

WOODSTOCK: 40 YEARS DOWN THE ROAD AND A NATION LOST

Well, I came upon a child of God
He was walking along the road
And I asked him, Tell me, where are you
going?
This he told me

Said, I'm going down to Yasgur's Farm,
Gonna join in a rock and roll band.
Got to get back to the land and set my
soul free.

As you may have heard, we are on the precipice of the 40th anniversary of Woodstock. The famous, and infamous, cultural milestone took place down on Max Yasgur's dairy farm outside of Bethel New York between August 15 and August 18, 1969. Thirty-two acts performed, during a sometimes rainy weekend, in front of nearly half a million concertgoers. The history and lore of Woodstock began immediately, it was clear to both those who loved it, and those who hated it, that it was a uniquely seminal moment.

Well, then can I roam beside you?
I have come to lose the smog,
And I feel myself a cog in somethin'
turning.
And maybe it's the time of year,
Yes and maybe it's the time of man.
And I don't know who I am,
But life is for learning.

We are stardust, we are golden,
We are billion year old carbon,
And we got to get ourselves back to the
garden.

Something had happened. Something big and transformational. But what? The prevailing view seems to be that it was a symbol of the discord

and unrest of the 60's, the antiwar movement and the counterculture generation. It is also viewed as the ultimate example of the peace and love motif of "the hippies". I wonder about all that; in fact, I am more inclined to the view expressed by Jon Pareles in a great article in the New York Times:

Yet for all the benign memories, Woodstock also set in motion other, more crass impulses. While its immediate aftermath was amazement and relief, the festival's full legacy had as much to do with excess as with idealism. As the decades roll by, the festival seems more than ever like a fluke: a moment of muddy, disheveled, incredulous grace. It was as much an endpoint as a beginning, a holiday of naïveté and dumb luck before the realities of capitalism resumed. Woodstock's young, left-of-center crowd – nice kids, including students, artists, workers and politicos, as well as full-fledged L.S.D.-popping hippies – was quickly recognized as a potential army of consumers that mainstream merchants would not underestimate again. There was more to sell them than rolling papers and LPs.

With the 40th anniversary of Woodstock looming – so soon? – the commemorative machinery is clanking into place, and the nostalgia is strong.

Woodstock is, like so many larger than life things, what each individual makes of it. As Woodstock performer Sly Stone would say, it has different strokes for different folks. But, mostly, I think Pareles may have this about right. For all the sturm and drang over its impact, Woodstock was not a big antiwar protest; in fact, the promoters, performers and masters of ceremonies made a conscious decision to stay away from that. As an example, when Abbie Hoffman tried to take the stage to gin up mass

emotion against war and oppression, Pete Townsend of the Who literally batted him off the stage with his guitar. Peace and love yes; conscious and overt war protest, not.

But if Woodstock itself was not the epitome of social protest and activism, the times surrounding it were. There was an immoral and unjustified US war and occupation a half a world away, there was a culture of government spying on its citizens and invasion of their privacy and there was a growing dichotomy in society. In short, eerily similar to what seems to be the case today. And there were people protesting. Loud and large. Out in the streets, on college campuses, in the public square. There was a lot of juice to the dissent and it was led by the youth, college students and academics.

By the time we got to Woodstock,
We were half a million strong
And everywhere was a song and a
celebration.
And I dreamed I saw the bomber death
planes
Riding shotgun in the sky,
Turning into butterflies
Above our nation.

Where are they all today? Where has the soul and conscience of our society gone? Where is the dissent; where is the beef? It is curiously and conspicuously absent from our analogous circumstance. There is so much wrong, on so many fronts; and yet there is so much talent and ability. People are sick and tired of the state of the nation; and yet the ability and gumption to mobilize and make a stand seems lost. Why?

Maybe Jon Pareles is right and Woodstock, for all the notoriety, really was "as much an endpoint as a beginning". It wasn't peace, love and activism on the march so much as automatonic consumerism and self concern setting in for the duration in America's youth. We need to reverse that and get ourselves back to the garden of moral and legal certainty.

Oh, and by the way, and I know not everybody has the connection speed to do so, but if you can, check out the videos, at a minimum the first and last ones, although all are very good. If you have memories of, or related to, Woodstock, the time period etc. please feel free to relate and discuss them. Let's have some fun this fine Friday afternoon!

**We are stardust, we are golden,
We are caught in the devils bargain,
And we got to get ourselves back to the
garden.**