubbed as a 'disaster.'"

With the Vietnam War still raging overseas and anti-war protests raging at home, Woodstock became a place where those people likely to be affected by the draft could converge.

"Nobody was really aware of how big this sort of counter culture was and how deeply their ideals had penetrated," said Anthony DeCurtis, a contributing editor at Rolling Stone magazine. "The thing about Woodstock is that it really came out of the blue. Nobody really anticipated what it was going to become."

"There was this element of presenting this alternative view of reality through Woodstock," said DeCurtis. "In 1969 there were probably half a million soldiers in Vietnam and here we are at Woodstock with half a million people there."

"Woodstock became this symbolic event of 'this is how we want to do things,'" said DeCurtis. "It was non-violent. There was music, sex and drugs."

"It showed it was possible to live a more sensual and peaceful life, and with Vietnam going on, that was very much a counter image," said DeCurtis.

Woodstock garnered much media attention during the three days, and opened the public's eyes to an entirely new consumer base that they'd never before thought of marketing toward.

"In a way, we came to Woodstock as half a million individuals and we left as a market," said Makower. "A generation that had its own tastes and sensibilities and power in the marketplace."

"I don't know if the world was different on Aug. 18 than it was on Aug. 13," said Makower. "I think what happened at Woodstock reflected the changes that were already in place and made it more visible."

Before Woodstock, most adults looked at the hippies with long hair who took drugs and listened to rock music as "misfits," not as a "political force or a market force or as a social force," according to Makower.

Was Woodstock the Beginning or End of Something?

Fornatale says that those who remember Woodstock often argue about whether the event was a beginning or an end to something. He says it was both.

"It was the beginning of this awareness of this generation as a consumer group to be exploited by corporate America," he said. "And it was also the end. Woodstock had never happened before and it has not happened since and it will never happen again."

Makower agrees and says that one of the reasons Woodstock's anniversary creates such a sense of nostalgia for those has-been hippies is because they, too, know that another event like it is unlikely to happen.

"In order to have another Woodstock, you have to have another 1969," he said.

"You could create something called Woodstock just as you could bring together four guys, three guitars and a drummer and call them the Beatles. It wouldn't be the same, or even close."