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Cultural Epicenters of Entertainment in the Hudson River Valley

The Hudson River Valley has been a center of culture since its settlement. Writers such as Washington Irving, painters of the Hudson River School such as Thomas Cole, and poets such as John Ashbery are only a sampling of the individuals who have historically contributed to the higher culture of the region. Singers and stage performers are one group of entertainers who have called the Hudson River Valley home. However, this type of entertainment has been unique, resulting in cultural epicenters where stage performers have come together and thrived. Foremost among these epicenters have been the Catskill resort region during the early twentieth century and Woodstock during the mid-twentieth century.

It was in the late 1800s and early 1900s that Sullivan County and southern Ulster County of the lower Catskill Mountains developed the thriving Jewish resort trade that would draw entertainers and provide some the start which would launch them to later fame. The Catskills were already a Christian farming and resort region as of the early 1800s. This is evidenced by the building of the first major resort hotel in Haines Falls in 1823.¹

It was not until 1892 that Yana “John” Gerson was recognized by his community to be the first Jewish farmer in the region. Being close to New York City was a major factor in both farming and the later Jewish resort trade.² Railroads connected the region quickly to the city and this brought new enterprises to the people of the region. In 1899,

¹ Phil Brown. *In the Catskills A Century of Jewish Experience in "The Mountains"*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 22.

² Brown, *Catskills*, 23.

Gerson also became the first Jewish boarder, advertising in “Summer Homes” that at the “Rock Hills Jewish Boarding House” he could accommodate forty charging “adults \$6, children \$3.” This shows the how Jewish families began combining farming and boarding as Christian families had for nearly eighty years.³

However, what began to occur around the turn of the century was the transfer of land from Christians to Jews. The developing Jewish community grew as many of the boarders decided to purchase land after staying seasonally. Most Jewish landowners farmed, if only for a short time. Many would be forced to put up boarders due to the difficult conditions the Catskills provided for farmers. Even experienced farmers in the rugged Catskills, a region distinctly difficult for agriculture, could not sustain a family based solely on farming. All would be forced into subsidize their farms by putting up boarders.⁴ Most Jewish farmers had little or no experience making it near impossible to succeed on farming alone.⁵

Those individuals who did come from New York City to board had drastically different aims than their Christian predecessors. Jews traveled to these locations to socialize rather than experience the beautiful natural surroundings. This enticed return visits year after year making summer in the Catskills a “way of life” rather than a simple getaway to nature.⁶ This development of Jewish colonization was unplanned compared to other colonies such as in New Jersey and the mid-west or the “self-segregated” religious communities such as Amish or Shakers.⁷

³ Ibid; 26.

⁴ Ibid; 27.

⁵ Ibid; 31.

⁶ Ibid; 28.

⁷ Ibid; 33-34.

The Borscht Belt, as the region came to be known for its extensive Eastern European Jewish population, became more popular through the 1900s boarding house owners began to feel pressure to provide entertainment for their guests. However these farmers knew nothing about show-business. In fact many resented having to put on shows to remain competitive with the farm down the road.⁸

In the early days entertainment was a “home-grown” phenomenon. It began with readings of literature, variety nights, and simple discussion.⁹ A Social Director was hired to completely oversee every aspect of entertainment. They would be “producer, director, writer, actor, song-and-dance man, emcee, comedian, scenic designer, electrician, stage manager, stagehand, and sometimes waiter.” However, this was only at night, during the day he would be responsible for sports and activities.¹⁰

The talent was equally as home-grown and diverse in their responsibilities as the director. Aaron Chwatt, also known as Red Buttons, was an entertainer, bellboy, prop boy, and waiter at the Beerkill Lodge. For all this work he made only a dollar and a half a week though much of his pay came in the form of lodging and meals. The stars that grew out of the Catskill resorts went on to headline at places such as Madison Square Garden. Very few people kept their own names when they entered show business in the Catskills.¹¹

“David Kaminsky is Danny Kaye, Aaron Chwatt is Red Buttons, Al Dabruzio is Robert Alda, Phillip Feldman is Phil Foster, Pinky Perlmutter is Jan Pierce, Moishe became Merrill Miller then Robert Merrill, Jerome Levitch is Jerry Lewis, Bernie Schwartz is Tony Curtis, Milton Berlinger

⁸ Ibid; 225-226.

⁹ Ibid; 221.

¹⁰ Ibid; 226.

¹¹ Ibid; 226.

is Milton Berle, Murray Janofsky is Jan Murray, and... Joseph Abramowitz to Joey Adams.”¹²

The Borscht Belt gave many big names their initial start. The entertainment would be the central focus of these resorts, hosting a culture of entertainment that would rival Miami Beach and Las Vegas.¹³

Comedy was one form of entertainment that truly exploded in the golden age of the Borscht Belt during the thirties, forties, and fifties. Individuals such as Jerry Lewis, Buddy Hackett, Jackie Mason, Dick Shawn, Joey Bishop, and Don Rickles all got their start. Even Mel Brooks was a Social Director. A majority of the comics were second-generation Jews making them a “restless crowd,” according to Joyce Wadler, who would do anything for a laugh.¹⁴ Once, while Buddy Hackett doubled as a busboy and comic, he “scratched his ass through supper all week to provide the setup for one lousy joke. (Waiter, in front of the guests: “Busboy, I notice you been standing with your hand on your ass all week. Do you have hemorrhoids?” Hackett: We only have what’s on the menu.”).¹⁵ Their variety acts were extremely diverse, ripping off hit movies and Broadway. In the thirties and forties, Comedians would come up for the season and work but as the fifties brought the New York State Thruway, making the mountains more accessible, comics began traveling for an evening or weekend only.¹⁶

What truly brought to a close this culture of resort entertainment was the invention of the 1950s television culture. Many of the comedians and actors of the Catskills resorts soon found themselves spreading the entertainment culture that was once

¹² Ibid; 225.

¹³ Ibid; 226.

¹⁴ Ibid; 250-251.

¹⁵ Ibid; 251.

¹⁶ Ibid; 252.

reserved for the Catskills across America, into each living room. Mel Brooks found himself producing a hit television show called *Admiral Broadway Revue* show in 1949. On the show, Borscht Belt-brand comedy prevailed. One of Brooks's hit characters, "The Twelve Thousand Year Old Man," talked like an old Jewish man, a bit that came directly out of the Borscht Belt tradition. It was the dissemination of Jewish entertainment culture across America that made the cultural centers of entertainment in the Catskills obsolete.¹⁷

Just as the Borscht Belt began dying out, Woodstock began to gain a reputation as the center of a countercultural movement that would encompass the United States. During the fifties, Woodstock fought to maintain itself as the artistic summertime tourist center it once had a reputation for being though residents were uneasy about the future of their town.¹⁸ During this period of uneasiness of the town's history an emerging cultural movement called the Beat Generation very slowly began to take hold in Woodstock during the 1950s. The Beatniks were "disheveled individuals" who grew beards, something out of style for the time, and rejected the beliefs of their parents. They thought Americans were victims of a social system that stifled them by participation in a materialistic economy. This social movement had already taken hold in San Francisco and Greenwich Village but now was in relatively few numbers finding Woodstock to be a wonderful home.¹⁹

Beat culture was not strong in Woodstock. Beats were essentially musicians, writers and intellectuals. It was in the mid 1960s that the Beat's descendents, the Hippies, who had broader interests, began entering the town. Hippies were generally young people who were more generally dissatisfied with American culture than Beats. They were the

¹⁷ Ibid; 252-253.

¹⁸ Alf Evers. *Woodstock: History of an American Town*. (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1987) 643.

¹⁹ Evers, *Woodstock*, 652-653.

sons and daughters of successful business people, who held traditional societal roles. They idolized individuals such as James Dean and Elvis Presley. Music was essential to them. Beats read poetry to jazz, but hippies followed rock and roll, which grew out of the electrification of folk music.²⁰ Hippie culture was inexplicably linked to folk music as well as rock and roll. Where hippies went the music went and where the music went the hippies followed.

Musical entertainment of the folk generation began taking up residence in Woodstock during the early sixties. Albert Grossman a manager of successful folk singers came to the town. Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Peter, Paul, and Mary were just a few of the folk groups that took up residence and found that they were followed by loyal fans to the town.²¹

By the late 1960s, the Beat and the Hippie movement had merged to form the American counterculture. One aspect of this counterculture that set them apart from the previous residents of the town was their use of drugs. Older residents had used hard cider, whiskey, and beer for a long time, but the counterculture utilized LSD and marijuana.²² As the counterculture spread, Woodstock saw a convergence of young individuals who had “tuned in, turned on, and dropped out” swell the ranks of the counterculture in the town. What characterized the movement was that hippies liked to live in close quarters together, thus they would rent out a two-person house and then invite a dozen or more individuals to live in it with them.²³

²⁰ Ibid; 653-654.

²¹ Ibid; 654.

²² Ibid; 653-654.

²³ Ibid; 655.

As the events of the sixties unfolded, some hippies left Woodstock to help in the Civil Rights movement and protest the war in Vietnam. However, rock stars began buying property in this stronghold of the counterculture and that only brought increased droves of youth to the town that was now predicted to become, “the Nashville of the north.”²⁴ This was no understatement either. During the 50s, Woodstock hosted many promotional festivals called “The Woodstock Festival” to attract tourists. Festival booklets were printed every year. During the sixties these festivals began to focus on popular music such as folk and rock, attracting crowds of up to one thousand young people to see performers such as Richie Havens. One resident described these concerts as having, “hippie music until the wee hours of the morning.”²⁵ These events eventually began being held every weekend and were called “Soundouts” though they were held across the town line in Saugerties due to locals of Woodstock hostility towards them and the hippies who flocked to see them.²⁶

Townpeople of Woodstock were hostile towards the hippies because they disapproved of both their sexual habits as well as their form of substance abuse. At the “Soundouts” it was said that “dope pushers and dope users” were extremely prevalent, and an increased number of arrests were made to confront the issue.²⁷ Regardless of the efforts, the state felt that with the ever-increasing hippie population brought more drugs into the town, making it the target of a strike on drugs in 1967.²⁸ The manner of

²⁴ Ibid; 656.

²⁵ Ibid; 661.

²⁶ Ibid; 661.

²⁷ Ibid; 661.

²⁸ Ibid; 657.

entrapment the state used to investigate only proved how little they understood the drug trade.²⁹

The hippie culture was destined to grow even further in the late sixties as youths of the counterculture read in underground papers that Woodstock was the place to go because of the free camping and swimming spots.³⁰ The town however, was completely incapable of dealing with the influx of people. In lieu of public transportation, people began hitchhiking.³¹ Similarly, sanitation facilities were inadequate and people began bathing in springs such as the “Big Deep.”³² These issues, in conjunction with the hippie disposition to ignore the requests of non-hippie citizens, created an extreme anti-hippie sentiment among many of the original townspeople.³³ These anti-hippie individuals were afraid that the almost daily increase in numbers would eventually allow them to overrun the town if they hadn’t already, something, Alf Evers claimed there was not enough hippies to do.³⁴

Regardless of the protests against hippies, the counterculture had spread in New York and “claimed Woodstock as its capital.” Up until 1967, countercultural entertainment had revolved mostly around these “Soundouts,” where hippies gathered to listen to music, smoke marijuana, and sleep out under the stars together in a communal setting. The official “Woodstock Festival” was run by the Woodstock Council of the Arts but in 1969 there was rumor that a non-official “Woodstock Festival” was being planned.³⁵ The town of Woodstock had the opportunity to host the Newport Jazz Festival

²⁹ Ibid; 658.

³⁰ Ibid; 662.

³¹ Ibid; 658

³² Ibid; 661

³³ Ibid; 662.

³⁴ Ibid; 663.

³⁵ Ibid; 665.

in 1965 but decided against it because of the rowdy reputation jazz buffs had.³⁶ This illustrates how determined Woodstock's townspeople had then become when the hippies proposed to hold an unofficial Woodstock Festival in the town. This is why the hippies decided to move it to Wallkill until Wallkill as well decided to rethink their decision. The festival then moved to White Lake in Bethel, nearly sixty miles from Woodstock. Nevertheless, the concert carried its name with it to White Lake.³⁷

The three day Woodstock Festival was held on Max Yasgur's Sullivan County farm became a small city of people. Some reports say that the crowd was so vast that some people could not even get close enough to the stage to hear the rock and roll stars that played on it. Rain came over that weekend as well, forcing people to live up to their knees in mud.³⁸ Estimates of the number of people who attended were five hundred thousand.³⁹ Major musical groups such as The Band, Jimi Hendrix, The Who, Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Santana, Crosby, Stills, and Nash, Janis Joplin, Joe Cocker, and Mountain all were in attendance.⁴⁰ This was one of the major culminations in the countercultural entertainment in the sixties.

This however, was not the end of the influence the counterculture would have on Woodstock. Many Hippies found Woodstock to be a turning point in culture as they entered the Age of Aquarius and believed the town of Woodstock to be a place where Aquarian life could thrive. In this way, the hippie culture continued though at this point it took on a stronger focus on religion with Buddhism and Zen.⁴¹ Never the less division

³⁶ Ibid; 656.

³⁷ Ibid; 665-666.

³⁸ Ibid; 667.

³⁹ Woodstock 69, "1969 Woodstock Festival and Concert"; available from <http://www.woodstock69.com/index.htm>; Internet; accessed 20 April 2009.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Evers, *Woodstock*, 668.

arose among the Aquarians and when conjoined with the added pressure of a recession which began to spread throughout the nation in the seventies, many people who had come to Woodstock in the sixties were now leaving, unable to make a living.⁴² Those who did stay found more socially acceptable outlets for their enthusiasm such as environmental projects and setting up therapeutic centers.⁴³ Nevertheless, the decade of the hippies was over and Woodstock declined as a center of folk and rock music.

The Catskills and Woodstock became national centers of entertainment culture in the Hudson Valley. Through larger cultural movements in the United States both Jews and hippies sought out communities of people with similarities to themselves and found the Hudson River Valley to a place where they could go to find such a group. Once together, these communities harbored great entertainers who would become nationally, if not internationally infamous.

⁴² Ibid; 669.

⁴³ Ibid; 672.