

BY THE TIME WE GOT TO WOODSTOCK, PART I

The Woodstock Music and Arts Festival was an event like no other in the 20th century. Nearly half a million young people gathered in upstate New York on a hot, rainy weekend in 1969 to watch one of the most impressive musical lineups in history. But what they got was much more than a concert—Woodstock was both a cultural milestone and the end of an era.

TENSE TIMES

In the late 1960s, the United States was a divided nation. The war in Vietnam had essentially put people on one of two sides: pro-war or anti-war. And both sides were vehement in their beliefs—the violent confrontation between police and protesters at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago had proved that. By 1969, as the anti-war movement felt more and more marginalized by the media, the only way left to spread the message of peace was through music.

San Francisco was the West Coast headquarters of the hippie movement; on the East Coast, it was New York City. But after a while, the hustle and bustle of the cities became too much for musicians to deal with—especially for recording music—so a lot of them started moving to the country.

About 100 miles north of Manhattan, the rural town of Woodstock, New York, had been a pastoral retreat for artists and musicians for nearly a century. Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, and Van Morrison, to name a few, decided to build homes and record there. Young people liked Woodstock for its back-to-nature appeal, but the local farmers weren't too thrilled to see long-haired hippies rolling into town. Because there were only a few at first, the locals just shrugged it off. They had no idea what was about to hit them.

THE FANTASTIC FOUR

There was one thing Woodstock lacked: a state-of-the-art recording studio. In the spring of 1969, four entrepreneurs—all young men in their 20s—decided to build one.

- Michael Lang, the oldest of the four at 26, was a stereotypical longhair, described by his friends as a “cosmic pixie.” A year earlier, he had produced Florida’s largest-ever rock concert—the two-day Miami Pop Festival, which drew 40,000 people.
- Artie Kornfeld was a vice president of Capitol Records and an accomplished songwriter with 30 hit singles to his credit, including Jan and Dean’s “Dead Man’s Curve.”
- John Roberts was the one with money. He was heir to a toothpaste fortune and had served in the Army. The only concert he’d ever been to was a Beach Boys show.
- Joel Rosenman was a Yale Law School graduate, but he cared more about playing guitar in a lounge band than practicing law.

LET’S PUT ON A SHOW

Kornfeld and Lang were friends who shared a New York City apartment and a love for progressive music. One of their dreams was to put on a huge music festival. When they heard of the exodus up to Woodstock, they wanted to be a part of it, and building a studio would be their in. They thought a rock concert might be a good way to raise money and generate publicity for the studio—but first they needed money to put on the concert.

Meanwhile, in another New York City apartment, Roberts and Rosenman were busy thinking up new and inventive business ideas. They had some money between them, but true to the times, they wanted to use it for some unconventional, cutting-edge business venture. But what? They decided to write and produce a television sitcom about two oddball businessmen who got into a different wacky business venture every week. For plot ideas, they put an ad in the *New York Times* in March 1968:

Young Men with Unlimited Capital looking for interesting, legitimate investment opportunities and business propositions.

MEETING OF THE MINDS

The show never made it off the drawing board. The ad, however, caught the eye of Lang and Kornfeld’s lawyer, who knew his clients were looking for business partners to put on their concert. A meeting was arranged in February 1969. Although they came from different backgrounds—Roberts and Rosenman were button-down college graduates; Kornfeld and Lang were tie-dyed flower chil-

dren—they all agreed that the summer of 1969 in Woodstock, New York, would be the time and place for an unprecedented festival, what they called “three days of peace and music.” They expected between 40,000 and 50,000 people to show up.

FINDING A FIELD, PART I

The four men formed Woodstock Ventures. In the spring of 1969, they scouted around upstate New York for a concert site in or near Woodstock. In Wallkill they found an abandoned industrial park. It was the right size (300 acres), was in a good location (right off the highway), and had all the utilities in place. Roberts shelled out \$10,000 to rent the park, and the town of Wallkill welcomed them with open arms...at first.

Although the industrial park had all the amenities the four were looking for, the “vibe” didn’t feel right. Lang, for one, hated it: the industrial feeling of the park was a far cry from the back-to-nature theme he’d envisioned for the concert. The people of Wallkill were wary of the prospect of 50,000 hippies converging on them, but Rosenman assured town supervisor Jack Schlosser that it would be a low-key folk festival—they’d get 50,000 people if they were lucky. Schlosser reluctantly agreed, and so did Lang. Roberts tried to ease the tensions between hippies and townsfolk by hiring a minister to take care of local relations and a former assistant at the justice department named Wes Pomeroy to head security. Even though the site wasn’t perfect, it was the only one they had.

FINDING THE ACTS

As spring turned to summer, the four promoters went to work trying to book the biggest folk and rock acts of the day. But performers were understandably hesitant—Woodstock Ventures had never put on a concert before, and now they were trying to put on the largest one of the year. “To get the contracts,” remembered Rosenman, “we had to have the credibility, and to get the credibility, we had to have the contracts.” They got the contracts the only way they could think of: they promised incredible sums of money to performers. One of the most popular groups of the time, Jefferson Airplane, agreed to play for \$12,000, twice their usual fee. Then Creedence Clearwater Revival and The Who signed for similar fees.

Those groups gave the show the credibility it needed. Other acts soon began to follow: the Grateful Dead and the headliner, Jimi Hendrix. (The musician they wanted most, Bob Dylan, couldn't make the show—he had already signed on to play the Isle of Wight Festival in England on the same weekend.)

With all the wheels in motion, an army of longhaired hippies descended upon Wallkill to begin setting up the site and start construction on the largest sound system ever created. The influx proved to be too much for the already suspicious locals. "I don't care if it's a convention of 50,000 ministers," Schlosser told Woodstock Ventures. "I don't want that many people in my town." So on July 15, 1969—a month before the concert was scheduled to begin—the Wallkill council ran Woodstock Ventures out of town.

FINDING A FIELD, PART II

Losing the site was a huge blow. The people at Woodstock Ventures were disconsolate; some were even packing up their stuff to go home. But then something unexpected happened: the press found out about what happened in Wallkill and ran with it. While the promotion for Woodstock was limited mostly to radio stations and independent newspapers, the story of the town that reneged on its concert deal made headlines everywhere. Suddenly, Woodstock was a part of the national conversation. And that may have been the best thing to happen to the festival. Many think that if the concert had gone on in Wallkill, it would have turned out badly—tensions there were already high, and some Wallkill citizens had threatened to "shoot the first hippie that walks into town."

But the fact remained that Woodstock still had no venue. Then, sometime during the week of July 20, when most of the people of the world were focused on the first moon landing, Lang heard about Max Yasgur, an eccentric old pipe-smoking dairy farmer from the town of White Lake. He owned a 600-acre farm and might be willing to rent it. Lang went to the field and fell in love with it. "It was magic," he said. "The sloping bowl, a little rise for the stage. A lake in the background. The deal was sealed right there in the field."

THE BUSINESS OF PEACE

Woodstock Ventures may have started out with the best of inten-

tions for the festival, but it was evident early on that they would have to utilize some tough business tactics to make it happen.

- Rosenman had maintained that maybe 50,000 people at most would show up. That's what he told Wallkill and that's what he told the people of White Lake, even though he knew it wasn't true. He expected five times that amount. At that point they would have told anyone anything to make the show happen. But Max Yasgur was wise to the ways of Woodstock Ventures. He tallied up his expenses for lost crops and destruction of his land and charged \$75,000 for his field—in advance—and got it.
- The bands were misled, too. There was supposed to be a \$15,000 cap on artists' fees, but word leaked out that Jimi Hendrix had been promised \$32,000. Rosenman explained that it was because Hendrix was the headliner and was slated to do two sets. But in the end it didn't matter, because many of the acts were never paid in full, anyway.

HERE IT COMES

A week before the start of the festival, the citizens of White Lake and Bethel realized the full magnitude of what was about to happen. There were at least 1,000 people on the site building the stage, the sound towers, the clinics, tent cities, and two huge ticket booths. That was on the inside. On the outside, tens of thousands of people were driving up Route 17B, inundating the small town of Bethel.

In an attempt to pacify the locals, Woodstock Ventures invited them to attend a pre-festival event in order to prove that the Woodstock performers were harmless and wholesome. They hired an avant-garde acting troupe called Earthlight Theater to perform a play. Bad idea: The play was called *Sex. Y'all Come*, and the script involved having the actors strip naked, pantomime an orgy, and shout obscenities at the crowd. The townsfolk were not amused. White Lake pulled the permits with just a few days left before the event. But by this point, it was too late. The "Stop Work" signs were ripped down almost as soon as they were put up. Like it or not, Woodstock was going to happen.

Don't freak out, man. Part II of the story is on page 503.

BY THE TIME WE GOT TO WOODSTOCK, PART II

By August 15, 1969, the stage was set for one of the largest gatherings of the 20th century. No one knew how large it would be until the event unfolded. It was evident early on, though, that this was more than a mere rock festival. (Part I is on page 375.)

FRIDAY

Close to half a million hippies had converged on the site by evening, and estimates say that half a million more tried to get to Woodstock, but never made it past the 20-mile traffic jam leading into Bethel. Woodstock Ventures blamed the police for purposefully not maintaining the traffic flow in the hopes of ruining the event. In the end, thousands of people just abandoned their cars and walked to the farm. And when they got there, instead of going in through one of the two gates, the kids trampled the fence and walked right in. While Woodstock Ventures were overjoyed by the turnout, they were equally dismayed when they found out that very few of the concertgoers had paid. The largest concert of the century had suddenly become a free concert. And Rosenman, Lang, Kornfeld, and Roberts had no clue how they were going to pay for it.

When word got out on Friday afternoon that the bands could not make it through the gridlock, Woodstock Ventures rented a fleet of Army helicopters to ferry them in. But that would take time, and hundreds of thousands of kids were screaming for music. The only artist who had shown up—folkie Richie Havens—was ushered onto the stage at 5:00 p.m. His band hadn't arrived yet, so he played solo...for three hours. Every time he tried to stop, the promoters threw him back onstage. Next up was John Sebastian, who wasn't even scheduled to perform, but happened to be there. Lang was afraid that if the music stopped, the kids might riot. For that reason, the plan to stop playing every night at midnight was abandoned. If all went well, the music would go nonstop until Sunday evening.

SATURDAY

When the sun rose on Max Yasgur's field on Saturday morning, Woodstock was the third largest city in New York State. It was also one of the muddiest: five inches of rain had fallen in about three hours during the night. On the surface, the entire event looked like a mess. Greil Marcus, a reporter who covered the event for *Rolling Stone*, described the troubles:

The sanitation facilities (600 portable toilets had been spotted across the farm) were breaking down and overflowing; the water from six wells and parked water tanks were proving to be an inadequate supply for the long lines that were forming, and the above-ground water pipes were being crushed by the humanity; the food concessions were sold out and it was impossible to ferry in any more through the traffic; the chief medical officer declared a "medical crisis" from drug use and subsequent freak-outs; police reported a shortage of ambulances, and those that were available had difficulty getting back to local hospitals through the metal syrup of the traffic jams.

Against All Odds

But even with all of the adversity, the music kept going through the afternoon and people banded together for survival. The Hog Farm, a group of communal hippies, was hired to manage the crowds, run interference, help people make it through bad drug trips, and keep the message of love flowing through the crowd. Their leader, known as Wavy Gravy, when asked how he intended to maintain law and order, replied, "With seltzer bottles and cream pies." Instead of the police force, they called themselves the "Please force." Woodstock Ventures would later maintain that the \$16,000 they spent to get the Hog Farm to Woodstock was the best money they ever spent.

Even the locals, many of whom had tried to stop the event, pitched in when they heard how little food there was for so many people. Churches, the Boy Scouts, and even the local Air Force base went on food drives and donated provisions by the ton. Through it all, the music kept playing. And then at five in the afternoon on Saturday, it started raining again. Heavily.

No Pay, No Play

But the rain was the least of their problems. The three main acts for Saturday night—the Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin, and The

Who—informed Woodstock Ventures that they wouldn't play unless they were paid in advance, in cash. That added up to more than \$30,000. Roberts didn't have that kind of money on him, so he pleaded with Charlie Prince, the owner of a local bank, to give him a cash advance. Roberts promised that he was good for it (he had a trust fund of more than \$1 million). But Prince was still skeptical. Then Roberts told him that if the music stopped, they might have to deal with the largest riot in American history. Prince conceded, and the music went on.

SUNDAY

As the sun came up, The Who were just concluding the performance of their rock opera *Tommy*. Arriving by car (barely) the night before, they didn't realize how big the crowd was until dawn. As they were singing "Listening to you, I feel the music," the band saw almost half a million people looking back at them. Pete Townshend says it's one of the most amazing things he's ever experienced. (Less than an hour before, Townshend had another strange experience: yippie activist Abbie Hoffman ran onstage during The Who's set and started preaching politics to the crowd. Townshend, not recognizing Hoffman, bonked him on the head with his guitar.)

By noon on Sunday, torrential rain had given way to baking sun. All of the extra space at the festival, even the dressing rooms, had been converted to hospitals. Someone had spiked the water supply with LSD, so the Hog Farm was helping thousands of kids (and many band members) through bad trips. Local medics were treating people for heatstroke, cut feet from all of the broken glass, pneumonia from being drenched for two days, and even blindness—several tripped-out kids had been lying on their backs and staring at the sun.

The food situation was dire. Wavy Gravy tried to coordinate "breakfast in bed for 400,000," but supplies were woefully short. And by this time, the portable toilets were unusable. Three Days of Peace and Music had become a disaster area. The situation was so bad, in fact, that New York governor Nelson Rockefeller threatened to send in National Guard troops to break up the festival.

But luckily for everyone involved, calmer heads prevailed. And still, the music went on. Audiences were treated that day and

throughout the night to sets by Crosby, Stills & Nash, Ten Years After, Johnny Winter, and Joe Cocker.

Woodstock's final act, headliner Jimi Hendrix, didn't even get to start his set until 9 a.m. on Monday morning. His instrumental version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" woke up the dozing crowd and gave them one last electrifying—but underappreciated—performance as they packed up their muddy belongings and left Yasgur's farm. The Woodstock Music and Arts Fair was over, but for the four men who formed Woodstock Ventures, that weekend would consume them for years to come.

AFTERMATH

The largest concert in history also left one of the biggest messes in history. It took several months and \$100,000 to clean up all the garbage left behind—and it was years before Max Yasgur's land recuperated. The festival also left at least three people dead: one a 17-year-old boy who was asleep under a tractor trailer when it started up and pulled away, and two more people who died of drug overdoses. The final tally for those treated for medical problems was around 5,000. There were eight miscarriages and it was rumored that several babies were born. And with all of the free love, who knows how many babies were conceived at Woodstock.

By the festival's end, Woodstock Ventures was \$1.3 million in debt. Promotional expenses had gone 70% over budget, and production expenses were 300% over budget. Throughout the 1970s, Woodstock Ventures was mired in lawsuits and faced criminal charges for illegal drug use, breach of contract, and even illegal burning from the plumes of smoke that rose over the field for weeks as all the trash was burned. Another lawsuit came from the town of White Lake for disturbing the peace (an ironic charge for an event whose goal was to promote peace), but that suit was dropped in 1978. So was it worth it? Yes, says Lang—the whole ordeal of organizing Woodstock was like "living a dream. My idea was just to get it done, whatever it took. We had a vision, and it all came true."

AFTER THE AFTERMATH

The saving grace for the concert promoters' monetary woes came from the movie *Woodstock*. Warner Bros. made a film of the event

(edited by Martin Scorsese) and Woodstock Ventures was entitled to residual royalties. Because of this, Woodstock Ventures broke even—in 1980. (Want to see Mrs. Uncle John? She’s in the movie. She the cute brunette behind the guy freaking out.)

Twenty-five years later, on August 12, 1994, around 300,000 people showed up in Saugerties, New York, to attend Woodstock '94, which was produced by Woodstock Ventures, still headed by Michael Lang, Joel Rosenman, and John Roberts.

CULTURAL LEGACY

Woodstock came at a time when the United States was at a crossroads, but did it really change anything? On the day after the event, the *New York Times* ran an editorial that called Woodstock a “colossal mess.” But just a day later, the paper changed its tune, calling it a “phenomenon of innocence. They came, it seems, to enjoy their lifestyle that is its own declaration of independence.”

Elliot Tiber, the man who supplied the original permit for Woodstock Ventures to put on the festival, says in his essay, *How Woodstock Happened*: “True believers still call Woodstock the capstone of an era devoted to human advancement. Cynics say it was a fitting, ridiculous end to an era of naivete. Then there are those who say it was just a hell of a party.”

Which of the three it actually was is still being debated, but one thing is for sure: as the summer of 1969 came to an end, the optimism that stemmed from seeing men land on the moon and 450,000 people gather peacefully in the rain was running out. On December 6 of that year, the Rolling Stones headlined the Altamont Festival in Livermore, California. The event was scarred by a near-riot and the stabbing death of an 18-year-old man at the hands of the Hells Angels. Altamont has since been called “the day the ‘60s died” and “the anti-Woodstock.”

As the ‘70s rolled in, the nation would soon be rocked by the Watergate scandal and then an energy crisis, making that weekend in White Lake seem like a distant memory.

WHAT A LONG STRANGE TRIP

But Woodstock is by no means forgotten. It’s one of the most enduring images of the 1960s. And it’s likely there won’t be a concert again of its magnitude. The original site now holds a monument to

the event and an amphitheater that seats 16,000... comfortably. And as for the recording studio that sparked the whole idea in the first place, it was never built.

"I think you have proven something to the world—that half a million kids can get together and have three days of fun and music and have nothing BUT fun and music. God bless you all!"

—Max Yasgur to the crowd at Woodstock

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LINEUP AT WOODSTOCK

Friday:

Richie Havens
 John Sebastian
 Country Joe McDonald (with
 his "Fixin-to-Die-Rag")
 Swami Satchadinanda
 (the guru)
 Bert Sommer
 Sweetwater
 Tim Hardin
 Ravi Shankar (quit due
 to rain)
 Melanie
 Arlo Guthrie
 Joan Baez

Saturday:

Quill (threw stuff at
 the audience)
 Keef Hartly
 Santana
 Mountain
 Canned Heat

The Incredible String Band
 Grateful Dead
 Creedence Clearwater Revival
 Janis Joplin
 Sly and the Family Stone
 The Who
 Jefferson Airplane

Sunday/Monday:

Joe Cocker (followed by a
 huge rainstorm)
 Max Yasgur (with a speech)
 Country Joe & the Fish
 Ten Years After
 The Band
 Blood, Sweat & Tears
 Johnny Winter
 Crosby, Stills & Nash
 (joined for a few songs by
 Neil Young)
 Paul Butterfield Blues Band
 Sha-Na-Na
 Jimi Hendrix