

The Woodstock Festival

The Logistics behind the Legendary Concert of 1969

By James O'Donnell

Introduction

The summer of 1969 proved to be a pinnacle point in American history. America's policy of containment in Vietnam soon culminated in an invasion of Cambodia and the advent of civil war across South East Asia. The Cold War raged between the two global superpowers who sought to edge out one another on the world stage economically, politically, and militarily. NASA's Apollo 11 mission put the first man on the Moon and won the Space Race. Despite these tumultuous times and scientific successes, many Americans remember 1969 as the year that witnessed sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll brew a countercultural revolution within America's youth population. Political and economic uncertainty defined the closing year of the sixties and the counterculture- a movement disillusioned with contemporary America, foreign conflicts, and tradition- was a symptom of such events. These revolutionary individuals, defying the traditional moral practices of the previous generation, sought to create a testament to the values of the counterculture; a stage from which they could show the world that their understanding and perspective of the world is viable. They found this stage on a dairy farm in the small-town Bethel, New York in August 1969 at the now famous Woodstock Music and Arts Fair. However, despite months of planning and coordination, Woodstock promoter Michael Lang and his staff found themselves ill prepared for the testament the counterculture was about to create. The 1969 Woodstock Festival, promoted as "Three Days of Music and Peace," proved to be a financial and logistical nightmare for the promoters, staff, and local community that failed to anticipate the cultural significance and attendance of the festival that many modern scholars point to as the pinnacle moment of the 1960s counterculture revolution.

Planning for the Festival- a Debacle of Disorganization and Pure Luck

“At Woodstock, we would focus our energy on peace, setting aside the onstage discussion of political issues to just groove on what might be possible. It was a chance to see if we could create the kind of world for which we’d been striving throughout the sixties: That would be our political statement—proving that peace and understanding were possible and creating a testament to the value of the counterculture. It would be three days of peace and music.”

— Michael Lang, *The Road to Woodstock*

Woodstock almost ended before the music had even begun. Between the disorganization of the promoters and organizers to the location of the festival changing just thirty-one days before Woodstock’s scheduled date, it truly was the festival that barely made it off the ground.

The Woodstock Music and Arts Fair, of which it was conclusively neither, was the brainchild of two semi-professional New Yorkers: Michael Lang, a well-known concert promoter, and Arthur Kornfeld, a record executive at Capitol Records in New York City.¹ Having met and struck up a friendship through mutual business relations in May 1968, the two toyed with the idea of the “perfect concert” for much of that year, hoping to use the funds from the concert to open their own recording studio.² The idea for the concert became reality when Lang and Kornfeld contacted two young, wealthy investors from New York City: John Roberts and Joel Rosenman. Roberts and Rosenman had posted ads in the “Capital Available” sections of the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* stating, “Young Men with Unlimited Capital looking for interesting, legitimate investment opportunities and business propositions.” The four met several times in early 1969 and Roberts and Rosenman, who expressed interest in “investing

¹ Hillstrom, Kevin, and Hillstrom, Laurie Collier. *Woodstock*. Detroit: Omnigraphics, Incorporated, 2012. Accessed March 25, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, 37

² *Ibid*, 38

in unusual new business ideas,”³ agreed to form a partnership with Lang and Kornfeld called Woodstock Ventures.⁴ With this partnership, the Woodstock festival transformed from a mere idea to a reality.

Roberts provided \$500,000 initial funds to support the project while Rosenman drew up and reviewed the legal contracts and affairs necessary to move the project forward.⁵ This investment and legal validity provided Lang and Kornfeld with the support necessary to begin planning and promoting the Woodstock Music and Arts Fair. Lang first sought to distribute roles to each of the partners: Kornfeld would be in charge of publicity and advertising,⁶ investing roughly an additional \$200,000 into promotions while garnering “a tremendous amount of excitement and speculation” about the festival on the radio stations.⁷ Lang acted as the hands-on producer of the festival- booking the talent, designing and preparing the site, and putting together the production team.⁸ Roberts and Rosenman would utilize their backgrounds in finance and law respectively to oversee business administration and ticket distribution and purchasing.⁹ The partners agreed upon calling the festival, “An Aquarian Exposition: The Woodstock Music and Arts Fair.” In regards to the name of the concert, Lang stated:

“I suggested “Aquarian Exposition” to encompass all the arts, not only music but crafts, painting, sculpture, dance, theatre... I wanted to reference the Aquarian age, an era of great harmony predicted by astrologers to coincide with the late twentieth century, a time when stars and planets would align to allow for more understanding, sympathy, and

³ Hillstrom, Kevin, and Hillstrom, Laurie Collier. *Woodstock*, 39

⁴ *Ibid*, 143

⁵ *Ibid*, 39

⁶ Lang, Michael, and Holly George-Warren. *The Road to Woodstock*. New York: Ecco, 2010, 49

⁷ Cottrell, Robert C. *Sex, Drugs, and Rock 'n' Roll: The Rise of America's 1960s Counterculture*. Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015. Accessed April 1, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, 264

⁸ Lang, Michael. *The Road to Woodstock*, 49

⁹ *Ibid*.

trust in the world. Our festival would be that place for the people to come together to celebrate the coming of a new age.”¹⁰

The partners sought to create a festival that “set aside the onstage discussion of political issues”¹¹ and focused on the proposition that:

“...we could create the kind of world for which we had been striving throughout the sixties: That would be our political statement- proving that peace and understanding were possible and creating a testament to the value of the counterculture. It would be three days of peace and music.”¹²

In order to begin ticket distribution and sales, Rosenman and Roberts began researching the major population centers of the northeastern corridor - New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts - and determined that as many as 200,000 people¹³ could possibly attend the festival. With this record-breaking estimation in mind, Lang and his partners set about securing a location for the concert, with Woodstock being their first option. However, their proposal was hastily rejected by the town supervisor, Bill Ward, and officials from the county health department.¹⁴ Despite this setback, the weekend of August 15 was chosen as the official date of the concert¹⁵ and Kornfeld promptly began promotions, including designing posters, ads, and actively engaging radio stations in building anticipation and excitement for the event. Lang also began preparing a list of potential talent that could perform at the festival and contacting their representatives to create a list for Kornfeld to use in his promotions. Overtime, Lang successfully booked several high-profile groups including Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, and The Who. As bands continued to be booked for the concert, the producers sought to begin early ticket

¹⁰ Lang, Michael. *The Road to Woodstock*, 52-53

¹¹ Ibid, 53

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 54

sales to further build publicity and increase profits. Advance ticket sales were conducted largely through mail orders; however, some tickets were also sold in record stores and head shops (stores that specialize in selling drug paraphernalia).¹⁶ Tickets were initially sold for \$6, however, Lang's team eventually modified the prices to \$7 for a one-day ticket, \$13 for a two-day ticket, and \$18 for a three-day ticket. Additionally, the partners researched the logistics of accommodating 200,000 people at the event site and even made arrangements to meet with US Army officials in the Pentagon to discuss information in regards to maintaining field sanitation and crowd control, as there was no precedent - outside the military - for the magnitude of the event they were planning;¹⁷ but, their meetings were repeatedly cancelled. Luckily, Lang was successful in securing the services of Stanley Goldstein, a veteran concert organizer whom Lang had worked with to produce the 1968 Miami Pop Festival.¹⁸ Goldstein agreed to take on the responsibility of building a top-level staff for the Woodstock Festival and organize preliminary site plans.¹⁹ Additionally, Mel Lawrence was recruited as the director of operations, placing him at the forefront of developing the overall site layout and landscaping, including the design and construction of the stage, sound, and lighting systems.²⁰ But there remained one obstacle to the launching of the festival - finding a suitable location.

The desperate search had begun early in 1969, when a promising site location in Saugerties, NY was turned down at the last moment. Lang's team continued searching for a venue or location, eventually entering negotiations with the local government of the small town of Wallkill, NY to seek permission to utilize the Mills Industrial Park²¹ - an unattractive tract of

¹⁶ Hillstrom, Kevin, and Hillstrom, Laurie Collier. *Woodstock*, 42

¹⁷ Lang, Michael. *The Road to Woodstock*, 57

¹⁸ Hillstrom, Kevin, and Hillstrom, Laurie Collier. *Woodstock*, 41

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 43

undeveloped industrial park land - a site with access to water and electricity, two resources the Woodstock producers sought desperately. Despite a promising start to the negotiations, during which the Woodstock producers openly lied about the projected size and scope of the concert, the townspeople organized a Concerned Citizens Commission and actively petitioned the town board to reject the zoning permit application sought by Woodstock Ventures.²² Despite meetings with the townspeople to address their concerns, the location was ultimately turned down on July 15, shortly after the Wallkill Town Board passed a resolution requiring a permit for any gathering of more than 5,000 persons. With just 31 days until the concert date, it looked as though the endeavor may have to be cancelled. Then, Max Yasgur, a dairy farmer from Bethel, NY sympathizing with the plight of Woodstock Ventures, offered 700 acres of his land as a site for the festival.²³ With just a month until the concert and despite limited protesting from residents of Bethel, which Lang sought to simmer down through negotiations, Lang's team began desperately and hastily constructing the stage and other facilities at Yasgur's farm and announced the location change. Lang also hired a small security force of roughly 350 New York police officers, who would be unarmed and wear uniforms labeled "Peace Service Corps" rather than be identified as police.²⁴ Members of the Hog Farm commune were recruited to construct trails to the concert site from the streets, operate a free kitchen tent on the festival grounds, and operate "freak out" tents for individuals tripping on LSD and other hallucinogens expected to be widely available at the concert.²⁵ Lastly, filmmaker Michael Wadleigh was hired to make a documentary of the concert.²⁶ With these assets in place, the Woodstock Festival was set to

²² Hillstrom, Kevin, and Hillstrom, Laurie Collier. Woodstock, 43

²³ Ibid, 45

²⁴ Ibid, 48

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

move forward. To Lang and his ambitious team, the perfect concert and the political ideal of peace and love were finally becoming the reality they had once dreamed to achieve.

The Scene at Woodstock

“If you like colossal traffic jams, torrential rain, reeking portable johns, barely edible food, and sprawling, disorganized crowds, then you would have found Woodstock a treat.”

- Mark Hosenball, journalist, attended Woodstock at age 17

The 1969 Woodstock Festival is often portrayed as a cultural phenomenon and the flashpoint of the counterculture sweeping the United States in the late 1960s.²⁷ Many sources focus upon the pinnacle hippie experience that Woodstock offered, the 20-mile-long traffic jams that highlight the magnitude of the event, and the mixed performances of some of the era’s greatest rock ‘n roll icons. From this concert came Jimi Hendrix’s now famous version of the Star-Spangled Banner and a political statement that sought to prove that peace, music, and love were reality rather than simple ideals. While these portrayals are true, they often mask the logistical and humanitarian nightmare that was the 1969 Woodstock Festival. Logistical struggles during the planning process compounded issues that would quickly become apparent during the concert and have near disastrous results. By Sunday morning, having heard reports of the deteriorating conditions at Woodstock and fearing mob rule and lawlessness, New York State governor Nelson Rockefeller considered calling out the National Guard and removing the concertgoers from Yasgur’s land forcibly.²⁸ Fortunately, Lang and his team reported that the people, despite harsh weather conditions and logistical struggles, were generally respectful and

²⁷ Frisch, Michael. "Woodstock Festival." In *Encyclopedia of New York State*, edited by Peter R. Eisenstadt and Laura-Eve Moss, 1716+. Syracuse University Press, 2005. *Academic OneFile* (accessed March 28, 2019).

²⁸ Hillstrom, Kevin, and Hillstrom, Laurie Collier. *Woodstock*, 74

peaceful, defusing the concerns in Albany. But logistical issues, including the ill-preparation of sanitation services, concessions and food vendors, and emergency medical services, served to create the potential for a humanitarian disaster of great proportions.

Medical services at the festival proved startlingly inadequate. In order to quell the protests of Bethel citizens in the lead up to the concert, the promoters fudged the numbers on the estimated attendees, telling local officials, including police, medical services, and the town board, that the concert was expected to see roughly 50,000 attendees.²⁹ Unfortunately, this inaccurate figure was also used in drawing up the initial plans for the concert's emergency medical services.³⁰ Woodstock Ventures hired William Abruzzi, MD, to head the EMS services for the festival.³¹ Abruzzi was a local practitioner with experience in "crowd medicine" and was non-judgmental towards drug use, aware that drugs such as marijuana and LSD would be in rampant use during the three days of peace and music.³² Abruzzi use the inaccurate figure of 50,000 attendees in his medical preparations, hiring an additional 18 physicians, 37 nurses, and 27 medical assistants to work the festival in eight-hour shifts over the three days.³³ This meant that around the clock, there would be at least two doctors and four nurses on duty. Additionally, local hospitals in nearby towns and counties were put on alert in the event that assistance was needed or more serious injuries required treatment. Unfortunately, these preparations would be insufficient to cope with the magnitude of the Woodstock Festival.

On August 14, 1969, one day before the concert began, Abruzzi made an aerial survey of the crowd descending on Yasgur's dairy farm. Immediately, he knew that 50,000 was a

²⁹ Kelly, Jack. "EMS at Woodstock." *Journal of Emergency Medical Services*. April 28, 2010. (accessed March 25, 2019).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

drastically inaccurate estimation, stating that he was “frightened in its aspects” and estimated the crowd to be near or over half a million people.³⁴ Abruzzi also stated that he feared “the greatest medical tragedy of our times.”³⁵ Aside from the high number of concert attendees and the prospect for the medical services to be overwhelmed by injuries, drug overdoses, and disease, unprecedented traffic jams on nearby highways and roads would compromise EMS service’s abilities to transport patients to nearby hospitals. Sullivan County Ambulance was providing two ambulances for the three-day concert, but traffic would make transportation slow, if not impossible.³⁶ Even some Woodstock attendees, recognizing the potential of the unfolding catastrophe, made their way to the hospital tent and first aid stations to offer their services.³⁷ Additionally, the US Army dispatched two Huey (UH-1D) helicopters and Air Force medics from West Point to assist in the transportation of patients.³⁸

In his post-concert report, Abruzzi estimates that the medical staff at Woodstock treated approximately 3,000 patients during the three-day concert, remarkably low numbers considering the estimated attendance of the Woodstock Festival was well over 400,000 people. Many medical treatments for the concert had to be improvised in order to cope with the number of attendees, with injuries often receiving rudimentary, yet surprisingly effective treatments. For example, in order to preserve the stock of bandages, minor foot lacerations were treated by wrapping and covering them with clothes and plastic bags rather than bandages, which were saved for more serious lacerations and injuries. There were two recorded fatalities, one from a tractor accident in which a sleeping teenager was accidentally run over and another due to an

³⁴ Kelly, Jack. "EMS at Woodstock." *Journal of Emergency Medical Services*.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

unconfirmed heroin overdose by a Marine.³⁹ According to the *Journal of Emergency Medical Services*, Abruzzi's post-concert medical report specifically identifies:

“...938 foot lacerations, along with 135 punctures and 346 other foot injuries. There were 23 epileptic seizures and 176 cases of asthma requiring therapy. Approximately 250 patients were airlifted out of the site. Despite of the fact that drinking water was sometimes scarce and daytime temperatures reached into the 90s, only 57 patients were treated for heat exhaustion. Although there were widespread and persistent rumors of one or more births at Woodstock, there's no evidence of a single birth on the festival grounds. Abruzzi reported one baby born in a car on the way to the festival and another born in a local hospital. The handling of drug cases proved particularly effective. Abruzzi reported 797 cases of “bad trips” that required care. But of those cases, only 72 were seen by a doctor, and only 28 were treated with medications. The vast majority responded to supportive therapy alone.”⁴⁰

Overall, Abruzzi's report concludes that despite the ill-preparedness of the medical staff and the potential disaster that could have unfolded, the civility of the concert attendees and the atmosphere of peace and love maintained a general tranquility at the concert, despite a lack of basic services, food, and water, thus preventing a humanitarian catastrophe from unfolding. Nevertheless, Woodstock left its mark in the field of medicine and EMS, with doctors noting the need for accurate estimations of concert attendees and the necessity for medical providers to be able to improvise their medical treatments and staffing plans.

Concessions and food vending proved to be an additional logistical obstacle the organizers failed to properly address. As Lang recalls:

"We originally thought locating a food vendor would be a no-brainer and that this would be a big profit center for us. As it turned out, the large food-vending companies like Restaurant Associates, which handled ballparks and arenas, didn't want to take on Woodstock. No one had ever handled food services for an event this size. They didn't want to put in the investment capital necessary to supply such a huge amount of food, on-

³⁹ Kelly, Jack. "EMS at Woodstock." *Journal of Emergency Medical Services*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

site kitchens, and personnel, plus transport everything upstate. And what if we didn't draw the crowds we projected?"⁴¹

Initially, it seemed that the producers would be successful in booking Nathan's hot dogs - the famous Coney Island vendor - to provide concessions for the festival. However, disagreements over staffing and wages soon drove a wedge between the food provider and the Woodstock producers, and when the location was moved from Woodstock to Sullivan County, Nathan's pulled out of negotiations entirely.⁴² With only two weeks left until the concert and food vendor not secured, the organizers were forced to hire a trio of amateur food vendors - Charles Baxter, Jeffrey Joerger, and Lee Howard - who operated a tiny company called Food for Love.⁴³ The influx of 400,000 people to the Woodstock Festival swiftly overwhelmed the vendors, leading to long lines, food shortages, and angry concertgoers. After the vendors raised the price of hot dogs to \$1, the crowd retaliated by burning down two of the concession stands.⁴⁴ Sullivan County, responding to the food shortages, airlifted 10,000 sandwiches, water, fruits, and canned goods to the festival.⁴⁵ The most iconic food of the Woodstock Festival was granola,⁴⁶ which Wavy Gravy and members of the Hog Farm commune began passing out for free to many of the hungry concertgoers when the food ran low on Saturday, August 16. By the end of the weekend, despite the food shortages, there were no serious incidents caused by the logistical issues suffered by the food concessions. The peace and music held everyone together.

⁴¹ Bramen, Lisa. "Woodstock-How to Feed 400,000 Hungry Hippies." *Smithsonian.com*. August 14, 2009. Accessed March 25, 2019.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

The aftermath of the Woodstock Festival saw a mixture of criticism and praise for the concert. Yasgur's farmlands were either largely trashed or turned to mud and the cleanup process took weeks. The media reaction was generally negative, with the *New York Times* published a blistering article in the immediate aftermath of the festival, writing that the festival was "an outrageous episode" and demanding to know "what kind of culture it is that can produce so colossal a mess?" But in a sudden reversal, the *New York Times* later published an article stating that the festival was "essentially a phenomenon of innocence... they came, it seems, to enjoy their own society, to exult in a life style that is its own declaration of independence..." As time progressed, Woodstock generally lost its negative stigmas and became the cultural phenomenon that it is known today. Woodstock was the highpoint of the hippie counterculture, a flashpoint for a generation of individuals who sought to make a statement about peace and love. The 1969 Woodstock Festival, despite the logistical problems, financial struggles, and poor weather conditions, proved to be a turning point in American history - a pure rejection of the precedents of past generations and the ushering in of a new era of thought and challenges for the future of the nation.

- James O'Donnell, Marist '19