

Woodstock: A Desperate Fear for the Future?



Young people come together in "Woodstock." In theory, affirmation is the sole motif.

By CRAIG MCGREGOR

SO I walk inside and there is this crocodile of black and white schoolkids across one row ("Persons Under 17 Not Admitted," says the notice outside—why? because of all those naked boobs and beavers?) and three hips from Show magazine in front and a handful of nubile gigglers up the back ("Let's go into the Men's Room!") plus a scattering of popcorn munchers, heads, squares and cools and we are all sitting there at 10 o'clock on a Tuesday morning for God's sake to see if Woodstock really was like that or not.

The movie starts and there are some low-keyed pastoral shots of tractors and Porsches and other farm implements and some long, long pans of the pilgrims arriving and a bearded guitarist who says it is a "Biblical, Epical, Unbelievable Scene" (it is) and some close-ups of hippie kids dancing while far, far overhead, like a subliminal allusion to Antonioni's "Eclipse," a jet plane vaporizes the vibes: SAC H-bomber? Mace-sprayer? Grunt troopship for Vietnam? The music breaks out. Richie Havens: some virtuoso flat-picked, thumb-barred guitar work as a warm-up, and then that hoarse, unimaginative, 'gutbucket voice'

chanting "FREEDOM, FREEDOM, FREEDOM, FREEDOM . . ."

By the time Joe Cocker arrives and has flung himself into "With a Little Help From My Friends," I have begun to feel that electric, spine-shivering current of excitement which I remember from when Monk sauntered up to the piano in "Jazz on a Summer's Day" (which is the progenitor of "Monterey Pop" and "Woodstock") and sent astringent blues dissonances slicing out over the waters of Newport, and as he reaches that utterly demonic climax, the Gorgon head whipping in and out of a blank gray screen, one of the main themes of Woodstock, festival and film, has emerged: affirmation.

In theory it is the sole motif. Here is the Woodstock nation, here is its music; "It's beautiful, they're beautiful people," everyone keeps saying, like a record with a cliché in it. Certainly one of the strengths of rock is its defiant affirmation of life; it is this irresistible, magical, declamatory shout for joy which sustains most of the music in the movie, from Joe Cocker to Santana's beautifully shaped "Soul Sacrifice" to pop-gear Sly to the artificial melodrama of the Who and Ten Years After.

But there is another strain in "Wood-

stock," as there is in rock music itself, and it surfaces with Crosby, Stills & Nash. Theirs is a music of dark-edged melancholy, of a desperate and profound fear for the future; it is the alternative tradition in rock, the white, high-voiced, harmonized, Appalachian/European yearning for a transcendent peace, an incessant reaching after the infinite. The same strain comes through, transmogrified, in Country Joe ("Whoopie, we're all gonna die"), and Arlo Guthrie, and those ambiguous shots of Army helicopters swooping down beyond the crowd, and the man who is the real schizophrenic hero of Woodstock, the Port-O-San man who empties the latrines of the beautiful people and has one son there at Woodstock and another flying a DMZ helicopter in Vietnam.

For all its rhetoric about togetherness, the sense of family which brought nearly half a million young people to a festival of love, peace and happiness, Woodstock is haunted by death, the fear that it may never happen again. Outside the magic circle, the devourers of the tribe: Vietnam, the Draft, Mitchell, the Silent Majority. By the end of the movie, one can't help but admire the naive, naked, loving ones; the self-congratulation, the ecstasy, the pathe-

tic eagerness to believe they are a new race who are indeed changing the world become abruptly meaningful. After all, they've achieved much: in the midst of the most advanced, materialist and power-oriented society the world has ever known, they have created a viable counter-culture which puts man, not the System, at the center of the universe.

But it can't stop there. I believe it's not enough to change people, you have to change structures as well. There are those who argue that the Woodstock ethos and radical action are antipathetic. In fact, each needs the other: they are the humanist and political correlatives of what is called, optimistically, the Revolution. As Europe learned, politics without love leads straight to the concentration camp; as the West Coast has begun to learn, love without politics leads to Reagan and police helicopters hunting down desert communitarians in Arizona. Like most impure elements, freedom is a mixture of disparates: love/politics, person/community, young/old, white/black.

BLACK? Hardly a black face in that massive come-together. A few black performers, but then Louis Armstrong played the Jim Crow circuit. The cruelest paradox of

the Woodstock nation is that it has been liberated, primarily, by the black race from which it has borrowed its music, dance, language, style and much of its sense of brotherhood—but that so far it has done little to free those who freed it. Yet, finally, young white America has to free black America if the Woodstock ethic and everything it stands for is to survive at all; in a slave state, nobody's free. Otherwise, Mailer and Cleaver are right: There's a hurricane in the wind.

Closing shots of "Woodstock," the movie. Hendrix. Black, hip, arrogant. From a pure white guitar he wrings out a brutal, destructive parody of the Star-Spangled Banner, complete with shellbursts, shrieks, taps, manic explosions of sound. Strain 1. Then, as the camera cuts to the Flanders quagmire which was once inviolate pasture, Hendrix switches to a slow, rhapsodic rock meditation which drifts out over the forests and stoned friendship and earnestness of the flesh which, for three precious days, sheltered the pilgrims from Another Country. Strain 2. Beyond that again, beyond the screen, reverse masks in a cruel farce: Hoffman, Julius Hoffman, Abbie. Q. *Where do you live?* A. *I live in Woodstock nation.* Something has to give.