

Where Have All the Woodstock Flowers Gone?

By FOSTER HIRSCH

WOODSTOCK, 1969, the Youth Movement was riding high on energy and purpose: a sunny, spirited, sensuous three-hour movie of the Event, more people shown on a screen in that final shot than in any other movie in history. Altamont, 1970, the Rolling Stones, the Hell's Angels, a murder: "Gimme Shelter," a black sabbath movie, eerie and brooding. New York, 1971, the concert for Bangladesh, a new cause, a renewed sense of rock community: an austere movie which cautiously avoids political or social context, which has no sense of event or audience, and which has neither good Woodstock nor bad Altamont vibrations, but instead occupies a flavorless, non-reverberating middle ground.

The marked differences in style and temperament among these three rock documentaries are definite sociological barometers. "Woodstock" was a tribute to late sixties expansiveness, those few highly-charged, high strung years of reaching and stretching. As Festival and as movie, "Woodstock" celebrated the spirit which had characterized American dissidence since—when did it start, Berkeley, 1964? The film both captured and saluted the life as it was lived on Telegraph Avenue, Sunset Strip, the Haight, St. Mark's Place—all the places which, for a time, joyfully signalled the fact that American youth were breaking free of the crew-cut hibernation of the fifties and early sixties.

Yes, "Woodstock" was glibly self-congratulatory, was too self-conscious of its social revolution ethic, but the very excesses of movie and

event had terrific momentum. I remember an early showing of the film, the audience spilling into the aisles, rocking and rolling and having a ball, and it really felt as if times were changing, everybody was opening up, getting freer, just plain living better.

And then Altamont and its ominous overtones. The media eagerly pronounced the doom of the Movement, saying loudly: that's it, settle down now, back to school, the fun's over. From Woodstock to Altamont, from joyful climax to grizzly denouement. And in the wake of Altamont? The Fillmores are closed, the Haight is boarded up, the Lower East Side is grim, vacant, the campus is quiet—who bothers to rebel now, and for what? And at the movies, the youth cycle failed and movie heroes have shifted from left to right: Popeye Doyle, Dirty Harry, the straw dogs. Everywhere on the screen these days you see some dumb, two-fisted John Wayne-type.

Maybe Bangladesh was a chance to regain some of the counter-culture spirit? A new rallying cry, a new gathering of the dispersed Movement? If this was the chance for a renaissance, you'd never know it from the tight-lipped, repressed movie of the concert, a documentary which concentrates with defensive single-mindedness on the performers and avoids the by-now standard paraphernalia of interviews, speechifying, psychedelic color, and frenetic editing—and the critics were relieved: Here, they said, is a rock concert which doesn't try to masquerade as a social revolution; everybody, thank goodness, is pacified.

Here is a rock concert, then, filmed with neoclassic re-

straint, the clichés of the genre scrupulously side-stepped; but the film attains its (misplaced) dignity at the cost of animation and esprit de corps. Composed of tight close-ups of aging and curiously sedentary rock stars, "The Concert for Bangladesh" is a spiritless film: where are the explosive, exhibitionistic performances of "Woodstock?" Where's the rock theatricality? (Those shows down at the Fillmore were the best theater in town.) Where's the Mick Jagger intoxication? Except for Ravi Shankar's majestic set, and Billy Preston's number—this boy moves, he exudes the pure joy of performing, he enlivens the show with his show biz flash—the performances are as stiff and "disciplined" as the look of the film itself.

George Harrison looks Christ-like and all, and he makes eyes at the camera like you never saw, but as a singer he's weak and as the master of the revels he disappears into the back-up band.

There's hardly any exchange here between performers and audience. Some of the "love and peace" so magnanimously dispensed at Woodstock may have been phony, but everyone was in there trying, and Jagger, why he talked to those people at Altamont. Dylan sings real good, and he sure can play that harmonica, but the audience might not have been there as far as he was concerned. Leon Russell, insolent, with his wicked cat's eyes, drinks a Coke instead of acknowledging the applause of the audience. Ringo — looks very distracted.

And what about that audience? Audiences at Wood-

stock and Altamont shared co-star billing with the music makers. Here, ignored by the film's director Saul Swimmer and his crew and (for the most part) by the rock stars, they are a faceless, contextless brood, a far cry from the personality kids at Woodstock. "The Concert for Bangladesh" resolutely denies any opportunity for heroics either to the performers or the audience.

Evidently reluctant to mingle with Causes, shy of overloading the concert with social dimension, the filmmakers have ended up with a tight-corseted film which, alas, reflects only too well the mood of the moment. Late sixties energy has faded into early seventies lethargy. Embarrassed by causes and crusades, the country seems to be in a flaccid transitional phase, the direction and the spirit of the new decade haven't yet been formulated—and this movie of a rock concert, like its two landmark predecessors, is an uncanny (if unconscious) reflector of the zeitgeist, mirroring as it does a disheartening social and political vacuum.

There's some good music here, mind you, and some nice, if subdued performers, but oh is there ever something missing. No excesses, no facile calls to brotherhood, no visual clichés, no sentimentality—no real mistakes, in short—but hovering over the whole enterprise is a deadening failure of nerve, a fear of taking risks, of being outspoken or audacious. This fatigued and battle-shy film, whose failures unintentionally indict society at large, confirms the truth of that old friend of the fifties: nothing ventured, nothing gained.



The New York Times (Donal F. Holway)
"The Fillmores are closed, the Haight is boarded up — who bothers to rebel now, and for what?"