

BY GEOFFREY STORM

How long does it take for historical memory to change a “brand”? Maybe no more than a generation—as evidenced by two music festivals thirty years apart, both held in New York and both called Woodstock.

**D**uring the weekend of August 15–18, 1969, an estimated 400,000 people descended upon

Bethel, New York for an event that was billed—and is still remembered as—“three days of peace and music.” But on July 23–25, 1999 in Rome, New York, the final act of a mega-concert intended to commemorate the anniversary of Woodstock became an inferno of destruction.

Vandalism, looting, and arson marred the closing hours of Woodstock '99 as concertgoers set bonfires, flipped vehicles, torched and plundered concession tents, pillaged ATMs,

and toppled sound towers.

Why did Woodstock '99 end in a riot? And what might this suggest about our idealized vision of the original gathering?

### Selective Memory

Though it is celebrated as a defining moment of the 1960s counterculture, Woodstock '69 was in fact a poorly organized event. Organizers were unprepared for the number of attendees. The entire weekend was plagued by food and water shortages, inadequate sanitary facilities, and torrential rainfall that turned the concert site into a sea of mud. Heavy congestion stalled traffic on the New York State Thruway

for miles. At least two deaths were reported. *The New York Times* ran an editorial, “Nightmare in the Catskills,” decrying rampant drug use at the festival and criticizing organizers for their “mismanagement” and “lack of responsibility.” “What kind of culture is it that can produce so colossal a mess?” it asked.

Maurice Isserman, a professor of history at Hamilton College and co-author of *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, attended Woodstock in 1969 and suggests that the phenomenon of historical memory—a subconscious shift in our perception of historical



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events—helps to account for Woodstock’s illusionary legacy as a transcendently wonderful event. “Historical memory is selective,” he says. “[It] brings certain things to the fore and tends to forget about other things. It reflects our present-day anxieties [in] that we tend to look back and latch on to certain moments...as greater, more fulfilling time[s] than our own.”

Tom Starr is a former rock radio personality and programmer who was seventeen when he attended Woodstock. “It was an absolute miracle that the event came off as smoothly as it did,” he says, recalling Woodstock’s chaotic conditions. “It was clear right from the start that they didn’t have the scene...together... and the only way it was going to continue to be a good scene was if everybody was as accommodating of one another as they could be, and as peaceful as they could be, and made the best of it.”

Indeed, the crowd’s

cooperative, communal spirit helped make Woodstock a success—at least in historical memory—and underscores its contrast to the ill-fated name-sake, although in the weeks leading up to Woodstock ‘99, Rome-area young people like Sean Salce hoped for a sense of déjà vu. “I just remember how excited everybody was, and the sense of pride that started going through the community,” he says, “thinking that ‘hey, we’re going to be a part of history here.’” Kristy Clifford lives in Utica, a few miles from the concert site: “The name Woodstock drew you in. You wanted to be a part...because for me, growing up, all I heard about was...Woodstock, Woodstock, Woodstock.”

#### Trouble in Advance?

The 1999 festival was a better-planned event than its predecessor, but Isserman notes that the original Woodstock “had a different feel to it.” The pastoral setting “had a very

calming effect. And I think that made everyone more mellow than at a place like a Strategic Air Command base... .” Held at the former Griffiss Air Force Base, Woodstock ‘99 was also commercially oriented, with several corporate sponsors as well as onsite retailers and modern technological amenities. To prevent gate-crashing, the entire site was surrounded by a brightly painted, twelve-foot-high plywood barrier called the “Peace Wall.” Inside the wall, Woodstock’s own private security force patrolled the grounds. There was a strong police presence, but under an agreement with concert promoters uniformed law enforcement officers remained outside the perimeter.

The disadvantages of Woodstock ‘99’s location and commercialism became apparent the first day of the concert. Temperatures soared into the 90s and were estimated at over 100° on the tarmac, where thousands of



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*The stage at Woodstock '99.*

Top: Joe Cocker’s band, Woodstock ‘69.



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AP PHOTO/WILL WALDRON

Fires burn through trailers and debris at Woodstock '99.

Top: Martin Scorsese (in hat, below) returns Max Yasgur's peace sign. Yasgur was owner of the farm where Woodstock '69 took place.

packed-in fans listened to the music. The high demand for water sapped pressure at the site's drinking fountains, and hundreds of heat exhaustion cases were reported. "There was water available on the grounds," says attendee Mike Kohli, "[but] it was very difficult to get to...So then you were stuck with the \$4 bottles of water, which is what the mantra of the whole weekend was: \$4 bottles of water."

Kristy Clifford remembers that by the second day there was a noticeable deterioration in the conditions of the site and in the crowd's mood. The grounds were covered with trash, portable toilets were overflowing, and a palpable tension was in the air. "I couldn't tell if it was the excitement...from the event itself, or if it was people getting fed up," she says. "I did hear a lot of people complaining about prices." Sean Salce recalls that he first sensed

impending trouble during Kid Rock's set that afternoon. "He started to encourage everybody: 'Whatever you have, pick it up and start throwing it,'" whereupon bottles, cans, and debris filled the air. "I've never been in a tornado," Salce says, "but I think that may have been the closest thing... that I hope I'll ever experience."

Steve Reynolds worked for MJI Broadcasting and was assigned to Woodstock '99 to report on the festival. He recalls that "Saturday was a very testosterone-heavy, angry day of music," which featured acts like Limp Bizkit (who were widely criticized for encouraging unruly behavior). "I think that sent an edge through the crowd that never really dissipated."

### Violence

The real problems began during the Red Hot Chili Peppers' closing set on Sunday evening. Prior to the performance, a group handed out "pax candles" to be displayed in a peace demonstration. But the candles served a very different purpose in the hands of disgruntled fans. "You pretty much give them the ultimate thing to rebel with, which is fire," Sean Salce says. "How do we erase the memory of how they screwed me over in that tent for \$4 bottles of water? Burn it down." The fires spread to a sound tower, and the Chili Peppers' performance was interrupted while the local fire department attempted to extinguish the flames. The band

eventually returned to the stage, and in a planned tribute to Jimi Hendrix, the original Woodstock's closing act, played a version of his song "Fire."

Salce remembers walking across the concert grounds to investigate an "unnatural glow" in the darkening sky. As he made his way around an old hangar that separated the two main stage areas, he got his first "full glimpse of all the trailers that were on fire, and all the separate bonfires that were set, cars being flipped over, the concession tents being completely overrun." Some fans ripped down sections of the Peace Wall, fed them into the bonfires, and began dancing around the flames.

According to most accounts, the security team had dwindled throughout the weekend, and by Sunday night seemed to evaporate as the situation spun out of control. Kristy Clifford recalls seeing some members taking off their security shirts in fear of the crowd turning on them. A force of several hundred New York State Police in riot gear was called in to restore order. Sean Salce was among the many fans hurriedly seeking an exit as the police moved in, and remembers thinking, "This is going to get ugly. I didn't know if we were going to get billy-clubbed, or how they were going to try to calm the masses down." The police quelled the riot, there were no more serious incidents, and the mayhem resulted in only seven arrests

## THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

This article began as a radio documentary. You can listen to it at [www.nysarchivestrust.org](http://www.nysarchivestrust.org). Click on *New York Archives* magazine, then “Fall 2010.”

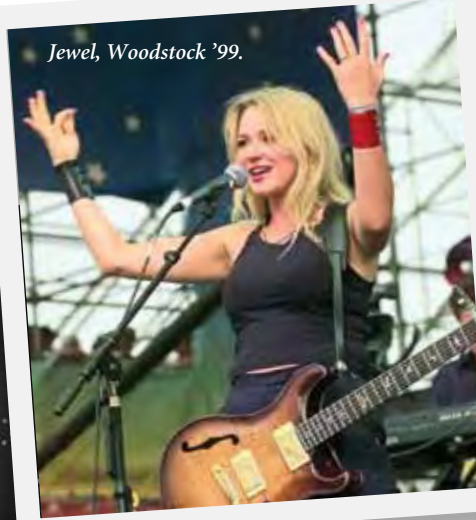
Much of my research involved conducting oral history interviews and corroborating statements by consulting various media reports on the two events. Some of these reports included archival audio from my personal collection, since I work for WIBX-AM in Utica, which covered Woodstock '99. Newspaper reports on both festivals are widely available on microfilm in local libraries. Primary source documents pertaining to the two events are surprisingly scarce, but the Museum at Bethel Woods houses a collection of oral and text histories, photographs, and other artifacts relevant to the original Woodstock festival.

The photographs of Woodstock '69 are ©Elliott Landy, one of the two official photographers of the music festival. More than fifty of his photographs were presented at *Spirit of the Woodstock Generation: The Photographs of Elliott Landy*, the 1994 exhibition at the New York State Museum commemorating the thirty-fifth anniversary of Woodstock. View more of his work at [www.landyvision.com](http://www.landyvision.com)



Janis Joplin, Woodstock '69.

Jewel, Woodstock '99.



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instead got him to send in medical teams and food—it could have degenerated into a riot. If all these armed soldiers in helmets suddenly showed up on the perimeter of Yasgur's farm, who knows how we would have remembered it.”

Nonetheless, it was immediately apparent that the legacy of Woodstock '99 would be far different than the original event's. Where were the peace and love ideals that the Woodstock brand had come to represent? “There's always been a problem with trying to reenact Woodstock, because you'll never get back there,” Isserman explains. “There will never be an event again—under that name—that has such a dramatic impact or creates such a durable myth... every generation should create its own mythology and have its own transcendent experience.” Tom Starr contends that the original Woodstock crowd's ability to cope with adversity is what made that festival a cultural phenomenon. “And I don't think,” he says, “that it's likely to be replicated on that kind of scale for quite some time. If ever.” ■

and five injuries, but as many as seven rapes were reported to have occurred during the festival. No arrests have been made in those cases.

### An Error of Memory

What went wrong at Woodstock '99? The heat, price gouging, aggressive music, inadequate security—or perhaps all of these, and more? And could the mythology of the 1969 Woodstock festival have influenced the outcome of the thirtieth-anniversary event? “Maybe it didn't add up,” Maurice Isserman speculates. “Maybe [people] felt ripped off because it wasn't, as advertised in popular memory, a thoroughly transcendent experience.”

Sean Salce is concerned over the riot's effect on his

generation's image in historical memory. “I think that people look at the original festival as a...monumental event in the history of the United States, and I think [they] felt, you know, 'maybe this is going to be another major turning point in society.' As it turned out, by the end of Sunday night, everybody obviously saw us in a different light.” But Maurice Isserman cautions that the festival's tumultuous climax should not be seen as evidence of a shift in generational values. “The original Woodstock involved a lot of serendipity,” he says. “It could have turned out a lot worse. Governor Rockefeller was thinking of sending in the National Guard, and if he had not been persuaded otherwise—the organizers