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Andy Bennett (ed.), *Remembering Woodstock*

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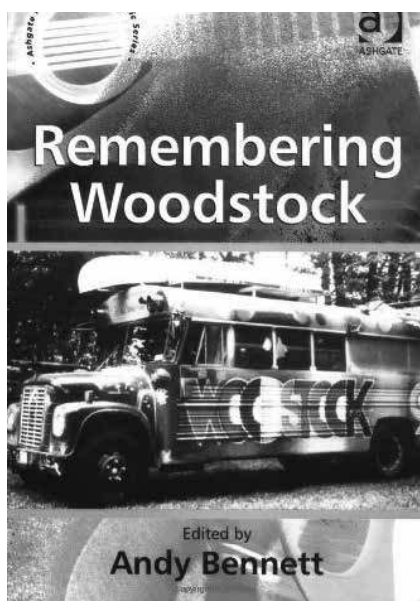
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Andy Bennett (ed.), *Remembering Woodstock*, Farnham & Burlington, Ashgate, coll. « Popular and Folk Music Series », 2004.



Of all the events associated with the counter-culture, none is as firmly embedded in common cultural memory as the Woodstock Festival of August 1969. In its perceived ideological trajectory, musical content and visual imagery, it has represented, for more than forty years, the most powerful evidence of the union between rock and politics. Michael Wadleigh's documentary movie (released in 1970) and Joni Mitchell's song (and its subsequent hit versions by Matthews Southern Comfort and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young) have ensured that an intimate awareness of the "three days of peace and music" was never limited to those (variously estimated to be

somewhere between 200,000 and 500,000) who actually travelled to Max Yasgur's farmland in upper New York State. Such has been the impact of the occasion that phrases like "Woodstock generation", "Woodstock nation" and "the spirit of Woodstock" have become part of the common vocabulary of social commentary.

If the event itself was marked by a certain degree of confusion (the problems in reaching the site, the performers who were scheduled to attend, the impact of the weather, the decision to make it a free festival) the past four decades have only added to this uncertainty as claims and counter-claims about its true impact have been repeatedly debated. Was it an authentic demonstration of generational unity that specifically drew on the power of music to offer an alternative to the ethnic, social and political divisions within the United States? Or was it a poorly-planned commercial venture whose significance lies in the symbolic and legendary properties that have been widely – some might say mistakenly – attributed to it?

These are the questions addressed in the pages of *Remembering Woodstock*. Andy Bennett's introductory chapter asserts that the book's goal is to "consider how and why Woodstock has achieved such iconic status [...] and to unravel the fiction and fact about Woodstock and the popular perceptions that surround it" (xiv). Thus, the nine essays that follow (and the closing interview with Country Joe McDonald) investigate the myth and reality of the festival from a number of perspectives.

While certainly not the first, Woodstock was one of the earliest major music festivals of the 1960s. Dave Laing compares the 1969 event – “preceded by the small-scale and idyllic Monterey Pop and followed by the nightmarish Altamont” (5) – with the anniversary events of 1994 and 1999. His assessment illustrates clearly the definitive transition from rural music festival to corporate media event that has characterised the growth of such occasions. Pay-per-view television coverage, inflated ticket prices, and the aggressive presence of merchandising and sponsorship interests were integral components of Woodstock II and Woodstock III: and it may have been the success of the original event itself that encouraged the growing intrusion of business interests and the subsequent industrialisation of the festival circuit.

Sheila Whiteley situates one of the defining moments of the festival – Jimi Hendrix’s performance of “The Star Spangled Banner”¹ – against the country’s escalating involvement in the Vietnam War. As she makes clear, Hendrix’s own circumstances exemplified many of the racial tensions of the late 1960s. As one of the few black performers to appear at Woodstock (others included Richie Havens and Sly Stone) his presence on stage was a reminder of the marginalisation of black voices; and as a former serviceman (with the 101st Airborne Division), he had personal experience of the difficulties faced by black soldiers. Whiteley convincingly argues that his startling performance of the United States’ patriotic anthem was not a spontaneous gesture but a deliberate and unflinching assault against the country’s imperialist and racist structures:

“the melody itself is still recognizable, but the sheer volume of noise, the distortion,

the blue note bends and swerves, sustain and feedback aurally attack the original... and, as such, the connotations of heroism associated with “The Star Spangled Banner” are undercut by a mood of devastation” (26).

The contrast between Woodstock and Live Aid is tellingly explored by John Street. He points out that there is no one correct interpretation of Woodstock and that it “exists not as a single historical entity, but as a multiplicity of symbols and signs [...] signifying many different experiences and ideas and moments” (30). Furthermore, this ambiguity is not without consequence. Although Woodstock’s idealism and communitarianism may have brought together politics and music, it was narrowly-defined, short-lived and utopian. On the other hand, Live Aid made a difference: it raised money, it saved lives. His conclusion is that “arguably, Live Aid has, in fact, had the greater impact on politics and popular music” (41).

The chapters by Andy Bennett and Simon Warner consider two of the ways through which information about and images of Woodstock have been generated and circulated. Warner’s examination of contemporary press coverage of the festival reveals that at the time very few journalists wrote about the music. Instead it was “the scale of the crowds, the human catastrophe, the financial calamity” (70) that occupied most of the column inches. In fact, Woodstock’s reputation as “the embodiment of the hippie dream” (55) is more likely to have been created by the later movie. Bennett’s account of Michael Wadleigh’s celebrated film emphasises the inevitable processes of editing and selection that underpin the making of any documentary: split-screen effects, extensive interviews, and footage of (often naked)

festivalgoers dancing, eating, playing and swimming present a comprehensive and atmospheric record of the three days. Ironically, however, "in its efforts to portray the event as authentically as possible, the film has become one of the key sources for stereotyping the 1960s" (52) and a powerful vehicle of nostalgia.

Two chapters concentrate unequivocally on the music of Woodstock. Dave Allen examines the contemporaneous transition from acoustic to electric performance as exemplified by the two appearances of Country Joe McDonald, and Allan Moore questions the legitimacy of spontaneous musical improvisation within the parameters of the festival's performative structure. And two further chapters provide historical, comparative and cross-national perspectives on the festival. George McKay suggests that the Beaulieu Jazz Festivals in Britain through the 1950s provided a template for large outdoor events such as Woodstock; and Gerry Bloustien considers Woodstock's legacy for Adelaide's annual WOMAD festival. Finally, Country Joe McDonald, whose performance of "I Feel Like I'm Fixin' To Die Rag" was, along with "The Star Spangled Banner" one of Woodstock's memorable musical moments, reflects on a forty-year career in which he has remained (for better or worse) indelibly linked with a sunny afternoon on Max Yasgur's farm.

1969 was a memorable year in the history of popular music. Elvis Presley returned to the stage, after an eight-year absence, for a four-week season at the International Hotel, Las Vegas. Brian Jones left the Rolling Stones and was found drowned in his swimming pool a few weeks later. Bob Dylan's appearance at the Isle of Wight Festival was his first live appearance since 1966. The Beatles released *Abbey Road* and gave their final performance on the roof of the Apple offices in central London. Debut recordings included albums by Led Zeppelin, Blind Faith, Genesis, Santana, Yes, Elton John, and the Jackson 5. Diana Ross announced her departure from the Supremes in order to pursue a solo career. At the Rolling Stones' concert at Altamont, black teenager Meredith Hunter was murdered by Hell's Angels. While the repercussions of all of these would be felt in different ways for many years to come, Woodstock has remained unique in its capacity to represent a period in musical and political history whose meaning may be ambiguous, but whose significance, as *Remembering Woodstock* confirms, is profound.

Note :

1. Sheila Whiteley will be publishing another article on Jimi Hendrix in *Volume's* second "countercultures" issue.

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