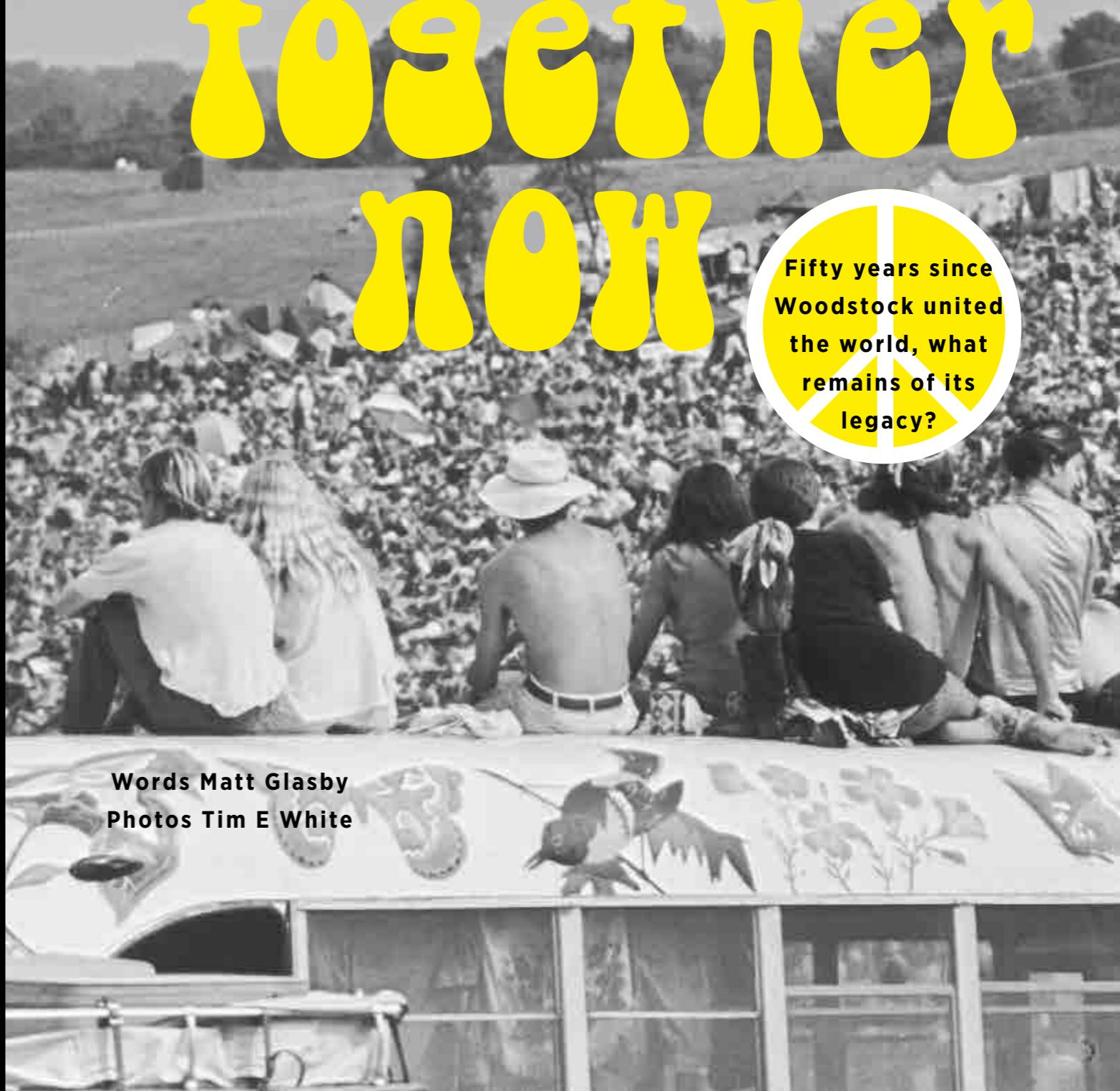


All together now

Fifty years since
Woodstock united
the world, what
remains of its
legacy?

Words Matt Glasby
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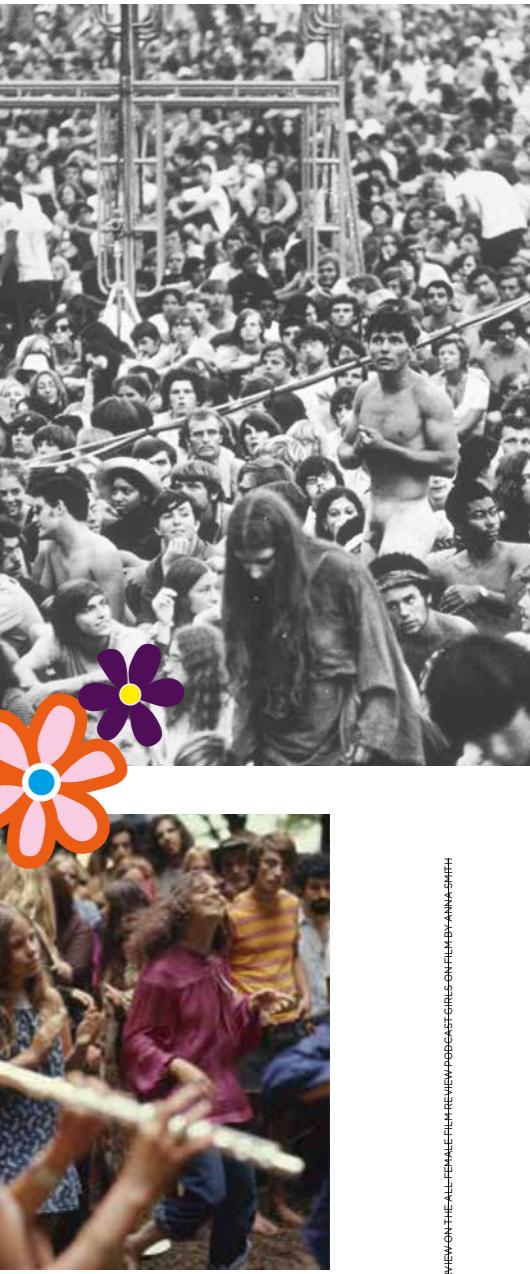


t the bottom of a sloping meadow in Bethel, New York State, there's a scar in the ground from where

history was made. Today, with wildflowers dotting the grass, and piles of stones left in silent tribute, it's a pretty, tranquil spot. But 50 years ago there stood a makeshift stage which held Jimi Hendrix, The Who, The Band and the dreams of a generation. No wonder it left a scar.

When it comes to Woodstock, separating the myth from the reality is easier said than done, but the basic facts are these. From 15-18 August 1969, some 500,000 people came to Max Yasgur's dairy farm in Bethel to enjoy, as the poster put it, "three days of peace and music". The brainchild of promoters Michael Lang and Artie Kornfeld, both only in their twenties, the festival was a powerful symbol of countercultural togetherness. But by any practical metric it was also an utter shambles, with shortages of food and water, and an infrastructure so inadequate that the organisers were forced to make the festival free to the thousands who turned up without tickets. As Lang would later write, "You couldn't organise Woodstock and nobody did."

Although it's tempting to view the 1960s through tie-dye-tinted spectacles, it was a time of uncertainty in America, with the civil rights movement, student riots and Vietnam causing deep divisions. "You couldn't avoid it because everybody knew somebody who was going to Vietnam, in Vietnam, or coming back from Vietnam, a lot of them in boxes," says Carl Porter, 71, a softly spoken volunteer at Bethel Woods Center for the Arts, which was set up in 1996 to protect the Woodstock site. He'd been drafted into the Air Force, but was granted leave before flying out to Vietnam. "My 30-day leave put me right here in August 1969," he says. "What a great place to be! I had nothing to do, it was a beautiful summer, and all my friends lived round here too, so we were just getting into the spirit of



Woodstock. It was an explosion of all the pent-up things that happened in the 1950s and 1960s, it just came to a boil right here. It all exploded right here."

Two hours outside New York, in the shadow of the Catskill Mountains, the little toy-box town of Woodstock has attracted artists of all kinds since the early 19th century. In the 1960s and 1970s it became associated with Bob Dylan, who hunkered down here with The Band to enjoy the hazy, backwater vibe that continues to this day, albeit with more vegan restaurants, gift shops and wind chimes. Lang and Kornfeld liked the name because it suggested a simple, rural setting; although the festival location moved several times before they settled on Bethel, about 50 miles west. >

"Woodstock was an explosion of all the pent-up things that happened in the 1950s and 1960s. It just came to a boil right here"

"I hitched from Texas, wound up here five days before the show and you could feel the magic in the air," says Duke Devlin, 76, a larger-than-life character who used to do guided tours for Bethel Woods' famous guests. "I mean we were smoking flowers and shit too, man, you know, having a good time, but it's just an amazing place to be. The smell of the place, the aroma, the feel, the karma of this whole place was so magical. You could feel it but you couldn't really describe it at that time, but now I look back I remember that."

"It was just crazy," says Carl. "A whole half a million people came here. The roads jammed up for 30 miles, with people still coming, and we were all on the same wavelength. It just all came together. Everybody agreed the place to be that weekend was right here, and – boom – it happened. I've seen anything like it. Nobody has ever seen anything like it."

Shelli Lipton, 72, runs the dinky Woodstock Museum in nearby Saugerties with her husband, Nathan Koenig. They're both eager to communicate the countercultural values of the 1960s to the next generations. "You don't really remember very much," she says, when quizzed about the festival. "I smoked a lot of pot and took the orange acid. I think if you didn't it would have been hard, going without food or drink. But we had the miracle medicine: marijuana."

When the torrential rains hit, Shelli and her friends took off their clothes and hid them under a tree so they wouldn't get wet. "It was a wonderful event but there really was no food and there wasn't enough water," she says. "When we got hungry, we'd just smoke another joint – there was a lot of comradeship among strangers. That was something I'd never experienced before."

Carl agrees: "There wasn't a hostile word. Nobody was angry. There were people inconvenienced like you wouldn't believe



Above the museum at Bethel Woods
Far left Shelli Lipton and Nathan Koenig
Left Duke Devlin



"When we got hungry, we'd just smoke another joint – there was a lot of comradeship among strangers"

– no food, very little water – but it showed up, it came out of the woods, people handed out food from the houses and farms nearby, and everybody just got along."

And let's not forget the music. After iconic, if rambling, sets from the likes of Joan Baez, The Grateful Dead and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, Jimi Hendrix took to the stage on Monday morning to play to the stragglers, and close the festival. Duke Devlin was among them. "First of all you've got to remember where my mind was:

I'd just spent four days in and out of the clouds," he says now. "When Hendrix played *The Star-Spangled Banner* I thought something was wrong with his guitar, which didn't bother me, but then you hear the tune and the way he put it together, it was like a work of art – beautiful. He was putting the missiles and the bombs [of Vietnam] into it – it was fantastic." More than that, it was one of the defining moments of the 1960s.

In the years that followed, Woodstock's symbolic legacy has outshone the often

Talk of the town

These Woodstock venues are protecting the festival's legacy in their own way

Colony

A fixture on the local scene since 1929, this atmospheric arts centre/bar/ballroom hosts everything from famous touring acts (Mumford & Sons, Josh Ritter) to open mic nights – even weddings. "I love the fact she gets beat up and then put back together the next day," says owner Neil Howard. colonywoodstock.com

Levon Helm Studios

Once the home of The Band's legendary drummer, this out-in-the-woods venue has welcomed everyone from Jackson Browne to The Black Crowes to play its intimate hall and – if they're lucky – fish in the lake. "Sometimes the frogs are louder than the music," admits manager Christy Newman. levonhelm.com

Woodstock Way Hotel

Just metres from the centre of a town that has been "enchanting artists, dreamers, musicians, writers, seekers and bootleggers since 1787", this elegantly eco-friendly option is built on the site of 19th-century tannery. It's less a hotel than a series of beautiful lodges, with each room boasting reclaimed wood features and vinyl collections curated by luminaries such as Woodstock founder Michael Lang. Slip off to sleep to the sound of the waterfall outside. woodstockway.com

depressing reality. Relations between Michael Lang, Artie Kornfeld and their investors soured, and they were forced to sell Woodstock Ventures, plus the rights to the ensuing 1970 documentary.

Not that this stopped Lang from trying to recapture the magic. Woodstock '94, which was based in Saugerties with Dylan, Aerosmith and Metallica, was nicknamed "Greedstock" due to poor planning and inflated prices. Woodstock '99 was held 100 miles away in Rome, headlined by Limp Bizkit, Red Hot Chili Peppers and Rage Against the Machine, and marred by sexual violence and vandalism, hence its nickname "the fall of Rome". Woodstock 50, meanwhile, is due to take place at Watkins Glen International race course some 150 miles away, with Jay-Z, The Killers and Miley Cyrus on the bill, but has been mired in legal issues and is not certain to go ahead. >

The outlook is much sunnier at Bethel Woods, which has a wonderful museum and an open-air venue where they'll be holding a 50th-anniversary screening of the documentary, plus concerts by 1960s stars such as Ringo Starr and Carlos Santana, among others. "What we're doing this year is what we're doing every year," says marketing manager Emily Casey. "Our mission is to inspire, educate and empower through the arts and humanities. We're thrilled to honour the anniversary, but we'll be here long after 2019."

For others the legacy is a personal one. "The legacy has dissipated," allows Carl. "It was a moment in time that can't be recreated, but there is a great peaceful atmosphere and this is pretty much the focal point for a lot of people around the world." When he sees bands play at Bethel Woods, he says, "I'm instantly transported back to 50 years earlier. And sometimes it's the same groups. I saw Pete Townshend here [in 1998] doing *Tommy*, and I'd seen The Who 50 years earlier as a 21-year-old."

"When Jimi Hendrix played The Star-Spangled Banner I thought something was wrong with his guitar"

Whereas Carl already lived in the area, Duke came for the festival and never left. "You were there?" asks a passer-by as Duke poses for a photo. "Still there!" he says with relish, before showing us a picture of his number plate: "YASGUR69". "It was a wonderful event," he says. "Fifty years later and we're still talking about it, you know? If you think about Woodstock and what it was really like, it was a colossal failure. Yeah, it was horrible: the shortage of food, there were too many people, the sound system kept breaking down, there was rain, everyone was soaking wet, all these things that were happening. But, you know, it worked. I think we tasted what it was like to be in a big community where there were no fights, everybody got along. That's what made it so cool."

Standing, alone, in the field where it all happened, imagining a sea of stoned, smiling faces stretching up the hill, there's a feeling of peacefulness that remains to this day. Perhaps it's this sense of togetherness



Above Hendrix in action. Below the restored forest trails at Bethel Woods



Listen to Jimi Hendrix onboard now

that's proved so powerful, especially now when the political climate is making people feel more divided than ever. As Carlos Santana, who made his name at the 1969 festival, put it, "When the Berlin Wall came down, Woodstock was there. When Mandela was liberated, Woodstock was in there. When we celebrated the year 2000, Woodstock was in there. Woodstock is still every day." The *New York Times*, meanwhile, called Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration "Woodstock without the mud".

No wonder so many people wish they'd been there. "Even to this day people say they were at Woodstock that weren't there, because it's an in-thing, you know?" says Duke. "I think it was Graham Nash who said, 'If everyone was there who claimed to be there the Earth would have tilted on its axis.' I think it tilted anyway." Perhaps that's what the scar really signifies. ■

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