

Chapter 2

BEING AT WOODSTOCK: THE MUSIC OF ALIENATION

It's a free concert from now on. That doesn't mean that anything goes....The one major thing you have to remember...is that the man next to you is your brother, and you'd damn well better treat each other that way because if you don't, then we blow the whole thing, but we've got it right there.

— “Chip” Monck, Woodstock announcer

Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky,
With one hand waving free...

— Bob Dylan, “Mr. Tambourine Man”

The call to Woodstock in 1969 was in some ways a reprise of the call to the Democratic Convention in Chicago that radical activists had issued the previous summer. Nearly all anti-war groups and politicians had opposed the Chicago rally as an immature, counter-productive attack on the Democratic Party just as its anti-war wing seemed to be gaining ground. They were wrong: by “bringing the war back home,” as they paraphrased the title of a Dylan album, the few thousand demonstrators exposed the Democrats as a pro-war party and struck a powerful blow at public support for the war. As in the Tet Offensive earlier that year, the authorities won the battle after a brutal counter-attack, but lost the war by revealing what victory would cost. Before Woodstock, Movement leaders dismissed it as an escapist waste of political energy, but it too fundamentally challenged and changed America's perception of itself and its war.

At 16, I had been a little too young to understand what the coming Chicago demonstrations were all about, but when Mayor Daley's cops ran wild on television I instantly learned all I needed to know. “The whole world's watching,” the demonstrators chanted as the police waded into the crowd on Michigan Avenue. I sure was watching, and so were millions of others who could

say, "Hey, those people look like me, and those cops are beating the shit out of them! This is war — pick a side!" Michigan Avenue was already hallowed ground: the Rolling Stones' "2120 S. Michigan Avenue" honored the Chess brothers' studios where Chuck Berry crossed over from the rhythm and blues charts. With the police riot it also became one of our key political addresses, one of the places where the war ought to have ended but, to our rage, didn't. Now I was 17 and out of high school, aggressively anti-war in every waking hour and eager to be where the action was. This summer, the word went out, it would be at Woodstock.

* * *

It was hot and bright in the hamlet of White Lake, New York, that Friday afternoon. I gunned the throttle on my Triumph 500 as I eased it down the county road between miles of backed-up cars, feeling like Peter Fonda in *Easy Rider*: menacing (in my aviator glasses), rootless (with my belongings strapped to the sissy bar), and cool (by virtue of the beautiful blond sitting behind me). Actually, at five and a half feet I suppose I didn't look too menacing, and I was hardly a footloose roamer, since I was working two jobs to pay my parents back for the bike before college started. As for being cool, my passion for the blond hadn't gotten past kissing. But my little lies troubled me not a wit. They were chicken-feed compared to the giant fraud of America at war under the banner of freedom, and I had met nobody yet who would want to call me on them whom I would recognize as having the anti-war credentials to do so. I didn't know yet the propensity of the left to attack itself. At Woodstock, the whole point was to accept as comrades people who said, just by being there, that they were for you.

My harmless fictions were of a piece with the Woodstock Music and Arts Fair, which was nowhere near the hip village where Bob Dylan, his Band, and many other musicians had their basement studios. The four young promoters — two silver spoons and two hustling hippies — who planned the concert to generate money and publicity for a studio in Woodstock had known from the start that the village couldn't accommodate the 50,000 people they hoped to attract. So they went shopping for a nearby site, backed by a bank's line of credit, which was covered by \$3 million that one of them had coming in a few years from a trust fund set up by his grandfather (who was, appropriately enough, a drug mogul). The promoters first tried Wallkill, 30 miles south of

Woodstock. After the town board succumbed to local protest and withdrew its approval a month before the festival, they rushed another 45 miles away to the fields of dairyman Max Yasgur, who had called in response to their public plea for help. Max was angry that Wallkill had rejected the kids; letting them “sit back and groove,” as Jimi Hendrix would say, on 600 fallow acres for three sunny and rainy days would bring him \$125,000 and them a measure of justice.

Throughout its travels, the festival retained Woodstock’s name, so that the whispering campaign about Dylan’s first appearance since the accident could draw a crowd. In the end, neither Dylan nor the other rumored big names, the Rolling Stones and the Beatles, showed up — John Lennon’s counter-offer of the Plastic Ono Band was mercifully ignored — but drawing a crowd turned out to be the least of the promoters’ worries. Over half a million young people swarmed into White Lake, and probably just as many were turned back by state police even before the promoters went on the air to ask people to stay home. Fences and ticket-gates were swept away after New York City withdrew permission for off-duty police service. The security force consisted of a small “heavy” (i.e. armed) guard for the back-stage safe, and a hundred spaced-out troops from the legendary Hog Farm, whose choice of weaponry was seltzer bottles and cream-pies.

So half a million people spent the weekend together in increasingly desperate conditions without society’s indispensable barriers against each other’s selfishness. Yet we were almost uniformly infused with a sense of safety, care, and brotherhood. The promoters’ partnership disintegrated even as their miracle became apparent. The two straights frantically wrote checks — a total of \$3 million, which was never quite recouped despite album and movie sales — to keep the show going, the food coming, and the sewage buried, while the two freaks took acid and dug it all as they nonchalantly managed the music. By Sunday night, all four had flown the coop (the freaks literally, by their new favored mode of transport, the helicopters that brought in the acts after the roads were jammed), leaving the Nation to fend for itself with a small network of caretakers, some paid, most not.

On that first afternoon, the crowd was amazed and heartened by its own size as it flowed toward the farm. But only when you came up to the ridge that looked over the long slope down to

the stage did the shock set in. People first murmured in awe and then roared with approval as they contemplated a nation to which they could really belong. To be one of the handful in your school to confront authority as a political act, to be one of the angry young people scattered in your town among adults and adult-likes, to renounce the mainstream but feel foolish because you couldn't express why, and then, unexpectedly, to see this! A sea of people like you and with you, filling the hillside in bright colors, freaky clothes, and the freak-flag itself, long, wild hair that usually earned a hostile or sarcastic stare but that here was a badge of honor. The three days and nights passed in a blur of friendly exchanges, of sharing everything that came into your hands, of feeling for once that you weren't a stranger, of feeling that when you left with the music of alienation and revolution ringing in your ears, you would always have energy and certainty for the task ahead.

People soon stopped asking about Dylan and the Stones, since it was hard to imagine the music being any better...although we could have been spared the token tribute to globalism that was Ravi Shankar and his droning sitar, which everyone had to pretend to dig even though to most people raised on western music it sounded like fingernails being drawn across a blackboard...and the cotton candy of Sha-Na-Na, the Columbia students spoofing the hoodlum gangs and do-woop groups of the '50s who had been the glue for a restless consciousness that emerged in the '60s as a serious challenge to the ruling culture. But the others I can recall, most for better and a few for worse, were the embodiment of the complex Woodstock Nation: its teachers, its cheerleaders, its spirit and power, its diversity, its casualties, and its essence.

Teachers

Richie Havens stood awfully alone on the giant stage, the first act on the first afternoon. He had only a barely audible conga player, another African-American, to keep him company. The Woodstock movie picks out a black face for every few seconds of crowd shots, but in reality it was 99 percent pure whitebread. You could blame that on the setting. How many blacks had the crazed nonchalance to hitch-hike through rural America or get off a bus in upstate New York? But the real reason was the promoters' accurate reading of our Nation. We could appreciate but never truly connect with the acts that blacks would have come for: James Brown, who fought his way back on stage each night, throwing off the glitter-

ing capes in which his handlers wrapped him so he could “say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud”; B. B. King, whose biting guitar and licentious lyrics captured the irrepressible black pride of an earlier era; or even Motown, Atlantic, and Stax/Volt cross-over stars like Smokey Robinson, Aretha Franklin, and Wilson Pickett. In fact, all the black performers at Woodstock had largely white followings: Richie Havens had the folkies, Sly and his Family Stone had the good-time crowd, and Jimi Hendrix made his mark only after trading the chitlin’ circuit for electric ladyland.

Havens was tall and somber, dressed in an African robe and missing lots of teeth. Obviously over 30, he was just as obviously someone to trust, a sympathetic but demanding teacher. He attacked his well-worn guitar and vocal chords, asking us: “Hey, lookie yonder, tell me what’s that you see, marching to the Korean war? Looks like handsome Johnny with his rifle in his hand...” Listing the series of wars America had sent Johnny off to implied that war was simply a recurring insanity, with new excuses but similar appeals to young men’s sense of immortality. Richie never mentioned Vietnam, making his point even clearer. He infused the song with abandon, trying to end the war right there, and then stumbled off the stage in a sweaty trance, having given us a scary image of total aliveness as a means to change and an end in itself, setting the tone for the next three days and, if we were lucky, the rest of our lives. The stage managers, who had prevailed upon him to open the concert because the scheduled act was hopelessly mired in traffic, pushed him back out for an encore. There was still nobody to follow him.

Searching for a reluctant Tim Hardin in the performers’ area later that afternoon, one of the stage managers got a pleasant surprise. The hell with Hardin, who was scared by the size of the crowd: that was Jon Sebastian, late of the Lovin’ Spoonful, wandering around with his guitar, looking for old friends to critique his new solo songs. He found some, because he was announced to the crowd and politely but firmly muscled onto the stage even as he protested that it was months too soon. Jon too was older than us and served as a friendly voice of experience. At first his nasal ironies grated on me as he recovered from his shock and felt his way into his new songs. But soon I could hear the old fun and simple wisdom of the Spoonful as he sang about our children saying: “Hey, hey, pa, my girlfriend’s only three. She’s got her own

videophone and she's takin' LSD. And now that we're best friends, she wants to give some to me." The song ended with, "But what's the matter, pa, why're you turning green? Can it be that you can't live up to your dream?" Jon wasn't denouncing our hypocrisy in renouncing our parents' limits when we'd have to provide some ourselves someday, but rather challenging us as only a friend could to be thoughtful. He left the stage after that song, shouting that we could live up to our dream, that we doing just that right then.

Cheerleaders

Country Joe McDonald was sandwiched between Havens and Sebastian on the Friday show that was so smooth out front but so hectic backstage. Not expecting to perform with his Fish until later in the weekend, he too was set upon by the stage managers, who found him a beat-up guitar, a piece of rope for a neck-strap, and a match-book for a pick. San Francisco was written all over him as he sauntered to the microphone in a dilapidated western fringe jacket, a tie-dyed band holding back an unkempt mane, and his haggard face telling of too many late nights and too much LSD. He stopped in the center of the stage and took dead aim at American culture and politics; it was a lethal shot.

Country Joe spoofed the phony loyalties we'd been raised to cherish, leading the crowd in an irreverent chant that let us renounce the pouring of our hearts into sports teams rather than real causes: "Gimme an F...a U...a C...a K. What's that spell?" Then, he led us in his anti-war anthem, whose verses exhort all Americans to get behind the war — come on, big strong men: Uncle Sam needs your help again; come on, mothers and fathers: be the first one on your block to have your boy come home in a box; come on, Wall Street: there's plenty good money to be made, supplying the army with the tools of the trade; come on, generals: the only good commie is one that's dead. The chorus asks "what are we fighting for?" and answers "ain't no time to wonder why — Whoopie! We're all gonna die." Tongue in cheek, he achieved what Richie Havens achieved heart on sleeve, binding the crowd in a consensus against the war and the war culture. He joked that we had to sing louder if we wanted to stop the war, and in a way he was right: the stronger our disaffection, the sooner the ruling culture would have to quit. It couldn't keep sacrificing hundreds of kids a week in Vietnam if the entire generation was singing along with Country Joe. The war was over when he sang that

song and got that response, but like a fatally wounded buffalo it staggered along awhile under its own momentum.

Canned Heat, a purposely scruffy, purposefully rough-edged group from California, had two distinct cheers to perform when it was their turn later in the weekend. These were embodied in their two biggest songs, "Goin' Up the Country" and "Refried Boogie." The first called on people to reject the System, even if they didn't go as far as heading for a commune "up the country," and the second called on them simply to express themselves, to leave the joyless and join the joyful wherever they were. "Goin' Up the Country" contained all the tension the counter-culture felt when it had to choose between rebellion and flight, between protest politics and mind-expanding drugs. By singing, "we might even leave the USA," rather than "we will leave the USA," the Heat was saying that the decision was personal, that no resolution of the tension was necessary as long as the consciousness was there. "Refried Boogie" went a step further and just let the tension go, as the players took turns climbing up on top of a droning five-second riff coined 20 years before by bluesman John Lee Hooker, and blasting out extended solos.

After a searing guitar adventure on high treble by Henry Vestine, the Wild Man from the tame Washington suburb of Takoma Park, came a more meditative interlude by Alan Wilson, the Blind Owl, who used the whining slide chords of blues guitar giant Elmore James. Then the band abandoned the stage to bass player Larry Taylor, the Mole, for an audacious act of self-expression even by the Heat's standards: a one-hour excursion on the mono-toned bass. The Mole caressed his four strings into frenetic chords (a path-breaking feat itself), let them subside into near-silence, and burst forth again, with each cycle ratcheting up the energy and shortening the rest. The pulsing of the bass driven through massive amplification, the kids running down the hill and leaping onto the mud-slide left by earlier rains, the dope being passed around in the baking sun (and the Mole had probably delved a bit himself), the anticipation of the coming crescendo and the magical moment when the band would come back on and, at a nod from the Mole, slam back into the riff that was still embedded in everyone's brain despite an hour's gap, the obvious joy of creation that had seized the Mole, the awareness that you would never see anything quite like this again and that nobody

but your people could understand it anyway — all this built up into an communal ecstasy in being alive that was as clear a call of resistance as the appeal to go “up the country.”

If anyone could personify the people at Woodstock, and so cheer them on, it was Arlo Guthrie: like most of us, he was very young and facing issues that overwhelmed his emotions, he had a dialect that was unintelligible to adults, and he wasn't overtly threatening, instead acting largely bemused at the stupidity of the war's prosecutors. One of his best meandering stage stories told of his sympathy for the FBI agent assigned to follow him. Since Arlo flew stand-by, if there was only one seat left on a plane, the agent had a problem: he could have the seat, since he paid full price, but then his suspect would be left behind. Arlo was angelic-looking and pleasantly sardonic, but he was tough, too, projecting an uncompromising opposition to the war culture. In the movie based on his anti-draft song, *Alice's Restaurant*, he is cornered in a pizza parlor by toughs who try to cut his hair. He responds by slapping pizza all over their faces with as much force and certainty as his father, Woody Guthrie, is said to have smashed the plates and glasses set for hundreds of union leaders in a Washington banquet hall when he was told that the dinner he was to address was segregated. By poking fun at an army that wanted draftees to kill but rejected Arlo for having a littering conviction, “*Alice's Restaurant*” hit the draft as hard as Sam Melville's bombs at induction centers or the Berrigan brothers' burning of draft files.

The song most identified with Arlo at Woodstock was his tribute to a small-time smuggler, “*Comin' into Los Angeles, bringing in a couple of keys*” of hash or marijuana. But except for discrediting the law and the police, who had already done that to themselves at Montgomery, Selma, and Chicago, what was the political purpose of such a song? Here, Arlo reaffirmed Canned Heat's tension, the dual messages of Woodstock. Do you tune in, turn on, and drop out, like Timothy Leary, or do you tune in, turn on, get pissed off, and sit in at the draft board? Arlo came to no conclusion, but he spoke for the crowd in this drawling, amazed, impromptu ramble, in language and tones that only we could tell were a tribute to our power and our potential:

Yeah, it's far out, man...I don't know, uh like, how many of you can dig how many people there are, man. Like I was rappin' to the fuzz, heh, right?

Can you dig it? Man, there's supposed to be a million and a half people here by tonight, can you dig that? New York State Thruway is closed, man, heh. Yeah, lot o' freaks, heh.

In contrast to Arlo, who slyly implied that a "lot o' freaks" just might make things messy, Joan Baez and her partner Jeff Shurtleff made their message too explicit, crossing cheerleading's fine line between entreating and preaching. Taking the opposite tack of her former flame Bob Dylan, Joan chose to use her gifts to push for specific changes in the real world, when they were better suited to inspire us to seek an unreal world from which we could engage reality in our own time and way. Joan's cause at Woodstock was draft resistance. Her husband, David Harris, was serving hard time while Joan prepared to have their baby. She and Jeff made the gutsy, grimy act of resistance sound mawkish and unappealingly saintly. When Martin Luther King Jr. had talked about loving the enemy, it meant being respectful as you stubbornly confronted him. With Joan and Jeff, it sounded like a California therapy session, saccharine and naive: "The wonderful side of the draft resistance movement is that it has no enemies." From my perspective, we sure did have enemies, all the people who were trying to kill us and make us kill others...

Joan's Pollyanna politics were often even more inept. A few years earlier she popularized a phrase that did as much to set back women in our movement as Black Panther comments about the place of a woman being on her back did in theirs: "Girls say yes to boys who say no." After the war, she joined in the government's bashing of Vietnam for expelling "boat people," a publicity campaign that ignored how our churlish economic sanctions were causing as much suffering as the expulsions, and in large part had caused them. But when she sang the old spiritual "Amazing Grace" with no sermonizing and no accompaniment, just her clear notes soaring into the chilly night, she was suddenly, tremendously effective by showing us the world beyond politics where we would know ourselves and find the strength we needed.

The Spirit and The Power

No African-Americans came to Woodstock to sing the blues that had given birth to rock n' roll, but there were two singers there, Janis Joplin and Joe Cocker, who could bring their spirit to us. Pasty-white Janis had fought her way out of seismotrash

Texas, the marginal working-class of oil riggers and seismograph haulers. She belonged to that small set of white American singers, usually in country music, who really offer up, in the words of her hallmark song, a piece of their heart, night after night, just the way blues singers do, and who are torn apart by it, just as they are. Hank Williams actually put himself into each song, staring down at the open coffin or watching an old love pass him on the street; he drank himself to an early grave. Mountainous Dave Evans breaks into tears like a baby and can't go with a song because its story is just too sad; he's been in and out of jail, incapable of controlling his life. That's the way of the blues, and Janis had them. The frailty of this overwhelmed little girl before the fury of the forces inside her was blatant. She was a walking advertisement about the risk of really letting it all go, and when she overdosed a year later, nobody who saw her at Woodstock was surprised.

Janis's male counterpart was an unlikely figure of inspiration from England named Joe Cocker. He displayed little concern for image and choreography, staggering around the stage on a soft afternoon breeze, locked in the grip of the music of his rough and ready Grease Band. He pantomimed their playing, inventing the fine art of air guitar, and generally acted as if he had stuck his finger into an outlet containing the energy of half a million. He rasped and screamed, pleaded and demanded, that we get by "With a Little Help From My Friends." It was a tribute to the most important band in rock n' roll, the Beatles, done in the style of the most important root of rock n' roll, the blues. Why could a white boy from England feel the blues, the dignity in abandoning oneself to sadness and joy, to bragging and humility, when white boys from America couldn't? Perhaps working class Brits like Joe Cocker had felt something of the oppression that had galvanized black culture, whereas white America had been on top too long to remember what it was like on the bottom. It took another five years before the Allman Brothers and Lynyrd Skynyrd got near Joe Cocker's intensity and blues spirit, and they were from the working class of the wounded South, Southern Men whom Crosby, Stills, and Nash's Young sanctimoniously reprimanded in song, generating a reply that was southern rock's purest expression, "Sweet Home Alabama."

Two groups led by lethal guitarists, Mountain and Ten Years After, unabashedly exposed our raw power for all the world to see. Leslie West of Mountain was a massive American whose guitar looked like a toy in his hands; Alvin Lee of Ten Years After was a lean and hungry Brit whose guitar looked like it would tip him over. Their singing — actually yelling and grunting — was easily ignored in the biting fire of their wide-open, high-treble solos that were, Jimi Hendrix notwithstanding, the stellar guitar performances of Woodstock. I was left open-mouthed by Lee's late-night exhibition on "I'm Goin' Home," a blues clinic that was often unaccompanied except by the crowd's clapping, all on time, almost ahead of time in his race to control the explosions coming out of his fingers. And West literally took my breath away on "Mississippi Queen" as he smashed open the door for ZZ Top and the other power trios of the '70s. Neither player strutted about the stage hyping the crowd or demanding acknowledgment of their skill. They had aggressive command of the technical side of the music, and they were too busy using it to be distracted by nonsense. The political implications of their purposeful abandon weren't lost on us.

The Diversity

The first cross-cultural moment for the white Woodstock Nation came one afternoon after a drenching rainstorm huddled the crowd together under shared blankets. As the rain lifted, a spontaneous rhythm dance and chant sprang up across the muddy hillside, and onto the stage came a band from the California the Mexicans stole from the Indians and we stole from Mexico. Bill Graham (Wolfgang Grajonca, a refugee from Nazi Germany), the once and belligerently continuing Don of rock who owned the Fillmore concert halls and managed many big bands, had forced the promoters to take the unknown Santana as part of a package. With uncharacteristic understatement, he said they wouldn't be sorry.

Jazz guitarist Carlos Santana had created this band of Chicanos to express rock n' roll in Latin rhythms. Like most of the crowd, I had never listened to Latin music, and knew nothing of its tradition as a companion to revolution. I was stunned first by the bright pulse of the music and then by an awareness of my own ignorance: if I'd never heard this stuff, there must be a lot else out there I didn't know about, either. I didn't suffer a similar moment for another 20 years, when only by chance did I come

upon in Venice's St. Mark's Church the thousand-year old Pala D'Oro, a huge metal quilt of gold and jeweled representations of saints and angels, in which each patch by the Turkish artisans was a dazzling creation in itself. Earlier generations may have had their epiphany about the breadth of the world in a classroom or on a trip with their parents, but we had stopped listening to teachers and parents, so mine was Santana's celebration of a culture so near, yet so far away.

There were only two integrated bands at Woodstock, one led by a white, Paul Butterfield, and one by a black, Sylvester Stewart, a.k.a. Sly Stone. (Sly's Family Stone was also the only band mixed by sex, with equal numbers of female and male musicians.) Listening to Sly wasn't a cross-cultural experience for this crowd. There was a certain kind of black music designed to hook white dollars, like the Supremes or Chuck Berry, and this was it. It was bright and brassy, but it didn't have the guts, grit, and emotion, or to use the obvious word, the "soul" of black culture. Sly's crowd-leading antics would have been innocuous had he been white, but in America, race matters. It reminded me of a bawdy black combo we used to swipe licks and lyrics from at Cornell fraternities during Spring Weekend dances. Sly's show wasn't outright demeaning like that of the Hot Nuts — who pranced about in leopard-skin bikinis like cave-men, acting out a parody of whites' fantasies about black sexuality — but his choreographed yet supposedly spontaneous explosion of inter-racial fun was also a race-based manipulation, an attempt to tell us what he assumed we wanted to believe. "I want to take you higher," sang Sly, but he ignored the racial ledge that kept us from coming up with him.

Even without guitar legend Mike Bloomfield, Paul Butterfield still fronted a Chicago-based group that drew on all the strengths of a city known for black blues and white rock. His merging of the two held out hope for an integrated future, or at least one with respect and interest across racial lines. Nothing like this had worked since black and white Memphis studio musicians, including guitarist Steve Cropper and organist Booker T. Jones, formed the MGs (Memphis Group) to back up Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, and other soul singers in the early 1960s. (That band resurfaced in the 1970s as a spoof of itself, backing up John Belushi and Dan Akroyd — the Blues Brothers — on Saturday

Night Live.) Like joint country-western and soul music night at an Army PX, mixing the music of two ethnic groups is usually boring at best and dangerous at worst. Butterfield's band, like the MGs, was an exception. Their anthem at Woodstock, the "Love March," was powered by a military drum, and had black gospel, rhythm and blues, and rock n' roll all strewn through it. It argued that "there's gotta be a change" in a system in which cultural regimentation was linked to the draft and the war:

They want me to wear a tie, they want me to be the same.

I gotta treat my brother wrong and kill him.

What a shame!

Introducing the song, one of the musicians explained the purpose of the song, and the counter-culture, in a way that was as clear to us as it would have been mysterious to our parents:

Uh we gonna do a little march right along through now. Is a, it's a love march. We, uh, don't carry no guns and things in this army we got and stuff. Don't nobody have to be worried about keeping in step, and we ain't even got no uniforms and whatever. We a poor army and what not...

The band commenced to march around the stage, bouncing the amplifiers' reverb units into smashing echoes. At least somebody knew how to make music and politics reinforce each other.

The Casualties

The Who, an English band that trafficked in pretension, was the biggest-selling act at Woodstock. When I learned later that they wouldn't perform until they got all their pay in cash, it didn't surprise me, since it fit with the pouty selfishness they exuded. The Who's unfortunate new piece of pontification, a rock opera about Tommy, the Christ-like pinball player, was to me, and apparently only me, embarrassingly vapid. In addition to "Tommy," the band played two youth anthems, "Talkin' 'bout My Generation" and "Summertime Blues." But they weren't really from our generation, and it had been too long since they'd had a teenager's summertime blues. It felt fraudulent and alien, and we drifted away to our tent long before the now-predictable, infantile destruction of instruments and amplifiers with which the Who ended their show. By leaving, we missed the confrontation between Peter Townsend and a tripping Abbie Hoffman, who tried to grab

the microphone and tell the crowd about a White Panther Party leader who had been jailed on drug charges. Having extorted his way into the capitalist festival by demanding \$10,000 for not attacking it, Abbie probably thought he had a right to the stage, but all Townsend saw was a rag-a-muffin babbling into the microphone, and he used his guitar to knock Hoffman into the press pit below.

Pardon my sacrilege, but Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young were also a disaster, at Woodstock and at large. Crossing the inventors of folk-rock, the Byrds (Crosby), with the talented Buffalo Springfield (Stills, Young) should have produced a magnificent offspring, a soaring wall of the 12-string guitars from the Byrds' "Turn, Turn, Turn," studded with acerbic lyrics like these from "For What It's Worth," the Springfield's report of a police riot against long-hairs:

There's somethin' happening here,
 What it is ain't exactly clear.
 There's a man with a gun over there,
 Telling me I've got to beware.

Maybe the addition of Britain's bubblegummy Hollies (Nash) was what addled the mix, but whatever the reason, this first of the "super-bands" made from famed components laid a super-bomb. The lyrics were like high school poetry (I am yours, you are mine, you are what you are...), hoping to be meaningful but never moving beyond banal, grabbing the first rhyme that came to mind and expecting the word it carried to be significant (Sing a song, don't be long...). Then again, perhaps it was the whiny singing that was the problem; after all, some great rock lyrics are fatuous until they're delivered. I'm sure that Bob Dylan could have snarled out CSN&Y's insipid description of Judy Blue Eyes (Lacey, lilt-ing, leery, losing love, lamenting...).

In the group's opening number at Woodstock, as they whined in falsetto to a horrendously out-of-tune guitar, one of the famous four asked the sound-man to tinker with the bass and treble settings: "A little less bottom end on the guitar, please." What is one to make of this rearranging of the deck chairs on a musical Titanic? Ah, pardon me, I'm getting carried away, probably to compensate for the awe in which many held this band. At least the next year they had the courage to keep politics on the front-burner, asking people to "Please Come to Chicago" after Black

Panther Bobby Seale was bound, gagged and beaten at the Chicago conspiracy trial, and broadcasting this gripping, grim reminder of the killing of Kent State students in "Ohio": "Tin soldiers and Nixon coming, we're finally on our own. All summer I hear the drumming: four dead in O-hio....Gotta get down to it, soldiers are cutting us down." Of course (here I go again!), their wailings on "Chicago" were feeble rather than inspiring, and (just once more, I promise) they could only come up with one verse and chorus for "Ohio," which they kept alternating for four minutes with the incongruous chant, "La-lalala, la-la, la-la." All right, I'll quit.

The Jefferson Airplane was America's premier anti-war band. Everyone knew how singer Grace Slick had shown up at the White House for an alumnae party sponsored by one of the Nixon Barbie Dolls, prepared to launch into an anti-war tirade; all that kept her outside was her poor choice of an escort, Abbie Hoffman, whom the guards knew at one look just didn't belong. The Airplane had attacked the war culture with this famed call for comradeship in the struggle for a culture of life:

When the truth is found to be lies.
And all the joy within you dies...
Don't you need somebody to love?...
You'd better find somebody to love.

At Woodstock, the band sounded tired and looked wan as they performed in what should have been an inspiring dawn. Their frustration with the apparent lack of results from their powerful but oblique anti-war songs had led them to exhortations. They were trying to call us to action, trying to build a permanent bridge over the nebulous gap between the singer and the song, between the counter-culture and the anti-war movement, but their unconvincing call for a revolution by the "Volunteers of America," whose aims were broadly defined as dancing down the street and marching to the sea, was heavy-handed, a well-meaning but clear measure of the limits of rock n' roll and its culture as an organizing tool. Even the best of political musicians — Gil Scott-Heron, Bruce Coburn, or Pete Seeger — can only rile you up, not tell you precisely what to do. That has to come from within you as you face each challenge, strengthened by the music's resolve. The Airplane, unfortunately, had run out of resolve.

The Essence

One musician just didn't fit in any categories. He was, well, uniquely himself, was nobody's, had outstripped distinctions. James Marshall Hendrix was the wrap-up, fittingly, for Woodstock and the 1960s. Jimi was degenerating into apathy by this time, living in a mystic and drug-enabled world of pleasure and pain, and only practicing his licks on the groups of women he kept in bed with him at most times. His emptiness had overcome his creativity after three years of stardom. As he and the pick-up members of his "electric sky church" straggled on stage with real, and not the old studied nonchalance, and began scratching around desultory, he said: "You can leave if you want to: we're just jammin'." What a pathetic contrast to the bold, scared claim of Mike Bloomfield on the "Super Session" jam album recorded live at the Fillmore West: "Uhhh...listen here now, here's the thing of this gig...we're gonna jam because, WHAT THE HELL, HOW MUCH DO WE KNOW?" The tension of that question put Bloomfield in the hospital after the second inspired sleepless day of the three-day run; Hendrix's indifference led to a weary recounting of past glories. Fortunately, they were glorious enough to sustain themselves one last time.

It was probably nine or ten Monday morning, and the music had gone on all night. Jimi and his entourage had been flown in during the wee, wee hours from his mansion in Woodstock. He had probably been stoned or tripping (and he'd played many times in both conditions...one book says that this night's ration was cocaine and grass), and had sat in the trailer backstage for hours. It was finally his time. A remnant of a few thousand from the half a million strong, amazed that the stage could now be approached so easily, crowded up to the fence in front of him. The jam came to a crescendo, and then Jimi, playing by himself but sounding like the entire US Air Force Marching Band being launched from a missile silo, blasted into what had become his trademark over the past year, the Star Spangled Banner.

It was an act of sarcastic rejection of the culture that celebrated order, flags, war, Vietnam, and obedience to them. At how many ceremonies for the draftees and the dead, at how many assemblies in high schools that were feeding the war its bodies, at how many Boy Scout meetings where the ideology of America

was hammered home, at how many football games before males bashed males as female cheerleaders in seductive shorts promised a pay-off (girls say yes to boys who score touchdowns) had that song been played? Over how many coffins had the flag been draped? Over how many car dealerships had it flown bigger and bigger, in competition with other dealerships? Over how many thefts of land had it presided? Now it was our turn to topple the icons of violence and military culture, and Jimi did it with us, in a daze, in the Purple Haze that killed him a little over a year later. Again, the war ended. We knew that no culture whose youth identified with this version of the national anthem, who flew their freak flag instead of the American flag, could hope to maintain the war; we knew that none of our peers on patrol in Vietnam who heard this song on their ever-present tape players would risk their necks for the war.

Jimi Hendrix was an apt symbol for the '60s: talented, undirected, rooted in black culture, insistently different (some of his unique sounds came from being left-handed and playing a right-handed guitar upside down), against the bad but not sure what the good was and how to aid it, and always balancing his "experience," a lifestyle that questioned everything, with the unquestioning commitment to values and friends that bound the generation together. He tried to meld a archetypal black background (ghetto youth, trouble with the law, joining the army as an alternative to jail, touring as a sideman with rhythm-and-blues bands, including Little Richard, from whom he gleaned his wild showmanship) with a multicultural present (starting on his own in the Greenwich Village club where Dylan began, fronting his own integrated band, the Jimi Hendrix Experience, which appealed to blacks and whites), but became lost in a murky, non-ethnic identity. Preparing to go on stage at Monterey in 1967 for the guitar-burning set that would cement his reputation, he was embarrassed to be seen in his wild Indian get-up by old pals in Otis Redding's band. He was the hope and the ultimate failure of integration in America, and the hope and the ultimate failure of being simply experienced.

Jimi was burned out by the time he got to Woodstock, but most of us weren't yet. There was still the war to end. I drove away from the meeting of the counter-culture having seen the best that it had to offer, the many ways one could choose to respond to

the challenge of the System, and I chose not to drop out onto the Hog Farm, not to go up the country with Canned Heat, not to sit back and groove on a rainy day and live in electric ladyland with Jimi Hendrix. The music and the fact of Woodstock meant that the war was obviously over, but just as obviously, the government was somehow still getting bodies for it. I left Woodstock energized, still believing that we could help in the real world, could help end the war and help end injustice while, not just by, living our new life.

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