

Remembering the Counterculture – Ang Lee’s *Taking Woodstock*

The year 2009 marked the 40th anniversary of the event that summarized a decade and defined a youth culture – the Woodstock festival in 1969. With a celebration of peace, love and music, Woodstock has become part of our collective memory and stands as a short moment of innocence in a time that was filled with chaos, fear and death. As it is common with anniversaries it is time to look back and reexamine the time through contemporary eyes. But sometimes it is nice to look at the past without the knowledge of the present and just go back in time. This is exactly what movie director Ang Lee has done with his movie *Taking Woodstock* (2009). Ang Lee’s movie is based on the memoir of Elliot Tiber, born Elliot Teichburg, who was responsible for bringing the festival to Bethel, New York, after it had been kicked out of Wallkill, New York, by the local community. *Taking Woodstock* centers on the days leading up to the festival, during preparations and during the festival itself. Instead of trying to tell the entire story, Lee’s in depth look at Elliot Teichburg narrows the story from 500.000 people to one.

So how does Lee accomplish his goal? How is the counterculture depicted? In order to try to answer these questions, it is important to first look at the time leading up to the festival and the youth culture of the sixties. Then one must look at the festival itself, including a look at the documentary “Woodstock” from 1970 which has captured the event and made the Woodstock experience available to those who were not there. Afterwards, the focus will be on *Taking Woodstock* and after a small introduction to the film, a summarize of the previous points will try to answer the questions listed above. Lastly, the meaning of Woodstock will be touched upon.

Beginning in the 1950s, teenagers in America had emerged as a consumer group with tremendous power. Companies aimed their products and advertisement towards the teenagers and soon an entire youth culture had taken form. By 1967 over 90 million people, nearly half of the American population, was under 25 years old, the highest number the country had ever seen. These children had grown up in a wealthy post-war society, with parents who had experienced the great depression and a global war, but who were now living in new houses and driving new cars due to the economic boom after World War II. Now children were told by their parents and by society that there was nothing left for them to complain about, as they had everything they wanted. But underneath the materialistic lifestyle there was a deep anxiety and fear, as peacetime had turned into a Cold War. Communist groups in America were being hounded and prosecuted and the fear of an atomic war

was ever present¹. If this was the best time the country had ever seen, was materialistic affluence then all that really mattered?

This constant anxiety and confusion left many of the young people to seek a different lifestyle than the ones of their parents and the older generations. They were trying to make sense of the world around them and soon a youth culture vastly different from the overall culture was taking form all over the country. The so-called counterculture was mainly about rejecting the social values of the older generation, especially regarding racial segregation and the support of the Vietnam War; but it had many different ways to do it. While some youths were more politically active and dedicated to the anti-war movement or civil-rights issues, others, like the Hippies, were more culturally active. They rejected the conformity of society and dreamed of starting their own, better world.

A vision of a utopian society became reality for a short while in 1967 in the Haight-Ashbury area of San Francisco, as Hippies took over the area. The Hippies dreamed about running a society that was not fuelled by money and materialism, but by love, peace and community. San Francisco was the place to be if you wanted a new way of living and soon the area was filled with the restless energy of youth.

But the youth culture was divided into many groups with different aims for their counterculture. One of the key figures in the San Francisco Hippie community, Allen Cohen sums up the split by saying:

“[Michael] Bowen and I had become concerned about the philosophical split that was developing in the youth movement. The anti-war and free speech movement in Berkeley thought the Hippies were too disengaged and spaced out. Their influence might draw the young away from resistance to the war. The Hippies thought the anti-war movement was doomed to endless confrontations with the establishment which would recoil with violence and fascism. We decided that to strengthen the youth culture, we had to bring the two poles together.”²

Allen Cohen and Michael Bowen therefore organized “A Gathering of the Tribes for a Human Be-In“, which took place in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park in January 1967. Over 20.000 people showed up. There were no famous musicians, no politicians spoke and there was little to gather people. But the people came and spent the day listening to music and expressing and sharing ideas

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/love/filmmore/pt.html> (Transcript)

² <http://s91990482.onlinehome.us/allencohen/be-in.html>

of peace, love and community.

In June the Monterey Pop Festival took place in Monterey, California, kicking off the Summer of Love. 32 bands played from the 16-18 June in front of a daily audience of 90,000 people. It was the first time that bands met and were able to see each other perform and also the first time that many of the bands played in front of such a large audience. The festival was a well-organized, charity fundraising festival and with all 32 bands appearing for free, the event became a success. The Monterey recipe, in terms of style and organization, was soon copied all over America and many other music festivals sprung up across America, culminating in Woodstock two years later. Between Monterey Pop festival in 1967 and Woodstock Music and Arts Fair in 1969, a lot had changed. The world had lost Martin Luther King Jr., and only two months later, Robert Kennedy. Race riots were spreading all across the nation and there was war in the streets echoing those in Vietnam. The students rebelled at Berkeley, Howard, Harvard and Columbia Universities, and Neil Armstrong had walked on the moon. This was all happening so fast, that it was difficult to make sense of it all.

The different sides of the counterculture had slowly come together and Woodstock became the place to show it. The Woodstock Music and Arts Fair was organized by John Roberts and Joel Rosenman who had the finances and Michael Lang and Arnie Kornfeld who had the creative ideas, as Lang had previously produced the Miami pop Festival in 1968, with great success. Unlike the Monterey Pop festival, Woodstock was organized with a clear aim to make a profit and it had the three-day ticket price set at \$18, which today would be around \$105. The slogan “Woodstock – 3 Days of Peace and Music” combined the anti-war sentiment with the music. The organizers hoped that by emphasizing the word peace and placing a white dove, the symbol of peace, on the official poster for the festival, the audience would choose peace instead of violence both during the festival itself and in general³.

The festival was scheduled to take place in Wallkill, New York, but the local community protested as they did not want those “hippie freaks” in their town and the festival was kicked out. With just a month to find a new location and with tickets already sold, Lang and the rest of the organizers were thrilled when they got a call from a man called Elliot Teichburg in White Lake, a mere 40 miles from Wallkill. In White Lake the organizers were introduced to Max Yasgur who had a 600-acre farm in the nearby town of Bethel. Yasgur was willing to let the festival take place

³ <http://www.edjusticeonline.com/woodstock/history/index.htm>

on his dairy fields for \$50,000 and the promise that they would clean up after themselves. With the location finally in place, preparations could begin. Tickets were being sold in large numbers and by the beginning of the festival the original expectation of 150,000 had to be corrected as thousands of young people flocked to the festival site. The night before the festival was set to start, the organizers were so much behind schedule that they decided to cut down the fence, as they had to concentrate on completing the stage instead of trying to keep people out. This made the festival free and as the rumor spread more people journeyed to Bethel, blocking traffic for miles and miles. With the main roads blocked, the musicians had a difficult time getting from their hotels to the festival site and many had to be flown in by helicopter. This delayed most of the bands and the festival was behind schedule even before it began. Richie Havens, who was set to start the festival, was even asked several times by the organizers to go back on stage in order to fill the gap until the next act was ready. This delay also meant that the concert ended in the early morning on Monday the 18th of August with Jimi Hendrix playing the national anthem in a completely new way. This iconic performance became a discordant symbol of the counterculture's love for their country but a country that they wanted to change.

With so many young people gathered in the same place, things were likely to go wrong. The organizers were not prepared for the amount of people that turned up, so sanitary facilities, food and clean water was all in high demand. The organizers decided to fly in The Hog Farm, a hippie commune from Tujunga, California, to run a free kitchen and the military provided food for the audience. There was also established a first aid clinic and a hippie police force. The most common injuries at the festival was drug overdoses and though the organizers time and time again warned the audience against using the hard drugs that was going around, many did not settle for "just" smoking marihuana. Over the course of the three days the festival was going on, two people died at Woodstock. One was run over by a tractor as he was sleeping in a cornfield and the other died of a heroin drug overdose. There are also reports of children being born at Woodstock. "Almost statistically, you'd think if there are a half-million people, and half of them were women, and 95 percent of them were of childbearing age, and fertile, and active. Just statistically, someone would have had to pop a baby."⁴ said Myron Gittell, who wrote a book about the medical care at the festival. But during his research he has not been able to find any of these Woodstock babies or their mothers and the myth remains.

⁴ <http://www.recordonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090719/ENTERTAIN90/307199987&cid=sitesearch>

Max Yasgur, who owned the fields where Woodstock took place, has been called the “Angel of Woodstock” as he was the one responsible to saving the festival. He was born in 1919 and after studying at New York University he returned to farming. He was the biggest milk producer in Sullivan County and even as the local residents threatened to boycott his milk unless he stopped the festival from taking place, Yasgur was willing to risk it and agreed to host Woodstock. He arrived at the festival site Sunday the 17th to talk business with the organizers, but as some of the audience members saw him, they asked him to go on stage, so that they could say thank you for all that he had done for them. He had not only provided the site for the festival, but also free food, free water and free milk from his farm for the “kids”, as he called them. He took to the stage and held a speech lasting only 1.5 minute. He finished the speech by saying: “But above that, the important thing that you have proven to the world is that a half a million kids – and I call you kids because I have children that are older than you are – a half a million young people can get together and have three days of fun and music and have nothing but fun and music, and I God Bless You for it!”⁵ He was the old-fashioned republican farmer, that normally should have opposed helping these weird looking young people, but he saw something in them and luckily he was right to help them.

With the sudden decision to make the festival free, the organizers and the Woodstock Ventures company lost a lot of profit and the festival became a financial disaster as Woodstock Ventures was left \$1million in debt. The only thing that actually drew a profit was the documentary film and the release of the soundtrack made during the three days. The organizers only owned a small percentage of the rights to the documentary and the soundtrack and therefore it could not cover the financial lose and it was not until 1980 that Woodstock Ventures finally broke even⁶.

During the preparation and the three days of the festival, a documentary crew captured the event on tape and the *Woodstock* documentary was released in 1970. The documentary was filmed by six cameramen under the direction of Michael Wadleigh, all from the New York University film community. Driven by their love of rock music, they captured the preparations of the festival, the arrival of the audience, the concerts and conducted interviews with the people who attended the festival. From 120 miles of tape it was cut down to a 184 minutes long documentary film.

Michael Wadleigh, who directed the movie and Martin Scorsese who edited parts of it, talked from the beginning about using split screens in order to get as much footage into the documentary

⁵ Evans, Mike *Woodstock – Three Days That Rocked the World* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2009), p. 46 + p.124

⁶ Evans, p.250

as they could. This visual effect meant that the documentary not only became a concert film, but also an audience film as audience reactions to the music also was included. This was the single most important choice the crew made as it added a sense of being there oneself when watching the documentary, which became a success. When the movie premiered people of all ages flocked to the cinemas to see what it was all about. It won Best Documentary at the Academy Awards in 1971 and has since been released in a Director's cut version in 1994 with a running time of 228 minutes, adding mostly additional concert footage. Wadleigh has received a lot of praise for his work on the documentary, which is called a milestone within the documentary field and especially within the concert films genre. Martin Scorsese did not finish editing the documentary but he has later become one of the most admired directors of our time. He has combined his love for rock music with his love for movies several times throughout his career, most notably as he directed "*No direction home: Bob Dylan*" from 2005, a documentary about Dylan in the 1960's and "*Shine a Light*" from 2008, which is a documentary film about the Rolling Stones.

In the foreword to the book "Woodstock – Three Days That Rocked the World" Scorsese credits the Woodstock documentary, which he edited parts of himself, for placing Woodstock in our cultural memory. He says "I think that without the film Woodstock, the concert, would not be more than a footnote to the social and cultural history of the 1960's – represented by a still photo in a picture book, a line or two in the history books."⁷, Scorsese argues that had people not seen the massive amount of footage, which captured both the amazing concerts, but also the audience and the atmosphere of the festival, Woodstock would simply have been another music festival in a line of many. To follow Scorsese' line of argument, one can look to compare Woodstock to Monterey Pop festival.

Though, Monterey Pop Festival is seen as the first of the open air music festivals, it has not received the myth and status of Woodstock. Monterey was also filmed and made into documentary, called *Monterey Pop* directed by D.A. Pennebaker, but the difference is that *Monterey Pop* solely focused on the musical performances and only touched upon the counterculture, even though the festival took place during the Summer of Love. *Woodstock* on the other hand is as much a documentary about music as it is about the counterculture and that moment in time where the two elements became one. It has given us iconic images that we remember and recognize. But Monterey Pop, like Woodstock also provided iconic moments, such as Hendrix setting his guitar on fire at the

⁷ Evans, p.7

end of his set. It was also at Monterey that Janis Joplin is said to have given her best concert ever, but unfortunately her management forbade D.A. Pennebaker to film it, which only adds to the myth of the concert⁸.

Although Scorsese is right about the importance of the documentary in creating the Woodstock myth and legacy, one must also not forget that Woodstock is also about numbers. If only the expected amount of people had shown up, maybe the event would not have generated so much interest in the media. But it so happened that 500.000 young people showed up ready to hear some of the best rock musicians of the time, but just as much to be a part of the event itself. The festival was talked about in newspapers, magazines, on the radio and on television across the entire nation and the world and every skeptic was proven wrong, as the audience remained calm throughout the festival.

Taking Woodstock tries to capture the spirits of Woodstock as it follows Elliot Teichburg⁹ through the preparations, from when the Woodstock coordinators fly in by helicopter to inspect the grounds and negotiate the price with Yasgur to the hippies' invasion of the small towns of White Lake and Bethel. Always with Teichburg in the center, the movie follows him as he is being caught up in an entirely new world, with people so different from the local people and more importantly, different from Teichburg himself.

The real-life Elliott Teichburg is gay. During Woodstock, Teichburg had not yet come out to his parents and the community in White Lake and he therefore lived a closeted lifestyle whenever he was at his parents' motel in White Lake and only being truly himself whenever he was in New York. Lee has chosen to include Teichburg's sexuality in *Taking Woodstock* and we see how Woodstock brings with it a freedom for Teichburg to be himself, throughout the movie slowly learning to accept himself as a gay man and not being afraid to break away from his parents. He is helped to this realization by a transvestite called Velma who helps with the security at the motel. By seeing how Velma, by being confident in herself, is accepted by others and especially by Teichburg's old father, Teichburg decides to out to his father at the end of the movie.

Ang Lee has covered a lot of history and gives a detailed view of how the Woodstock festival came to be. However, *Taking Woodstock* does not provide the audience with the real Woodstock experience in one area in particular and that is regarding the music. *Taking Woodstock* does not

⁸ Evans, Mike, *Woodstock – Three Days That Rocked the World* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2009)

⁹ As Elliot Teichburg changed his name years after the Woodstock festival, his birth name will be used here, just as it is in *Taking Woodstock*.

have a single concert scene in it nor appearances by any of the musicians. The decision to exclude the music part of the festival from the movie was already taken when Ang Lee chose the book *Taking Woodstock* as his story. Though very much at the center of the event, Teichburg ironically never made it to one single concert during the festival as he was too busy at his parents' motel or caught up by the events surrounding the festival. This means that one of the main reasons that attracted people to Woodstock in the first place, namely the collection of the best rock bands at the time, is not included in the movie in any way, shape or form. This is one area where Lee may divide audiences. Some would say that the lack of music is not that important, as many who attended the festival never made it near the stage and due to the technology that was available at the time, the sound could not reach everyone in the audience, thereby making Teichburg no different than many others who attended the festival. Another argument is that the festival quickly took on a life of its own, which was more about the peace, love and community ideas of the Hippie movement than about listening to rock music. Others would focus on the fact that rock music was essential for the rise of the counterculture and it is equally essential for gathering 500.000 young people on a field in Bethel, New York, and therefore must be a central part when talking about the Woodstock festival. As the counterculture and rock music were so intertwined, one could not exist without the other. It is clear that Lee has wanted to stay true to Teichburg's original story and even if Lee would have liked to include the music, staying true to Teichburg's story was more important.

Ang Lee has done extensive research on the subject before taking on the project, which clearly shows. He has been greatly inspired by previous Woodstock movies, especially the documentary and its split screen effect, which Lee uses when he is trying to capture the atmosphere of the festival. Lee wanted *Taking Woodstock* to be as authentic as possible. He has done this by capturing the look of Woodstock and the time perfectly, right down to every little detail. Lee has said that the most difficult part was to find extras as many of the young people today has too much determination in their eyes and Lee wanted them to have a mellower expression. The extras also could not be too fit and muscular and they needed to have longer hair and for the nude scenes, pubic hair. This meant that the casting of extras had to take place months in advance as people needed time to make these physical changes.

Throughout the entire movie the extras in the background are recreating scenes or images that actually took place at Woodstock and the people who attended it. There are nuns giving the peace sign, an interview with the man emptying the portable toilets, a couple wrapped in a blanket and

people sliding down the hill in the mud. Many of these images that we recognize as being from Woodstock is taken from the documentary film and recreated in *Taking Woodstock*. It is primarily through the extras and through the supporting roles that the counterculture is described. Lee has chosen to copy instead of commenting on the counterculture and he has left it up to the movie audiences to form their own opinions of the counterculture. But for audiences who are not familiar with the images of Woodstock, a film like this, being so close to reality visually, can be seen almost as a caricature and a parody of the sixties, instead of the tribute that it was supposed to be. Though perfectly sure that Lee's movie can stand on its own, many audiences especially the younger ones, would benefit from seeing it in connection with the Woodstock documentary, thereby again establishing the importance of the documentary.

It is difficult to say whether or not Lee has achieved telling the Woodstock story through one person, as it depends on one's point of view. If the movie is being watched as a coming-of-age-story of a young gay man in a time where everything changed, then Lee has achieved his goals. On the other hand if the movie is supposed to be more of a remembering-the-Woodstock-experience-type of film then one must say the music is definitely missing and the film seems incomplete. But to be fair, and in Lee's defense, can the spirit, the music and the magic of Woodstock ever truly be recreated and should it stop directors like Lee from trying to recreate small bits of it?

Taking Woodstock ends with Teichburg finally standing in front of the stage only to find that the stage is being torn down as the festival is over. Michael Lang rides up on a horse and stands next to him and talks about the next beautiful concert he is going to organize with the Rolling Stones, a reference to the Altamont Free Concert which took place in December 1969. Altamont was headlined by the Rolling Stones and security was provided by Hells Angels. During the Rolling Stones' set a young man, who was carrying a gun and trying to get on to the stage, was stabbed to death by a member of the Hells Angels. In an interview Ang Lee comments on Woodstock and Altamont by saying "It's the last page of our collective memory of the age of innocence. Then things turned ugly and would never be the same again."¹⁰ Whereas Woodstock is generally viewed as the culmination and the last great moment of the hippie movement, Altamont is viewed as the end of the movement and the death of the Woodstock Nation.

So what is the Woodstock legacy today 42 years after the event? Woodstock Ventures tried to copy the cultural and not financial success by making Woodstock an annual event, though in a new

¹⁰ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/6408957/Ang-Lee-interview-for-Taking-Woodstock.html>

location and with better planning and though the festivals continues to this day, it never again had the same feel to it as it did in 1969. The Museum at Bethel Woods, which opened in 2006, is located at the original site of the festival and is filled with everything Woodstock. Photographs, movies and artifacts helps tell the story of the event and the decade and an outdoor amphitheater helps keep the history of concerts on the diary fields alive.

In 2009 the 40th anniversary of Woodstock was celebrated. The year was filled with new releases of books and movies about the festival, such as *Taking Woodstock* and Max Yasgur's cousin Abigail Yasgur even released a children's book called "*Max Said Yes!*" that tells the story of Woodstock through short rhymes and colorful illustrations and placing Yasgur as the hero of the story. A stamp was also made honoring of the event that has become a part of our collective memory.

Woodstock has been romanticized as three days of absolute love and peace, even though chaos also was very much present and not everyone had a positive experience. The fact that the festival was more of a capitalistic manifestation, than the ideal non-profit hippie town, has not been given much space in the history books and instead Woodstock has been edged into our minds as a kind of utopia, as Ang Lee calls it¹¹. Though the anniversary was convenient opportunity for us to remember Woodstock, maybe it is also time for the young generation to remember Woodstock and the acceptance and tolerance that characterized it.

To close with a return to Martin Scorsese's foreword, Scorsese finishes by saying:

"What the movie did, and continues to do, is to distill the Woodstock experience and, more important, keep it vibrant and alive. The footnote has become a touchstone, a way for my generation to remind ourselves of who we were then and to measure the road we have traveled since. It has also been, more significantly, a way for newer generations to get in touch with the chaotic spirit of the 1960's. Or, rather, a part of that spirit – the happier part."¹².

Most of the people, who were at Woodstock, found themselves changed by the experience. It has become an iconic event that people brag about attending, while others kick themselves for missing out on. But fortunately, the spirit of Woodstock is not limited to those who were actually there on that field in Bethel in 1969. It has spread through time and reached new generations as Scorsese remembers and it continues to stand as this short moment in time when America was at war in

¹¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/6408957/Ang-Lee-interview-for-Taking-Woodstock.html>

¹² Evans, p.7

IP Berlin: Europe and the US in the 1960's - Coming Together or Coming Apart?

Session 3: The Summer of Love and Protest: European and American Youth Culture in the 1960s

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University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Due, 11

Vietnam and 500.000 young people gathered to celebrate an alternative world where peace was possible.

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