

1969

**The Year of Living
Dangerously**

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THE YEAR OF LIVE

From the mud-soaked frolics of Woodstock in August to the mayhem of Altamont in December, two





ING DANGEROUSLY

ndmark festivals 40 years ago encapsulated the best and worst of the hippie generation. By *Sean O'Hagan*



The hippie dream flowers and dies: Woodstock, August 1969, and Altamont, 6 December 1969. Photographs by Burk Uzzle and courtesy of the Ronald Grant Archive

D

uke is waiting for me at the entrance to the Bethel Woods Centre for the Arts, near Woodstock, in upstate New York. He is not hard to spot: his snow-white hair and beard are both long and flowing and he is wearing an acid-bright tie-dye T-shirt, faded denims and plastic sandals. He resembles a reincarnated and even more rotund Jerry Garcia.

"You made it, man," he says, clasping my hand in the universal hippie handshake and embracing me in a gentle bear hug. He guides me over to a waiting golf cart. I climb on board and, with Duke at the wheel, we trundle over the brow of the hill and into rock history.

A few minutes later, we are standing at Hippie Ground Zero, the spot where the Woodstock festival stage once stood. The hill that rises gradually away from us looks smaller than I had imagined, a fraction of the acreage of Glastonbury, say, but it was here, on the now legendary weekend of 15-18 August 1969, that an estimated quarter of a million young people gathered, with the same number spread out though the surrounding woods and all along the car-choked roads nearby. On the second day of the festival, the traffic stretched back to the George Washington Bridge in New York City – two hours' drive and 90 miles away. As Arlo Guthrie announced from the stage, "The New York Thruway is closed, man. Ain't that far-out." And, for once, it really was.

Duke had travelled all the way from Texas with his best friend, arriving on the Thursday night to find more than 50,000 people already there. The stage was still being built and the fence around the site was still being erected. People lay on the grass, stoned, watching and waiting, while road crews fuelled on Blue Sunshine LSD worked frantically through the night. When it started to rain, the crowd retreated under the trees nearby; a portent of what was to come. "Me and my buddy drank some beer and smoked some weed," says Duke, grinning, "then we got separated in the crowd and I ain't seen him since."

Now approaching retirement age, Duke has been living in and around Bethel since that weekend 40 years ago. When the Centre for the Arts

lying in a corner of the field, part of the stanchions on which the stage was erected. Nearby, under a fluttering American flag, is a monument that looks like a tombstone for the hippie dream. In the centre of the field, a totem pole stands with the faces of three of the hippie fallen carved on it: Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Jerry Garcia. Everything else about the landscape, though, is neat and well-tended, fenced in and fenced off. There are paved car parks where tents once stood and you now have to pay to walk on the site of the world's most famous free festival. Yesterday's mass utopian moment has become today's hippie-themed heritage site.

There is something sad and sadly inevitable about the transformation but Duke is still flying the freak flag, still channelling the cosmic energy of that long gone moment. "It's still a sacred place," he says as we stand where Sly laid down his supercharged soul-funk, Santana whipped up a Latin-rock storm, and Hendrix reinterpreted The Star-Spangled Banner as an anthem for America's doomed youth, drafted to fight in Vietnam. "You can still feel the energy," says Duke. "I recently took David Crosby around the site. We stood right here and he looked up at the hill and said: 'Duke, I can feel it, man. The vibe is still here.'"

Woodstock has entered the public consciousness as the high watermark of hippie idealism – "Three Days of Peace & Music" – but it was an event that succeeded against almost insurmountable odds. Fraught with organisational and logistical difficulties, dogged by bad weather and chronic shortages of food, water and toilets, it was first declared a financial disaster then a human one.

It took place a year after violent anti-war protests had rocked the Chicago Democratic convention and a week after the Manson Family murders in Los Angeles. "Apart from the Moon landing the previous month, '68 and '69 were horrible years," says Country Joe McDonald, one of the performers most tied to the Woodstock myth, who plays a 40th anniversary show at the Bethel Woods Centre on 15 August. "The news was all about riots, war and governments falling. You had Vietnam escalating and the Manson killings on prime-time news. It was not a great time and it suddenly seemed a long way from '67 and the so-called Summer of Love."

"People are cynical about Woodstock now," says photographer Elliott Landy, then, as now, a Woodstock native, whose images of the festival have become part of its enduring mythology, "but the single

most important thing to remember is that people who believed in peace and love were allowed to be together to practise their beliefs. The New York State Police were taken by surprise by the sheer numbers and, by then, were too late to control it or stop it. That's a big reason why it worked as it did. But you cannot just leave a vast sea of humanity to its own goodwill unless the people therein have the values of goodwill – and love, peace and togetherness – in the first place."



For all that, the vast audience that created the original Woodstock vibe, who descended on the hamlets and scattered farms of Bethel, frightening the livestock and angering the locals, were drawn there primarily by the promise of great music from some of the biggest acts of the time, including Hendrix, the Who, Sly and the Family Stone, Jefferson Airplane and, playing only their second gig, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.

Tim Kelly, a trim, middle-aged man who now runs his own roofing firm, has returned to the site for the first time since he came here as a 15-year-old rock fan in 1969. The first thing he saw then was a bunch of guys pushing part of the security fence down and a huge crowd streaming through. "I arrived at the actual moment it became a free festival," he says, laughing. "That's one of my big memories, that and Creedence Clearwater Revival's set. They hit the first note of Born on the Bayou on Saturday and this mass of humanity rose to their feet as one. It was just awesome. Me and my friends were blown away by that. The power of rock'n'roll."

To middle America, watching the television news, Woodstock was more than just another rock festival, though. It made the news first as a social phenomenon, the scale of which seemed almost unbelievable: nearly half a million kids, smoking dope, bathing naked and listening to loud rock music that seemed designed to soundtrack the youth revolution. To the *New York Times*, it was "an outrage" and an affront to American val-

'I TOOK DAVID CROSBY TO THE SITE. THE VIBE IS STILL HERE, HE SAID'

opened last year, he landed every ageing hippie's dream gig. His title is "Site Interpreter", which means he's the official tour guide for the Woodstock festival theme park. "They should excavate the site," he says as we wander around. "They'd find all kinds of artefacts in the earth. Everything that was buried by the bulldozers: sleeping bags, flags, shoes, T-shirts, bottles, hash pipes. It's all in the earth, man, relics of another time."

He points out two huge lumps of concrete



Above: Jimi Hendrix plays on the Monday morning – only 35,000 were left to see this historic set, including a radical reworking of The Star-Spangled Banner. Below: the aftermath out front, and Janis Joplin with champagne backstage.



[Laughing] Financially, this is a total disaster.”
TV reporter: “But you look so happy.”

In 1969, Art Kornfeld, at 26, was one of the most successful and hippest young guns in the music business, the writer of more than 75 hit songs and the youngest ever vice-president of Capitol Records. He had become good friends with another ambitious young hipster, Michael Lang, who managed rock groups and shared his fondness for grade A marijuana. They were planning to build a recording studio in Woodstock, where Kornfeld had a second home.

“We were talking and smoking one night in my apartment in New York and I had this kind of vision,” says Kornfeld, who, at 66, remains an ebullient character with a neat line in shameless self-mythology. “Suddenly I didn’t see a studio but a huge gathering. I saw the possibility for something new, something that would reflect all this new music that was coming through, these new ideas, this sense of a change – social and political – that was in the air. That’s why I was so blown away when I saw the crowds at Woodstock, man. People thought I was stoned when I was talking to that TV guy but I wasn’t. I was shocked in a kind of shamanistic way because I had seen it already a whole year before.”

This may be so but, from the off, the event was conceived as a profit-making three-day concert that would feature the best groups of the era. In February 1969, Kornfeld and Lang had ▶

ues of decency and duty. The parents, concluded a mean-spirited editorial, were to blame.

Then, when food and water ran out and the rains came, Woodstock made the news again as a disaster zone. “HIPPIES MIRED IN SEA OF MUD” ran the headline to another unapologetically gleeful front page story.

“The heavy rain started just as Joe Cocker finished his set,” remembers Becky Sandmann, from Wilmington, Delaware, who has come back to visit the site with her teenage 60s-obsessed son. “Then it became the world’s biggest mud bath. Local kids with tractors were charging \$10 to drag cars out of the mud. The thing is, though, a lot of people were

prepared for the rain. You don’t hear so much about that. I mean, we were hippies but practical ones. We had water, food, waterproof clothes. We were seasoned campers. We only heard it was a disaster area when we rang our parents afterwards.” For the organisers, though, the festival became a disaster as soon as it became free.

Flashback to Saturday 16 August 1969, backstage at Woodstock. Artie Kornfeld, co-organiser of the festival, is being interviewed for TV news.

TV reporter: “Mr Kornfeld, is this a financial success?”

Kornfeld: “No, man, it’s a financial disaster.”

visited the Manhattan offices of a company called Challenge International, which was run by two Wall Street mavericks called John Roberts and Joel Rosenman. The previous year Roberts and Rosenman had placed an advert in the *New York Times* that read, "YOUNG MEN WITH UNLIMITED CAPITAL LOOKING FOR INTERESTING, LEGITIMATE INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND BUSINESS IDEAS."

They had then spent months sifting through more than 5,000 replies, none of which captured their keen entrepreneurial imaginations. Then two stoned-looking hippies came knocking on their door with a vision of love, peace, music... and big bucks. A few hours later, Kornfeld and Lang left with a guarantee of \$165,000 to stage a three-day festival that would cater to around 50,000 punters, each of whom would pay \$6 per day. From the off, there was big money riding on Woodstock. At one point, the Beatles and Dylan were mooted as headliners, but, by then, the once Fab Four were disintegrating back in Blighty and Bob, ironically, was holed up in a mansion in the small town of Woodstock in the woods in upstate New York, deep in retreat from fame, hard drugs and his own carefully created mythology.

The first big problem for Kornfeld and Lang was finding a suitable site not far from New York. The event was due to take place in Saugerties until residents objected to the event being staged in or near the town. Then, with posters already printed announcing a new venue – a disused industrial park in Wallkill, 35 miles south of Woodstock – another 11th-hour protest by locals led to a second successful injunction. Enter Elliot Tiber, a 34-year-old interior designer from Brooklyn whose holidays were spent helping his family run the struggling El Monaco motel near White Lake, just east of Bethel Woods. When Tiber heard of the Wallkill debacle, he rang Lang and invited him to base his operations at the motel, adding almost as an afterthought that, as president of the Bethel Chamber of Commerce, he already had a permit to run a yearly arts festival, albeit on a small scale. (Until now, Tiber has been the forgotten man of Woodstock, but his book, *Taking Woodstock*, has just been

'WITH HALF A MILLION PEOPLE, SOMEONE WILL SHIT ON YOUR LAWN'

turned into a film by Ang Lee, director of *Brokeback Mountain*.)

It was Tiber who put Lang and Kornfeld in touch with the late Max Yasgur, the local farmer from nearby Bethel Woods on whose land the festival took place. In *Woodstock: Three Days That Rocked the World*, one of a number of new books marking the anniversary, Max's son, Sam, explains his father's *raison d'être*. "The summer of '69 was a very wet summer. We couldn't get hay

in the barn. When you have that many cattle and you're going to have to put up enough hay to get 'em through the winter..." In other words, Kornfeld and Lang were the answer to this struggling farmer's dream. His neighbours, though, were incensed, fearing a hippie invasion that would damage their land. But the extraordinary thing about Woodstock was that there was very little trouble; even when the rains came, the crowd responded by caring for each other.

"The hippies were polite, man," says Duke. "It was all 'please' and 'thank you' and 'sorry to bother you', and that won over a lot of the locals who let them use their phones and showers and gave them water. But we left a mess, man, an unholy mess. I stayed around with the crew of volunteers who cleaned up afterwards, and it wasn't all mud. There was a hell of a lot of shit, man. I spent a lot of time explaining to locals that if you have 500,000 people in one place, somebody's going to shit on your lawn."

As it turns out, it wasn't just the locals who were worried about trouble. Kornfeld tells me that in the months leading up to the festival, he travelled the country, trying to make contact with every left-wing revolutionary underground

group in America – the Black Panthers, the SDS, the Weathermen, the Yippies. "I invited them to come along for free in the spirit of peace and love, not violent revolution. They all showed up, too," he says, laughing his strange stoner laugh. "I remember a huge gang of Black Panthers arriving on motorcycles, and, right away, they started up with some serious attitude – 'No white middle-class mofo is going to tell us where to park our bikes.' I said: 'Listen, guys, you can park your bikes where you want. Have a nice day.' That's all it took. Our entire security was 1,600 peaceful volunteers. No guns. No anything. We had a simple policy: no confrontation. And for three days, man, it worked. It really worked."

When the crowd grew restless, performers were cajoled to play impromptu sets. During one lengthy gap, Country Joe strolled on stage with an acoustic guitar and sang his *I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag*, leading 500,000 people in his *Fuck Cheer* – "Gimme an F, gimme a U...". Did he sense trouble simmering? "Oh yeah. There were a few troublemakers, all right. There was this militant group from Manhattan, The Motherfuckers. They torched a hamburger van. I guess they didn't like hippie capitalists. Their whole trip was, 'It's a free festival, motherfucker, and that applies to your hamburgers too.'"

It may have been one of this gang then, who, high on bad acid, pulled a gun on Artie Kornfeld



12 JANUARY
Led Zeppelin release their self-titled debut LP.

30 JANUARY

The Beatles play their last-ever gig, on top of the Apple building.



25 MARCH

John Lennon and Yoko Ono stage a bed-in at Amsterdam's Hilton hotel.



23 MAY

The Who release their "rock opera" *Tommy*.

1969 A YEAR IN THE LIFE



20 JANUARY
Richard Nixon is sworn in as president of the United States.



3 FEBRUARY
Yasser Arafat becomes leader of the PLO.



2 MAY

The QE2 makes its maiden voyage from Southampton to New York.

2 JUNE

The Italian Job is released in UK cinemas.



3 JULY

Brian Jones is found dead. Two days later, the Rolling Stones play a free concert in Hyde Park. The Hells Angels provide security.



15 AUGUST

The Woodstock festival gets under way on Max Yasgur's farm.



20 SEPTEMBER

Sugar Sugar, by cartoon band the Archies, reaches No 1 in the US.



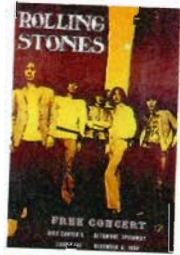
30 AUGUST

Bob Dylan makes his live comeback at the Isle of Wight festival.



1 NOVEMBER

Elvis Presley returns to the top of the US charts with Suspicious Minds.



6 DECEMBER

The Rolling Stones put on a free concert at the Altamont Speedway in California.



8 JULY

The US begins withdrawal of its troops from South Vietnam.



20 JULY

Neil Armstrong becomes the first man to walk on the Moon.



9 AUGUST

Charles Manson and his followers commit the Tate-LaBianca murders in Los Angeles.



14 OCTOBER

The heptagonal 50p coin replaces the 10 shilling note.

10 NOVEMBER

Sesame Street premieres on US television.



in the backstage area. "I was chatting to David Crosby and Stephen Stills when this crazy revolutionary dude suddenly appears and sticks a gun to my forehead," says Kornfeld, still sounding freaked out. "He's shouting, 'I'm going to blow you away, you fuckin' hippie capitalist pig!' It looked bad, then Stills's roadie, who was a big guy, jumped him from the back and took him down. But it was scary, man. I thought, 'I'm going to die right there in the middle of all this peace and love.'"

In the end, only two people died at Woodstock: one kid got run over accidentally by a tractor, another overdosed on heroin. "The audience was mainly middle-class kids with long hair from New York," says Country Joe. "Most people were there to dig the music and to party. The audience wasn't dissatisfied, man, the audience was happy. Abbie didn't get that."

Abbie Hoffman was the arch political prankster of America's late 60s radical left, a ubiquitous and, to some, intensely annoying presence at every hippie gathering. A veteran of the Chicago Convention riots and a defendant in the ensuing "Chicago Eight" conspiracy trial, Hoffman gate-crashed the festival with his fellow Yippie activists intent on "liberating" Woodstock from the hippie capitalists. He even inveigled \$65,000 out of the organisers on the very eve of the event with his threats to turn it into a rerun of Chicago. With

the money, he hired a printing press to disseminate the Yippie message of mischievous revolution to the bedraggled masses and set up a crash tent for the inevitable hordes of drug casualties. Alongside another collective, the Hog Farm, who gave out free food, the Yippies, ironically, helped keep Woodstock peaceful. "There's no morality here," Hoffman told a journalist. "The helicopters bring champagne for Janis Joplin's band, and people are sick in the field. I'm the conscience of the movement." He had a point.

Surprisingly, even Kornfeld agrees. "I loved Abbie, man. He was the Thomas Jefferson of the underground. A dissenting voice. The only thing is, he never shut up. He had some kind of power, though, the power of the court jester to say what people needed to hear but didn't want to hear."

Ever the scene-stealer, Hoffman walked on stage during the Who's set and tried to make a speech drawing the audience's attention to the plight of his friend, John Sinclair, the jailed leader of the White Panther party and one-time manager of Detroit band the MC5. "I think this is a pile of shit while John Sinclair rots in prison," he shouted just before Pete Townshend's guitar caught him on the back of the head and sent him reeling into the crowd. "Fuck off my stage," screamed Townshend, adding: "The next person that walks across the stage is going to get killed. You can laugh but I mean it." Little was heard of

Hoffman at Woodstock after that.

In his entertaining and characteristically self-serving speed-written book, *Woodstock Nation*, Hoffman wrote in uncharacteristically humble fashion: "Two days ago (the day after the whole Woodstock thing was over) I realised I had badly misjudged the event... It might have been the green tab, the red one, the blue... the four joints, no food, hash, no sleep for five days ... whatever, I had a bummer. One of those rare trips when everything caves in... It culminated with a battle on stage with the Who. The battle symbolises my amity-emnity attitude towards that rock group in particular and the whole rock world in general."

That's Abbie's version anyway but, like his brief but dramatic onstage intervention, it does highlight the chasm that already existed between the radical hippie underground of the late 60s and the emerging rock superstar elite, and by extension, the mass audience that worshipped them. Of all the performers at Woodstock, Townshend, tortured proto-punk that he was, seems to have been the one least drawn to its ethos, seeing only chaos and disorder where others saw peace and harmony. "All those hippies wandering about thinking the world was going to be different from that day on," he said later. "As a cynical English arsehole, I walked though it all and felt like spitting on the lot of them..."

Country Joe, though, sees it differently. "I ▶



Pete Townshend and, silhouetted, Roger Daltrey during the Who's set.

Left: Country Joe McDonald plays his solo acoustic set, top, and fans on the road to Yasgur's farm.

saw Townshend pull up in his limo, then do his set, and leave. That's the sum total of his experience of Woodstock. He played at it but he wasn't really part of it."

Therein lies the ultimate irony of the Woodstock nation – the distance between the utopian ideals and the rock groups who inspired, often voiced, and supposedly symbolised them; the distance, in fact, between the suddenly exalted rock performers and the increasingly passive audiences who idolised them. And after the violence of Chicago, as Peter Doggett wrote in his book, *There's a Riot Going On: Revolutionaries, Rock Stars and the Rise and Fall of '60s' Counter-Culture*, "it was impossible to envisage a mass assembly of the counterculture without cynicism and even fear". As the revolutionary ideals of the underground dissipated, though, the rock gig became less of a truly communal event, and more of an old-style form of entertainment.

Peter Coyote, an actor, writer and veteran activist – though he hates the word – helped set up the Diggers, the most celebrated of all San Francisco's many radical collectives. "We put on shows at Golden Gate Park with the Dead and Jefferson Airplane, and the groups were part of the community they emerged out of, not some superstars. We had multiple stages, diversions, communal entertainment. There is something slightly fascist about sitting in a huge auditorium focusing all the energy on one group far away on stage. It reduces the audience to pure passive consumers. There's nothing radical about that."

That distance and passivity would be illustrated in the most darkly dramatic terms just over three months later when another huge rock festival took place, this one in northern California, an event that has since come to be seen as the death of the peace and love era that Woodstock so symbolised. No other group, not even the Who, illustrated the distance between performer and audience like the Rolling Stones. By 1969, the Stones' outlaw attitude had shaded into a kind of cavalier, almost aristocratic arrogance and, more often than not, their audience was on the receiving end of it.

The Stones toured America on the back of *Let*

it Bleed, a darkly powerful album with tracks such as *Midnight Rambler* – about a deranged serial killer – and *Gimme Shelter*, which told of "a storm a-threatenin'" wherein rape and murder would be "just a shot away". In July, founder member Brian Jones had become the first rock'n'roll casualty of the era, drowning in his swimming pool after taking a lethal cocktail of drink and drugs. As the tour rumbled though America – with Jagger singing *Sympathy For the Devil* in a magician's cloak and pentagram-embroidered vest – the news broke of the arrest of Charles Manson and his so-called Family, a collective-cum-cult who had descended from the hills of the Californian desert to torture and murder their victims. Here was America's hippie nightmare made murderously real.

From within the radical counterculture came rumblings of discontent, mainly centred on the high cost of tickets – seven or eight dollars

contacted Woodstock promoter Michael Lang, who, together with the Grateful Dead's manager, Rock Scully, began flying around California in a helicopter trying to find another suitable outdoor venue. Their frantic search ended just days before the concert date and, on 5 December, Californian radio stations announced that the show would take place the next day at the Altamont Speedway, way out in the harsh and isolated desert scrublands of northern California.

Altamont was the inverse of Woodstock, although the two had much in common: a last-minute relocation to a different site, camera crews recording the event for feature films (*Woodstock* and *Gimme Shelter*), three groups – CSNY, Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead – and the presence of potential troublemakers intent on puncturing the illusion of universal peace and love. At Altamont, though, the troublemakers did not even have to contend with the onsite security; they were the onsite security.

It is still unclear how the Hells Angels were invited to provide security for the Rolling Stones free concert. The music writer Stanley Booth later recalled in his chillingly evocative book, *The True Adventures of the Roll-*

ing Stones, that Rock Scully met the Stones at their concert in Oakland, California in November 1969 and insisted "The Angels are righteous dudes. They carry themselves with honour and dignity."

The infamous biker gang was a fixture at rock gigs on the West Coast and often assumed the role of guardian angels, having forged an uneasy alliance with groups including the Dead and Steppenwolf as well as Ken Kesey's travelling troupe of fabled peaceniks, the Merry Pranksters. The Hells Angels were not peaceniks, though, nor pranksters. In his history of the Grateful Dead, *A Long Strange Trip*, Dennis McNally describes a meeting between Sam Cutler, the Stones' tour manager, and two Bay Area Hells Angels, Sweet William and Frisco Pete, in which the fateful contract was drawn up between the world's ▶

'AS A CYNICAL ENGLISH ARSEHOLE, I FELT LIKE SPITTING ON THEM ALL'

instead of the usual four or five. "Can the Rolling Stones actually need all that money?" asked the influential music journalist Ralph Gleason, adding: "Paying six or seven dollars for an hour of the Stones a quarter of a mile away because the artists demand such outrageous fees says a very bad thing to me about the artists' attitude to the public. It says they despise their audience."

Though the Stones had intended playing a show that lasted only half an hour, but were convinced otherwise by incensed promoters, Gleason's very public criticism stung Mick Jagger. At a press conference in New York in late November, he announced that the group would play a free show in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco on 6 December. Unfortunately, no permission had been granted for the concert and it was almost immediately denied. The Stones then



The Rolling Stones watch from the stage as Altamont spirals out of control. Left: the Jefferson Airplane, top, and Jagger, photographed by Eamonn McCabe.

“baddest” band and the world’s baddest biker gang.

“We don’t police things,” Sweet William said. “We’re not a security force. We go to concerts to enjoy ourselves and have fun.”

“Well, what about helping people out – giving directions and things?” asked Cutler.

“Sure, we can do that.”

When Sam asked how they might be paid, Sweet William replied, “We like beer.” The deal, McNally wrote, was done for 100 cases.

From the start, the Altamont festival was a disaster in waiting. The stage was too low, the crowd too close, the Angels too wired on beer and bad acid. Such was the rush to stage the festival that there were no food or drink outlets, and few toilets.

“It was a strange and ominous place,” says Eamonn McCabe, the *Guardian* photographer who attended Altamont as a 20-year-old, having pitched up in San Francisco to study film. “I arrived quite early in the day and it was so packed and so claustrophobic. I was intent on filming the Stones on my little Super 8 but it took me hours to push my way through to the front of the stage. I got there for Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young and it all seemed quite peaceful. Then, during the Airplane’s set, I saw this kid being attacked by Hells Angels. He was a big guy, obviously off his head, and he started stripping off. The nudity seemed to anger them and they waded in. I tried to run like everybody else, but there was no room to run.”

Jefferson Airplane’s Marty Balin was beaten unconscious when he jumped into the crowd to try and stop the Angels pummeling another hippie kid with pool cues. He was the only musician who physically intervened. When the Stones arrived by helicopter in mid-afternoon, Jagger was punched in the face by a spooked-out kid screaming, “I hate you! I hate you!” The backstage area looked like a field hospital as casualties were carried in, unconscious, and announcements were made over the PA for medical assistance.

“Fights were breaking out everywhere, one hair-raising thing after another,” wrote *Rolling Stone* writer David Dalton years later in his scathing essay *Altamont: An Eyewitness Account*. “Jerry

Garcia’s old school bus became the Dead’s dressing room. Jerry was shaking and huddling with Mountain Girl on the floor of the bus through the worst of the fighting – the Hells Angels and guns and pool cues and all of that. They’d arrived fully medicated – gummy opium, mescaline and half a key of rolled joints, but all the dope in the world wasn’t going to help a bum like this.”

Events reached their deadly climax when a young black man, Meredith Hunter, taunted by the Angels until he produced a small pistol and waved it in the air, was set upon, knifed several times in the neck and shoulders and then beaten to death while the Stones played on unawares.

“What I remember is that as the darkness fell, the danger seemed to increase,” says McCabe. “The drama was always going to be the Stones. Mick going through his Satanic stage. But when the violence started erupting all around him, he suddenly seemed so small and vulnerable.”

‘THE VIOLENCE ERUPTED AND JAGGER SEEMED SO SMALL AND VULNERABLE’

By then, the Grateful Dead had already fled the site in a helicopter, refusing to play, such was the fear that gripped them in their hallucinogenic haze. The Stones soon surrendered the stage and did likewise, their entourage piling into the choppers that awaited them. They landed minutes afterwards, shell-shocked, in a LA airport terminal. “Mick sat on a wooden bench...,” wrote Stanley Booth. “He was bewildered and scared, unable to comprehend what had happened – who the Hells Angels were or why they were killing people at his free peace and love show... ‘I’d rather have the cops,’ Mick said.”

Like Woodstock, the Altamont free festival was also filmed for posterity and when directors the Maysles brothers played back their footage they found that the killing of Meredith Hunter had also been captured on camera. The resulting

movie, *Gimme Shelter*, remains the most chilling document of a tumultuous time, as disturbing and shocking still as the Woodstock film is celebratory. After Altamont, as Stanley Booth later put it, “the Stones did comedy”. Well, not quite, but they did sail close to rock cabaret at times.

Forty years on, it seems extraordinary that Woodstock and Altamont – one the dream, the other the nightmare – were less than four months apart. “People like bookends,” says Country Joe McDonald. “Woodstock and Altamont seem like bookends to the great social experiment of the late 60s. But, really, they weren’t. Altamont went wrong for practical reasons – a bad site, bad organisation, greed, arrogance, stupidity. Woodstock worked because people didn’t feel used. If you want to attach big social significance to Woodstock, I really don’t see anything negative about it. It was progressive, gender-wise, race-wise. It was a triumph of technology. A template for every successful festival since.”

He takes a deep breath. “And what’s so bad about peace and love and looking out for each other? But it frightened people then, and still does now. The conservative right still blame it for every damn thing. Well, take a look around you. The alternative isn’t looking so great right now, is it? For me, Woodstock was never *the* beginning; it was *a* beginning. Real change takes time.”

He stops and laughs, as if to himself. “Then again, it’s 40 years on and I can’t believe that I’m still getting mileage out of it. I mean, what a fucking gift!” **OMM**

WATCH ONLINE



Exclusive: to watch Eamonn McCabe’s previously unseen footage of the Altamont concert go to guardian.co.uk/theobserver/musicmonthly