

WOODSTOCK: 3 DAYS OF PEACE AND MUSIC

By Ed Carter and Dale Bell

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As with many touchstone films, from CASABLANCA and THE WIZARD OF OZ to STAR WARS and TITANIC, WOODSTOCK presents audiences with the difficult task of separating a complex historical legacy from the actual work. Is it possible to clear away all the ancillary cultural baggage, and not view it with a fresh perspective? Even the word “Woodstock” has become so loaded, and shorthand for an entire cultural phenomenon, an entire generation, and is used by both those who loved, and those who despised the values of the counterculture. Equally hard is differentiating Woodstock the event (August 15-17, 1969), from WOODSTOCK the film, though of course their stories are inextricably linked. Yes, the film is an important sociological document. Unquestionably it’s a work of film art. But producer Bob Maurice and director Michael Wadleigh set out to produce a big, old fashioned, entertaining musical, which they and their many colleagues most definitely succeeded in doing.

Like the Festival, the film almost never happened (in fact, it almost collapsed several times during its gestation), and both exceeded the wildest dreams of their creators. Both had to overcome incredible obstacles, demanded on-the-fly planning and improvising, and required a large number of dedicated people in order to succeed. Certainly it was hard enough trying to mount a festival whose audience swelled to ten times the expected numbers, through rain, mud, and a scarcity sanitation and food. But to produce any film, let alone one destined to become a classic, seems virtually impossible, if one understands how WOODSTOCK was actually made.

A month before the Festival, Albert and David Maysles were far into preparations to film the event, but dropped out with less than a week to go (they would go on to film the Festival’s antithesis four months later, the notorious Altamont, which resulted in GIMME SHELTER). Meanwhile, producer Maurice also negotiated a film deal, while his partner, director Michael Wadleigh, was in Wyoming shooting a mountain climbing film. Their production team was committed to covering the Festival, with or without a deal or financing. They began pre-production planning and filming on-site a week prior to August 15th. On the Thursday before the event, a film deal was finally signed. On Friday, Wadleigh agreed to direct, with only a verbal agreement and a handshake.

At the last minute, a huge team of cinematographers, sound recorders, technicians, and various assistants – around eighty people in all, were organized into a giant crew by associate producer Dale Bell, who was responsible for the logistics of the entire production. Bell rented \$500,000 worth of film equipment, based on his long-

established relationships with camera houses. (All the insurance coverage for it was cancelled once the Festival was declared a disaster area, so some of the filmmakers were then personally responsible for all of it.) Six teams of two members each were assigned to photograph the music performances on the main stage. Each team consisted of a cameraman (they were all men) and an assistant (all women), the latter responsible in part for maintaining a constant supply of new film stock. These teams shot without sound, relying upon the concert recordings. They were hooked up by cables to the concert's AC power system, which proved to be dangerous after the three rainstorms, when the drenched cameramen endured electrical shocks. High humidity often swelled the film stock's emulsions, causing the cameras to jam. Power surges burned out several camera motors, and only three remained operational during Jimi Hendrix's legendary set on Monday morning. Up to four additional teams were sent out into the Festival grounds and environs to acquire coverage of the rest of the event. These teams consisted of a cameraman/director, a sound recorder, and an assistant. Because the crowds made getting around very difficult, these crews would be out in the field for several hours, and had to carry all their equipment and supplies (including raw film stock and battery power) with them, mostly by the assistant, lugging a mountaineering backpack, riding by motorcycle. Assistant directors Larry Johnson, Thelma (then known – and credited – as "T") Schoonmaker and Martin Scorsese coordinated all these complicated activities.

A forty-foot tractor-trailer and three tents behind center stage served as "headquarters" for the film crew. Their "offices" were located in the tents. Motel rooms had been rented in town, but it was

impossible to get to and from the Festival site, so the crew slept on the ground under the trailer. Beneath the stage around a large table, several assistants utilizing light-tight film changing bags (and often standing in ankle-deep mud), constantly loaded raw film stock into camera magazines, and unloaded the exposed footage. This area also became a makeshift camera repair shop.

Ultimately, the production team shot 315,000 feet (that's 60 miles!) of film, and recorded eighty-one hours of sound. Beginning in early September in offices on 80th Street in Manhattan, forty editors working around the clock in three shifts, spent a laborious month just synching up the sound to the picture. This proved particularly difficult, because the onstage cameras had not used any clappers or slates, and the sound was a continuously rolling track. For another month, the filmmakers just watched most all of the synched work print, shown interlocked on six projectors, over and over again. Many of the musicians were invited to view their performances being edited and screened. In December, a reduced team of seventeen moved to Los Angeles and set up their post-production shop on Vine Street and Yucca in Hollywood (just a few blocks north of the Academy's Pickford Center) and lived communally in three rented houses. They were the first in the United States to utilize the new KEM flatbed machines, which allowed editors (led by Nominee – and future two-time Oscar Winner – Schoonmaker) to view several pieces of film simultaneously. Nominees for Sound Larry Johnson and Dan Wallin spent four months mixing the soundtrack.

As work continued furiously from August 1969 until the release in late March of 1970, rancorous conflicts and misunderstandings arose between Warner

Brothers and the filmmakers, particularly over length and style. Plans for a December release proved impossible and were shelved. An initial rough cut clocked in at an incredible fourteen hours. The running time later shrank in half to seven and a half hours. Only ten days before release, it ran four hours, but the filmmakers very reluctantly made more cuts at the last minute, to arrive at the release length of 3 hours and 4 minutes.

No film is easy to make. Many films have tortured production histories. But the story of WOODSTOCK provides a unique example of the hard work of a group of talented and imaginative individuals creating a significant work of entertainment and art. Like much great art, WOODSTOCK only

came to exist through a highly complex series of circumstances, historical trends, technology, and intersection of people. If possible, try to concentrate on WOODSTOCK's cinematic attributes – color, editing, framing, pacing, sound reproduction, and perhaps you'll agree with one critic who wrote, "it happens to be one helluva fine job of film-making."

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