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Peace Or Chaos: The Media's Legacy of Woodstock & Altamont

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ABSTRACT

The Woodstock Festival and the Altamont Free Concert of 1969 represent two defining moments in the history of the counterculture movement, reflecting its ideals, contradictions, and ultimate decline. Woodstock, despite logistical failures such as food shortages and overcrowding, became emblematic of peace and unity, largely due to its positive media portrayal. In contrast, Altamont, marred by violence and the fatal stabbing of Meredith Hunter, was widely seen as the dark end of the hippie era.

This paper explores the organization, execution, and media coverage of both events, analyzing how the press and documentaries framed their legacies. While a mythologized image overshadowed Woodstock's chaotic reality, media reportage and films amplified the failures of Altamont. Through an examination of newspaper articles, firsthand accounts, and visual media, this study highlights how selective reporting and editorial bias shape historical narratives.

By comparing these two festivals, the paper reveals how media can define cultural memory, reinforcing or reshaping public perceptions over time. The findings offer insights into broader questions of media influence in shaping societal understanding of major events.

KEYWORDS: *Counterculture, rock-and-roll, Woodstock 69', Altamont Free Concert, The Rolling Stones, hippie culture*

INTRODUCTION

It all started in 1967 with an ad in *TheWall Street Journal*: "Young men with unlimited capital looking for interesting, legitimate business opportunities and business propositions." What followed was an unlikely collaboration that would culminate in one of the most iconic cultural events of the twentieth century. Two years later, half a million people gathered on a farm in Bethel, New York, for what would be billed as "three days of peace and music," witnessing the most iconic musical performances of the decade. However, Woodstock was far from the utopia we remember it as; plagued with heavy rain, food shortages, deaths, and overdoses. Still, Woodstock became a culturally defining moment that lived on through movies, books, and songs, symbolizing the peace and love of 1960s counterculture.

Four months later, the ideals established at Woodstock came crashing down when Mick Jagger, the lead singer of the Rolling Stones as well as the initiator of the Altamont Free Concert learned a hard lesson: a motorcycle gang fueled by beer is a poor choice for hired security. Rolling Stones' attempt to emulate the spirit of Woodstock through a free concert quickly descended into violence, shattering the ideal of "peace and love" it sought to embody. The Altamont Concert on a racetrack, which also drew nearly half a million people, ended with one murder, hundreds injured, and a crowd far from united. Headlines solidified the event's dark legacy and labeled Altamont as the downfall of the counterculture, immortalizing it as a tragic turning point.

The term counterculture appeared in the late 1960s, redefining what people previously referred to as youth culture. While youth culture focused on how adolescents lived and expressed themselves, counterculture signified a deeper shift. It recognized the growing influence of young people as a driving force for societal change, challenging traditional norms and advocating for new values. This evolution reflected the younger population's potential to reinvent society through distinct ideas, attitudes, and actions. The counterculture movement was popularized in the 1960s in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, rejecting conventional societal standards of conformity and consumerism, traditional hierarchies, and establishments in the post-World War II era while advocating for peace, love, and revolution.

Music, particularly rock-and-roll music, became a medium for these distinct cultural values. With the rise of singer-songwriter Bob Dylan, the so-called "British Invasion" led by The Beatles, and the appearance of many American rock bands and artists such as The Grateful Dead and Jimi Hendrix, music festivals and rock concerts attended by crowds of young people became more common during the late 1960s. The music frequently showcased themes of love, peace, and freedom, and the music gatherings embodied the

youths' vision for an alternative society. Drug use, which was intertwined with the counterculture movement, was prevalent at these assemblages. Psychedelics, in particular, became a tool for spiritual enlightenment, artistic inspiration, and personal liberation from social norms. The interaction of music and drug use at these gatherings was both a form of rebellion and an embodiment of the counterculture's alternative lifestyle.

The convergence of music, drug use, and newly emerging recalcitrant ideals not only shaped the colorful experiences of the 1960s but also set the stage for how these events were interpreted by the media. Woodstock and Altamont stand as examples of the media's role in defining the public's perception of the counterculture. The mainstream press and visual media framed Woodstock as an idyllic celebration of peace and love, overlooking its failures, while Altamont became the poster child of the counterculture's failures. These portrayals, often steeped in bias and sensationalism, raise questions about the truth and how much of history is shaped by perception. By synthesizing a wide range of sources, this paper seeks to recount the events of Woodstock and Altamont as accurately as possible, exploring how media narratives influenced the cultural identity and legacy of the 1960s counterculture.

SECTION I: WOODSTOCK

The 1960s were a turning point for mainstream music in America, with the music scene flourishing and diversifying in unprecedented ways. Beatlemania swept over the American public, and the now-ubiquitous rock-and-roll culture materialized through the rise ofhome-grown artists such as The Doors, Jefferson Airplane, Jimi Hendrix, The Grateful Dead, and so many more. Amidst the booming counterculture of the 1960s, four men, all 27 or younger, came together through an advertisement in *TheWall Street Journal*. Thus began the journey toward what would become one of the most culturally significant events in American history: the Woodstock Festival of 1969.

John Roberts, heir to the Block Drug Company fortune, and his Yale Law School graduated roommate, Joel Rosenman, posted an advertisement in the March 22, 1967 issue of *The Wall Street Journal*: "Young men with unlimited capital looking for interesting, legitimate business opportunities and business propositions." Originally, the advertisement was intended to generate ideas for a television series that Roberts and Rosenman had envisioned. However, the two men later wanted to bring attention to a new recording studio in New York City they had been constructing, so Roberts and Rosenman created an opportunity to bring the Woodstock Four, as Roberts, Rosenman, Artie Kornfeld, and Michael Lang became known. In response to the more than five thousand replies that the two received, Roberts and Rosenman met with headshop owner/music promoter Lang and Capitol Records vice president Kornfeld. The four came up with a plan to host a big music festival to promote local artists, creating Woodstock Ventures in the process.

As the name suggests, the organizers wanted to hold their festival in Woodstock, New York. Home of the Woodstock Art Colony and many artists, including singer-songwriter Bob Dylan, the town of Woodstock became the ideal spot for hosting their festival. However, many long-time residents of the town, especially those disturbed by the influx of "unsavory types," vehemently opposed hosting the festival, which at the time anticipated around 50,000 people. In response, local politicians passed health, safety, and traffic regulations that essentially eliminated the possibility of hosting a music festival of that magnitude. Locals opposed further attempts of the four men the gathering in nearby towns including Saugerties and Wallkill. Eventually, Woodstock Ventures settled on hosting the festival near the hamlet of White Lake on investor Max Yasgur's 600-acre farm in Bethel, New York—nearly sixty miles from Woodstock, despite public concerns about health, sanitation, and traffic.

The Woodstock Four adopted a non-discriminatory "most-favored nation" type fee policy when booking musicians, essentially offering to pay musicians roughly the same price no matter their popularity. This attracted many lesser-known acts such as Iron Butterfly and Country Joe and the Fish but led The Moody Blues, a well-established band at the time, to reject the offer. Woodstock Ventures worked with several booking agents, most notably Bill Graham, who established himself in the rock music world through his Fillmore East rock venue and Fillmore auditorium, both in Manhattan. Eventually, Woodstock booked a lineup of acts with wide-ranging levels of popularity, ranging from Jimi Hendrix to Melanie, who debuted at Woodstock.

The coordinators of Woodstock sensed a need to bridge the cultural gap between festival organizers attendees. The group of producers, promoters, and the direct employees – largely business executives clad in suits and ties – were not part of the youth culture. They wanted a way to communicate effectively with their audience demographic, which they predicted would be mostly young, urban hippies. To resolve this issue, Stanley Goldstein, who organized the campgrounds at Woodstock, recruited a collective based in California but with membership in New York that was knwn as the Hog Farm Commune, during a traveling show. Goldstein expressed in an interview,

> And so, we felt very strongly that we had a group that had its own integrity, that was large enough to be the core of our direct relationship with the people who came, who were a part of the culture, who understood the problems and how to relate to them and address them in very real ways.

Goldstein also expressed a concern that the crowd would be mostly city-based, with little or no prior involvement at overnight outdoor events. Bringing their outdoor experience and representing from an alternative lifestyle, the Hog Farm Commune contributed significantly to not only the safety but also the atmosphere of the festival. Its members quickly became involved in various parts of the festival from

construction, security, campgrounds, first aid, and food preparation.

Posters and newspaper advertisements publicized the festival to the nation. At $18 a ticket for three days (translated to roughly $154 in 2024), the festival was relatively affordable. The event's slogan, "Three Days of Peace and Music … An Aquarian Exposition," paired with the now-famous dove and guitar logo, roused excitement among enthusiasts all over the country. Woodstock's advertising, unlike previous rock festivals, focused not on the names of the performers but on drawing attention to the event as some kind of "all-encompassing hippie happening." As the festival came together piece by piece, the public closely followed every step, partly due to Lang's advertising campaign. As Richie Havens, the first performer at Woodstock recounts,

> I heard on the radio all around the country about this festival that was going to happen on the East Coast, and the news was 'Well, they found a place to do it.' And the next two days the news was, 'Well, they don't have a place to do it.' So mind you, all around the country, everybody's hearing this big music news item. When there was a finality of the location, people started to leave their places then. There were people from Alaska, from California - they drove from everywhere.

The mystique surrounding Woodstock, to be staged on an idyllic dairy farm, also attracted attention by drawing a sharp contrast to the previous festivals such as the Atlantic City Pop Music Festival, which had taken place on a racetrack. Prospective concertgoers were wooed with promotional language: "The direction spread across the nation: Head north on the New York State Thruway, get off on Exit 16, take the Quickway west, and look for the signs to the show." Only weeks after the news of Woodstock went out, national attention focused on the extravaganza, waiting for its metamorphosis in upstate New York on the first weekend in August.

In less than a month, the Bastard Sons, as the Woodstock construction crews called themselves, and members of the Hog Farm Commune erected the structures the festival needed, including an elevated 8000' x 8000' stage and several sound and lighting towers. Various accounts of the construction of the stage suggest that it was a miracle that its platform, as well as the sound and lighting towers–constructed hastily–held up throughout the festival, as crowds of attendees climbed onto the towers throughout the duration of the event.

A lack of organization and pervasive under-preparedness plagued the festival. By 7 a.m. on August 15, the first day of the spectacle, an official schedule of performances and a finalized list of artists had not been released. Michael Lang appointed Chip Monck, who was originally in charge of lighting, to be the master of ceremonies the very morning, when it became clear that Lang had no time time to hire anybody else. The ticket gates and fences had never really been finished, partly due to the tens of thousands of concertgoers who arrived days in advance and camped out in the performance area. This led to the failure of the New York State Police Department and the Hog Farm Commune, who the organizers hired for security, to keep out the unexpectedly large influx of concert-goers. The organizers anticipated that around 150,000 people would gather on Yasgur's farm, however, during the three days of the festival, somewhere between 250,000 and 750,000 showed up to partake in the Woodstock phenomenon. Eventually, the organizers complied with the public and made the festival a free-for-all, a "be-in," as San Francisco had popularized. By the time Richie Havens kickstarted the musical performances, his bass player had not yet arrived because he was trapped in traffic 25 miles from the festival. However, as much as imperfections marked the musical quality of the concert, the spontaneity of the festival also sparked passionate moments. For example, Richie Havens' iconic song "Freedom" was improvised on stage when he had no other songs to play for the audience. Havens recounts "It is what I thought of what I felt - the vibration which was freedom - which I thought at that point we had already accomplished."

Country Joe McDonald's impromptu solo set followed Richie Havens as all the other artists had either not yet arrived or didn't have their equipment. Meanwhile, musicians and organizers were busy navigating the hours-long traffic jam to ensure artists arrived by their scheduled time. The organizers broadcasted through AM and FM radios, "Stop trying to get to the Woodstock Festival," but the number of attendees was steadily increasing. Eventually, as Rosenman recounts, most artists and event personnel rode on helicopters to get in and out of the site of the festival. Some scheduled bands such as Iron Butterfly canceled their act due to the traffic. Others, like John B. Sebastian, who was not originally on the set list, agreed to perform, despite being underprepared and in Sebastian's case, not knowing the words to his own compositions.

However, the chaotic kickoff of the three-day festival marked the beginning of a truly culturally significant moment. In the words of journalist Robert Spitz, "Something magical transformed the stage when John Sebastian ambled out, waving at his fans, and it was at that moment, [organizer John] Morris thought, that the Woodstock Music and Art Fair truly became a festival." The first day continued with performances of Sweetwater, Bert Sommer, Tim Hardin, Ravi Shanker, Melanie, Arlo Guthrie, and Joan Baez, to an audience of about half a million. The festival became a scene unto itself. Beyond the musical performances, the event featured an American Indian art exhibit, a "Movement City" pavilion where different political groups distributed radical literature, a food service tent overseen by the Hog Farms Commune, a children's playground, an open stage area, drug-dealing corners in the woods, and even "trip tents" set up by volunteers for people on bad acid trips. At some point during the sets, someone delivered a kilo-pound of cocaine to the stage; it was then distributed into small bags to the artists. Despite the downpours, which terminated the performances

four hours early on the first day of the festival, the morale of the crowd remained high as the second day brought forth 14 more memorable acts by acclaimed artists including Keef Hartley, Santana, Creedence Clearwater Revival, The Grateful Dead, The Incredible String Band, Janis Joplin, the Who, and Jefferson Airplane. However, like the previous day, artists suffered from various difficulties; notably, The Grateful Dead struggled with an inconsistent sound system, and Janis Joplin's performance was possibly marred by drug and alcohol use.

The third day showcased performances by artists including Joe Cocker, Country Joe & The Fish, Blood, Sweat & Tears, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, and Jimi Hendrix. By the time Hendrix, the final artist of the festival, performed, there were only 50,000 attendees left. Nevertheless, his closing rendition of "Star-Spangled Banner" touched the hearts of all those who witnessed it and those who listened to the live recording in the years that followed. However, behind the scenes, according to bankroller John Roberts, "it was crisis time." Throughout the past three days of Woodstock, the organizers had not been able to earn back the money they'd invested into the festival, and they handed out bogus checks to the food vendor, Food for Love. A group of outraged customers burnt down two Food for Love stands with a flaming torch for selling "five-dollar hot dogs or something." Nearby grocery stores ran out of food, and the free food served at the festival consisted mostly of rolled oats and bulgur wheat served with stir-fried vegetables. Radio broadcasting continually urged anybody who was still en route to the festival to "bring whatever you can" as the vendors had ran out of food. The chief of security of Woodstock Ventures, Wes Pomeroy, contacted the New York State Police to declare the site of the festival a disaster area when it became evident that medical supplies and staff were not adequate for the half-million concertgoers. Some politicians in the nearby state capital of Albany attempted to shut down the festival by calling the National Guard to remove the masses of people who had assembled. Eventually, Governor Rockefeller declared the festival a disaster area, and Woodstock Ventures secured the supplies and personnel they needed by flying them in via army helicopters.

Despite the chaos, the challenges at Woodstock demonstrated the collaboration and selflessness of many in the crowd. Attendees shared plastic coverings and coats under the rain, nearby communities donated trucks full of food and supplies, and volunteers helped care for the sick and assisted vehicles that were trapped in the thick mud. When the director of operations for Woodstock Ventures, Mel Lawrence, asked the attendees to clean up the area as they prepared for the following acts, the audience quickly complied with the request. After the festival ended, about eight thousand people still camped in surrounding areas; many helped to clean up the site alongisde the cleanup crew. Many spectators recall the festival with fondness, remembering it as an event of communal love and unity. Ultimately, just like the counterculture movement itself, the Woodstock festival displayed what it had proclaimed: the values of peace and love – despite significant shortcomings.

The legacy left by the Woodstock festival is evident from its continued resonance. Often remembered as an epitome of the 1960s counterculture, the festival represented an escape from mainstream values reflected in consumerism and war. At the same time, the event was commercial in nature. American entertainer Wavy Gravy had said, "Let's face it: Woodstock was created for wallets. It was designed to make bucks. And then the universe took over and did a little dance." Riddled with accidents and chaos, the event witnessed three deaths, countless injuries, over 700 overdoses, and the birth of at least two babies. A tractor accidentally ran over a 17 year-old boy in a nearby field while he was asleep, and two spectators died from drug overdoses. The most common injury at the festival was foot lacerations, due to attendees opting to walk barefoot instead of donning their muddy shoes. Despite all of this, or perhaps because of these reasons above, people remember Woodstock as one of the greatest cultural milestones in American history. Various media outlets closely followed the event from its planning stages, throughout its three-day duration, and through its aftermath. Reports and opinions greatly varied. On the one hand, there were negative accounts from mainstream media such as *The New York Times* and *New York Daily News*, which described the festival with headlines including "Hippies Mired in Sea of Mud," "400,000 Flood Site; Rock Crisis Eases Off." On the other hand, underground newspapers, including *The East Village Other*, printed personal accounts praising the atmosphere at Woodstock.

SECTION II: ALTAMONT

Despite dominating the rock scene with hit singles and albums, the Rolling Stones were financially broke in early 1969. Manager Allen Klein's mishandling of the band's finances, combined with the Stones' lavish lifestyle, left them in debt that far outweighed their assets. This incentivized the U.K.-based Stones to host a month-long U.S. tour in November, especially since they missed the Woodstock festival that garnered international attention, because Mick Jagger was filming a movie in Australia. Yet, this tour would also plant the seed for one of the most notorious music festivals in U.S. history: Altamont.

When the Stones' American. tour began, demand for tickets soared. They charged as much as $15 per ticket for a single concert as the quickest way to alleviate their financial burdens. As a final stop on their tour, The Rolling Stones decided to host a free concert in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco on December 6, 1969 partly as a gift for their fans and partly to counter complaints about the excessive ticket prices. The event would also include other popular bands from the Bay area: Santana, Jefferson Airplane, the Flying Burrito Brothers, Crosby, Stills & Nash, and The Grateful Dead. Several of these acts, coincidentally, had played at Woodstock back in August. Furthermore, Mick Jagger had plans to make a film about the

free concert, which would presumably generate even more revenue.

At this time, the West Coast hippie culture had decayed significantly. San Francisco had been the epicenter of rock and counterculture in the 1960s, notably popularized by the Haight-Ashbury, human be-ins, and the Monterey Pop music festival. However, by 1969, the Haight-Ashbury scene had shifted from its original themes of peace and love, causing the physical site to transform into "a slum where criminals preyed on helpless drug freaks." Plagued by violence, unrest, and drugs, the West Coast's counterculture public image was in decline.

When Mick Jagger made the public announcement of a "surprise concert" at Golden Gate Park, park officials denied the permit. The Stones looked for an alternative location and found the Sears Point Raceway in the Sonoma Mountains. Chip Monck erected a stage and lighting towers on the site. However, on December 4, the organizers were once again forced to designate a new location for the concert because Sears Point canceled the deal. A dispute over film rights arose between The Rolling Stones and Filmways, Inc., the owners of Sears Point. The disagreement reportedly involved excessive demands, including a requirement for a substantial liability insurance policy and a $100,000 cash deposit. As a result, the Stones had no choice but to abandon Sears Point and scramble to find a new location and construct a new stage in less than two days. In a fortuitous twist, the organizers immediately found their final location, the 80-acre Altamont Speedway, about sixty miles east of San Francisco in Tracy, California.

Financial troubles had long plagued the Altamont Speedway. Knowing that the concert film was projected to generate huge profits, the manager/promoter of the Speedway, Dick Carter, agreed to the Stones' concert deal for no extra cost consideration. "I want the publicity," he told the organizers, who quickly packed up and moved everything downstate from the Sears Point Raceway to Altamont. Chip Monck, who managed the lighting and served as master of ceremonies at Woodstock, took on the role of staging manager. On the day the deal was finalized, Monck scouted the site and began moving the entire set on December 5. Woodstock also necessitated a set relocation, but its coordinators never fully finished the job, with many parts of the fencing and ticket booths still incomplete on opening day. "What Woodstock had been unsuccessful in doing with nearly a month, moving a large music festival, The Rolling Stones attempted in less than twenty-four hours." This hasty operation resulted in a tragic flaw: the stage was too low, allowing enthusiastic fans easy access to the bands.

The Altamont festival may very well have been doomed from the start. "It was a bad day for a concert, proclaimed astrologists. The Sun, Venus, and Mercury were in Sagittarius; the moon, on the cusp of Libra and Scorpio - very bad omens indeed." The former manager of The Grateful Dead, Rock Sculley, expressed his opinion on the festival's site:

> When I got there in the morning, Friday, I took one look at it and said, I think it was to a radio crew from a Sacramento station, that it wouldn't do. It was terrible. It was just a drag strip. There were junk cars and wrecks and broken glass all over. I said we'd have thousands of people with their feet cut from the broken glass alone.

Despite these ominous signs and the concerns over physical safety, The Rolling Stones moved forward with their plans, turning to an unconventional and controversial choice for security: the Hells Angels.

The Hells Angels is a motorcycle club founded in California with chapters throughout the U.S. and Canada and several in other parts of the world. Its members are known for driving Harley-Davidson motorcycles and getting in violent barroom fights, in addition to pursuing gang-related activities. The notorious bikers, were, however, embraced by many rock bands' inner circles. The Grateful Dead welcomed their prescence in their inner gatherings as the band embraced the outlaws, and they had been close with some members of the Hells Angels. Hells Angels bikes were often parked outside the The Grateful Dead headquarters, and some Angels had forged friendships with members of San Francisco's Jefferson Airplane. The Hells Angels were also regulars at outdoor rock festivals in the Bay area, tapped to bolster security, notably carrying performers up a hill to the Fantasy Fair and Magic Mountain Festival when the roads to the concert site were clogged. However, they were also known for dumping people off the stage at the Northern California Folk-Rock Festival in San Jose just a year prior to Altamont. The Grateful Dead had used the Hells Angels for security at their previous concerts without incident, and they recommended the motorcycle club to Sam Cutler, the tour manager of the Stones. Additionally, hiring the Hells Angels would also cut back on the Stones' concert expenses. Ultimately, the Stones hired about 20-25 Hells Angels from the Oakland Chapter for security. The payment for their services was $500 worth of beer.

Thousands of participants from across the country began flooding the Altamont Speedway on the morning of December 6, 1969. By the time the festival started, between 300,000 to 350,000 people had gathered at the concert. Descriptions of the scene varied: Concert promoter Bill Graham observed: "It's an amazing phenomenon. It's like the lemmings to the sea." However, David Dalton, a concert-goer, remembers the scene differently:

> You couldn't have a more apocalyptic theater… from the air there seemed to be something ominous about such a massive gathering on these bald hills … the bleached-out hills around Altamont looked metallic in the haze and glare of the morning sun … And there was something swarming and ominous about this gathering - kinetic energy zinged through the air like psychic pellets. The place was a war zone.

Several factors contributed to the tragedy of Altamont. Before the start of the concert, a toxic mix of psychedelics

laced with amphetamine had infiltrated the audience and some working members of the concert crew, rendering several of them incapacitated. One day prior to the concert, the organizers contacted Dr. Richard Fine of the Medical Committee for Human Rights about providing medical support for Altamont. However, Dr. Fine pulled together a team of only eight doctors, which was massively inadequate given the 300,000-plus attendees at the site. The almost complete lack of emergency medical care only exacerbated this drug problem. Some members of the Hog Farm Commune had contacted the producers about assisting backstage but received no clear response. On the day of the concert, a few volunteers showed up at the medical tents to help the Red Cross.

Nonetheless, the concert carried on. However, by the time Santana, the first act of the day, began, the Hells Angels, who lined the edge of the stage to keep audiences from climbing over, were mostly inebriated. As Santana performed its opening song, "Savor," the excited crowd celebrated and enjoyed the music until a naked man began to make his way toward the stage. The Hells Angels, offended by his presence, began beating the naked man with their fists as part of their attempt to carry out security duties. It wasn't until the The Grateful Dead's permit specialist, Bert Kanegson, intervened and pleaded with them to stop that the assault ended. The Hells Angels immediately turned their eye to Kanegson and beat him with pool cues, leaving him with severe wounds that needed 60 stitches. These two were only the day's first victims.

One probable reason for the Hells Angels' propensity for violence at Altamont is the fact that most of them were prospects – probationary members looking to join the club. They needed to prove themselves to their seniors. These probationary Hells Angels continued to chase down and smack members of the crowd who had displeased them, often by refusing to stop filming or leaping onto the stage. Not only did they beat the audience, but they also got into fights with other Hells Angels at the concert. The medical tent was in total disarray, filled with overwhelmed volunteers and psychiatric staff tending to overdosed and injured attendees.

When Jefferson Airplane was performing its act, the Hells Angels were brutally beating down a black youth in front of the stage. Lead singer Marty Balin jumped into the crowd to break up the fight, only to be beaten unconscious by the Hells Angels. The organizers realized the concert escaped their control. It had become evident at this point that "it had become, to a disturbing degree, a Hells Angels Festival."

The Flying Burrito Brothers and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young continued to perform despite the chaos. Meanwhile, the Stones had flown to Altamont from San Francisco on a helicopter. Upon landing, a young man stepped into Jagger's path as the Stones moved through the crowd and punched Jagger in the face. During Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young's performance, a beer can hurled from the crowd, possibly by an Angel, hit a woman in the eye, causing her to suffer a near-fatal skull fracture. Lacking proper medical support, the woman wandered aimlessly, barely able to see, until a station wagon stationed at the perimeter of the Speedway, helping transport people experiencing bad trip took her to the medical tent. She was finally evacuated in an ambulance to a nearby hospital in Livermore. The doctors soon realized that they lacked the facilities to perform the surgery the woman needed, so she was evacuated once again to another hospital in San Francisco. This incident exemplifies the lack of emergency medical preparations for the Altamont festival.

As the sky grew dark, the crowd waited amidst the violence and rock music for the climax of the concert: the performance of The Rolling Stones. As the anticipation grew, a scuffle broke out in front of the stage. When the band took the podium, chaos erupted as spectators pushed toward the roped-off area. This enraged the Hells Angels, not only because attendees were attempting to jump on the stage, but also because the audience had surged into the area where the Hells Angels parked their Harley-Davidsons. The Hells Angels continued to throw people off the stage, including a naked woman who had scrambled her way through the crowd. Mick Jagger pleaded with the crowd "Hey, people. Sisters, brothers and sisters, brothers and sisters. Come on now. That means everybody, just cool out. Will you cool out, everybody?" However, the Hells Angels did not answer his call for peace. When the Stones played "Under My Thumb", a young black spectator named Meredith Hunter, who went by the street name "Murdock," had moved to the front of the stage while under the influence of heavy psychedelics. Aggravated by punches and harassment from a several Hells Angels, Hunter pulled a gun from his waistband. Before Hunter could aim his gun, Alan Passaro, an Angel, plunged a hunting knife into Hunter's neck. The stabbing and beating continued during the final chords of "Under My Thumb" until Hunter lay unconscious on the floor. Even though medical personnel quickly rushed him to get help, it was too late: the Hells Angels's had murdered Meredith Hunter.

Despite witnessing the murder, the Stones decided to play their act, channeling their fear and anxiety into their performance. At this point, the band was afraid that without the distraction of music, the crowd would erupt into a full riot. The beatings in the audience continued. Screams and moans followed the end of each song. Ironically, the band closed off their show with their song "Street Fighting Man".

The Altamont festival epitomized chaos. In addition to countless injuries, Meredith Hunter and three other men died during the concert. Two died when a car plowed into a group of people, and another drowned when he slid into an irrigation ditch. The outcome of the festival mobilized calls to outlaw this kind of gathering. Several cities passed restrictive ordinances banning rock festivals outright, and anti-festival laws spread throughout the nation and into Canada with strict health codes and security bonds.

Woodstock had some oversight in their planning due to a lack of experience with an event of such magnitude, but

the organizers had hired proper security and the Hog Farm commune to ensure the experience would embody a communal and safe gathering, notwithstanding the cost. The Rolling Stones at Altamont took an opposite approach. They scrimped on essential aspects of the concert, cutting costs on health services, security, stage infrastructure, and event preparation, which resulted in the tragedy of Altamont as we remember it today. Altamont shattered the public's perception of counterculture, feeding into fears that this "free-spirited" movement lacked substance, foresight, and accountability. Instead of standing as a celebration, Altamont became a turning point by providing an example of how ideals of peace and unity can crumble under negligence and greed.

SECTION III: MEDIA PERCEPTION

Woodstock was far from perfect. Heavy rain turned fields into mud pits, food was scarce, performances were disorganized, and rampant drug use led to overdoses and chaos. Yet, the idyllic image of peace, love, and music overshadowed Woodstock's imperfections, transforming Max Yasgur's farm into a glowing symbol of the counterculture. Media coverage shaped the memories of Woodstock, defining the festival's triumph and preserving its utopian narrative over the past fifty years. On the other hand, the Altamont Free Concert, which unfolded across the country just months later, became a symbol of chaos, violence, and disillusionment. While the media praised Woodstock for being the embodiment of the counterculture's positive ideals, it defined Altamont as the counterculture's sordid underbelly.

Early mainstream media reports reflected Woodstock's organizational issues. *The New York Daily News* featured a front-page headline reading "Traffic Uptight at Hippiefest," and the *United Press International* described the festival as "a massive traffic jam in a giant mud puddle." In the article, "Thousands flee Woodstock," *United Press International* reported on the death of one attendee who was run over in a muddy field by a tractor while sleeping. The article also noted that sheriff's deputies aided state police in coping with food and water shortages, problems caused by mud and rain, health conditions, and traffic. Additionally, the reporters emphasized that numerous of medical personnel had to be flown in by helicopters due to the overwhelming traffic, to help with not only drug overdoses, tetanus risks and asthma patients. The article paints the site at Woodstock as a massive medical and traffic disaster, while mentioning that the situation was "'chaotic' but fairly peaceful."

The New York Times played a pivotal role in reporting on the festival, due to the determination of writer Barnard Collier, who was present at the celebration, unlike the authors from other publications. As Collier recalled in 2009,

> Every major *Times* editor up to and including executive editor James Reston insisted that the tenor of the story must be a social catastrophe in the making (…) I had to resort to refusing to write the story unless it reflected to a great extent my on-the-scene conviction that 'peace' and 'love' was the actual emphasis, not the preconceived opinions of Manhattan-bound editors.

On August 16, *TheNew York Times* published Collier's article, "200,000 Thronging to Rock Festival Jam Roads Upstate." This content was similar to that of other publications, describing the traffic jam caused by the festival as a "Great Big Parking Lot," and covering mostly the road conditions and the overwhelming crowd at the farm. However, his second piece, published on August 17, 1969, presented a picture of a gathering that differed from the other concurrent narratives. Titled, "300,000 at Fold-Rock Fair Camp Out in a Sea of Mud," Collier recalled a well-behaving crowd drawn by the music and the excitement of the scene. He quotes a state police official, "I was dumfounded by the size of the crowd. I can hardly believe that there haven't been even small incidents of misbehavior by the young people." Acknowledging the assistance of the Hog Farm Commune and the fair's medical officer in providing assistance to the overdose patients, Collier explains that the patients who overdosed from LSD are not in danger, but are going through "bad trips" with symptoms of agitation, disorientation and fear. Unlike most other writers, Collier also reported on the music at the festival, specifically mentioning Joan Baez's performance of "We Shall Overcome." He concluded by observing that for a festival billed as "Peace and Music," "There was plenty of music" and "peace was being kept." While Collier's article published on August 17, 1969 illustrated the peaceful gathering of 300,000 people, he could not control the editorials published alongside it.

On August 18, 1969, *TheNew York Times* published an editorial titled, "Nightmare In The Catskills," describing the festival as a "nightmare of mud and stagnation that paralyzed Sullivan County for a whole weekend." The article criticized the drug use, rebellion, and lack of organization, criticizing the sponsors of the event for being unconcerned with the turmoil that Woodstock caused. The article went further to question the counterculture itself: "What kind of culture is it that can produce so colossal a mess?" A brief mention at its conclusion summarized the positive side of the festival,

> Last, but by no means least, was the fact that the great bulk of the freakish-looking intruders behaved astonishingly well, considering the disappointments and discomforts they encountered. They showed that there is real good under their fantastic exteriors if it can just be aroused to some better purpose than the pursuit of LSD.

Despite a brief, parting acknowledgment of the attendees' peaceful behavior, the editorial emphasized the chaos of those three days , portraying Woodstock as a disorganized and misguided act of rebellion.

This skepticism, however, was short-lived. The next day, *The New York Times* published a new piece titled "Morning After at Bethel," referring to the rock festival, despite the prevalence of drugs, as "essentially a phenomenon of innocence." However, the article expressed disbelief that

many concertgoers showed up despite the discomforts of mud, rain, hunger, and thirst. Ultimately, the article concludes that although the festival might have failed by conventional standards, it succeeded in fostering community and peace, even amid hardship. Within a day, *The New York Times* had rewritten Woodstock as a success and emphasized the peaceful gathering of half a million people.

Alternative media responded to this shift in the tone of the *New York Times.The East Village Other* criticized the *New York Times* for what it called its "paternalistic and patronizing" editorials on Woodstock, claiming that the aforementioned editorial characterized the concertgoers as "a bunch of weird multi-colored ungodly freaks looking to kill, rape, and butcher the countryside." Even the more positive follow-up article, the author critiqued, took on the tones of a "parental rebuke," masking what the underground press described as the mainstream media's inability to fathom the spirit and purpose of the festival. The *East Village Other* argued that *The New York Times'* coverage revealed its broader hypocrisy, espousing progressive causes like civil rights and anti-war efforts yet recoiling from the more radical and communal expressions of the counterculture in its selective embrace of certain liberal ideals while treating Woodstock with fear and condescension.

The East Village Other painted, in a rapturous tone, a more vivid and celebratory image of Woodstock, emphasizing the personal experiences of concertgoers, their positive comments about the music, and sense of camaraderie forged at the event. The article, "That Aquarian Exposition" highlighted the "massive flow of good energy" and described the festival as "a grand tribal new beginning." In particular, the piece celebrated how the Hog Farm's contribution established a vibrant community. Another alternative publication, *The Rat Subterranean News,* explored the cultural tensions exposed by Woodstock. The paper captured the duality of Woodstock as both a celebration of music and community and a reflection of broader tensions between art and commerce. In its reporting, *The Rat Subterranean News* praised the vitality of performances such as Santana, and celebrated the creativity and spontaneity of Woodstock's other performers but contrasted this with the increasingly commercialized structure of the music industry.

The documentary *Woodstock,* directed by Michael Wadleigh and released in 1970, combined clips and interviews filmed during the festival to portray the image of Woodstock that glosses over logistical challenges and instead focuses on moments of joy, unity, and free expression. Those who had been unable to get to the actual event could only attempt to visually comprehend the phenomenon through this film. *Woodstock* was less of a recounting of the 'reality' of the Woodstock events than as a series of carefully selected impressions from the hours-long footage, informed by personal artistic and value judgements. For example, Country Joe McDonalds' performance of "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die-Rag" at Woodstock occurred near the beginning of the event. However, the film features this performance midway through, transforming this impromptu performance of a powerful anti-Vietnam War song into a centrally defining spectacle of the Woodstock experience. Performances by Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and The Who were interspersed with footage of mud-covered attendees laughing, dancing, and working together to overcome challenges. *Woodstock* largely omits the logistical struggles and focuses on moments of joy and unity, reinforcing the event's utopian narrative to align with the cultural aspirations of the counterculture movement.

The Altamont Festival received far less press coverage immediately after the event, especially when compared to the extensive reporting on Woodstock. Two local newspapers published detailed reports on December 8, two days after the festival, though neither had accurate accounts, as indicated by the titles of the respective articles: "Four Babies Born, Two Men Die" and "Four Born, Five Die At Altamont Rock Fest." These stories also lacked in-depth analysis. More major metropolitan newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* relegated their coverage to side columns or brief reports, failing to explore the event's broader implications. While the local papers addressed the violence and the stabbing of Altamont in detail, the larger outlets only mentioned that deaths had ocurred, without much explanation. The *Los Angeles Times*, in particular, quickly glossed past the four deaths, focusing more extensively on the clean-up efforts afterwards than the festival itself, explaining that Dick Carter expected to require at least a week to clean up the debris, including wine bottles and garbage. Interestingly, the article also features the reaction of the president of Young American Enterprises John Jaymes, who promoted The Rolling Stones' America tour. He proclaimed that the musicians were pleased with the outcome of the concert, particularly how "everybody left orderly."

It wasn't until *Rolling Stone* published its in-depth exposé titled *Let It Bleed,* that Altamont's significance as a cultural turning point began to take shape. The *Rolling Stone* article described Altamont as a "product of diabolical egotism, hype, ineptitude, money manipulation, and, at base, a fundamental lack of concern for humanity." The account details the chaos of the event, particularly the stabbing of Meredith Hunter, through an anonymous interview. The interviewee recalled that the escalation started when a Hells Angel began attacking Hunter, unprovoked, and that Hunter pulled out the gun after a Hells Angel stabbed him in the back. The article depicted the festival as some sort of a perfect storm, wherein the organizers had "worked out a blueprint for disaster" in their planning. A listing all the decisions that culminated in the tragedy at Altamont included the poor venue decision, inadequate facilities, and hiring the Hells Angels as security.

The article painted a disturbing image of the concert by describing the Altamont freeway as "a decaying urban slum complete with its own air pollution," with vivid imagery of

"flickering silhouettes of people trying to find warmth around the blazing trash." It goes on by retelling all the mishaps during the concert, emphasizing the chaotic and disorganized nature of events. The article includes anecdotes of a woman giving birth, the Hells Angels taking over the stage through violence, and severely injured individuals wandering the vicinity in search of medical help.

Rolling Stone reported that Mick Jagger was "shattered" post-Altamont. According to the article, Jagger had been very eager to host a free concert, almost prepared to pick a street corner in downtown San Francisco to perform. Initially, the group was excited to play at Altamont, but they soon realized the event's decline and contemplated not performing as early as the afternoon of the show, but eventually decided to continue. The incredible violence at Altamont destroyed the Stones' ideals of peace and love, which was especially poignant considering the event's proximity to San Francisco. The contrasting image of Altamont and the previous Summer of Love in Haight Ashbury is disillusioning to not just the British rock band, but for the American public as well. Notably, the *Rolling Stone* account includes a description of the band's reaction drastically differs from that of *The Los Angeles Times*, demonstrating the discrepancy in news outlets which shapes the overall narrative of Altamont.

Meanwhile, *Esquire's* article, *Aquarius Wept,* published seven months after *Let It Bleed* explored the deeper cultural implications of Altamont, providing a full account of the story of Altamont from inception to fallout. The article quotes a young lady who attended the festival: "There was no love, no joy. In twenty-four hours we created all the problems of our society in one place: congestion, violence, dehumanization. Is this what we want?" While *Aquarius Wept* describes Altamont in a similar tone as *Let It Bleed*, the piece notes that Meredith Hunter was holding a gun *before* he was stabbed (according to the documentary filmed at the concert), which has yet to be released at the time of the article's publication.

With a release that post-dated *Let It Bleed* by seven months, this article also gives insight about the wider impact of Altamont, which resulted in at least four California county ordinances banning large gatherings, and two bills in the California legislature of a similar nature. Furthermore, the article mentioned that Altamont altered the dynamics in not only the industry but also all around the San Francisco area, stating that the "San Francisco rock mythology" was "ended abruptly at Altamont." The article quoted the manager of Jefferson Airplane Bill Thompson, saying "a lot of personal relationships were burned behind Altamont," remarking that the outcomes of Altamont challenged the ethic that San Francisco music and hip culture had been based on. Moreover, the loyalty among the Hells Angels and their fans had reportedly begun to erode after Altamont, as proven by the identification of Hunter's murderer, Alan Passaro, which an insider had provided to the police.

Esquire's piece further emphasizes the pervasive violence and failure of the festival, underlining its impact. Combined with *Let It Bleed,* the two pieces paint a grim picture of Altamont, and in comparison to Woodstock, they defines the event as a turning point in the narrative of counterculture.

In December 1970, a year after the Altamont Free concert, the documentary *Gimme Shelter* revealed a haunting visual account to the public. In contrast to the film *Woodstock, Gimme Shelter* elicits a sense of uneasiness and fear rather than celebrating music and community. None of the Stones attended the movie premiere as they did not want to be reminded of the debacle, and the Santana even refused any of their clips included in the movie. The film begins with a festive, joyous tone, with scenes of people making their way to Altamont. But the action quickly shifts to the musical actsm, and the violence starts to emerge during the performance of Jefferson Airplanes. The nighttime appearance by the Stones follows. Escalating conflicts in the crowd are weaved into the Stones' performances, including songs like "Sympathy for the Devil" and "Under My Thumb." The film captures the stabbing of Meredith Hunter as its climax ignoring the musical aspect of the Stones' performance right after Hunter's death. Quickly, it cuts to a clip of Mick Jagger and filmmaker David Maysles in the editing room, where the footage replayed and dissected, highlighting the cruelty rather than underplaying it. The film finishes with a freeze frame of Jagger's face, painted with horror at he rewatches the clip of Hunter's murder.

This film set off a storm of controversy immediately upon release. Movie critic Pauline Kael from wrote in *The New Yorker*,

> It's like reviewing the footage of President Kennedy's assassination or Lee Harvey Oswald's murder. This movie is into complications and sleight of hand beyond *Pirandello*, since the filmed death at Altamont – unexpected, of course – was part of a cinema-verité spectacular. The free concert was staged and lighted to be photographed and the three hundred thousand who attended it were the unpaid cast of thousands.

The effect of *Gimme Shelter* is deeply enmeshed with the legacy of Altamont. As the film gained attention, people's negative views on Altamont were further intensified. Some began to see Altamont as a stunt and the poor planning decisions as intentionally aiming to induce a shocking event that would become material for a profitable film. Although the Stones planned Altamont with intention of it being filmed, it is doubtful that they could have anticipated the tragic aftermath, rather than an outcome parallel to that of Woodstock. *Gimme Shelter*, just like *Woodstock*, shaped the lasting public perception of the counterculture movement, becoming a record of the event and also of the fragility of 1960s counterculture.

Yet, perspectives on Altamont have not been unanimous. In an *Oakland Tribune* interview fifteen years after the concert, one attendee named Ted Cruz rejected the notion that Altamont marked the end of the counterculture. Cruz remarked that he had a wonderful time at the concert, recalling:

> 'That era' and the end thereof are the artifices of reportage. Nobody I knew who was there became Yuppies or anything horrible like that. I don't think it was the end of anything. It might have been the end of free concerts because nobody's lawyer would let anyone have one after that. My feeling about the violence was, well, there's violence at the football games, too.

Woodstock and Altamont demonstrate the power of media in defining the legacy of cultural events. The selective framing and focus of media outlets mold public perception through time. Woodstock's media narrative largely ignored its logistical failures. Despite the injuries, deaths, the lack of food and resources, Woodstock remains a symbol of peace, love, and unity. Conversely, Altamont's eventual coverage highlighted its flaws, solidifying its status in the public eye as the "downfall" of counterculture. It remains unclear whether the biases in the reporting and portrayal of Woodstock and Altamont were intentional. Journalists may have been personally swept up in the emotional atmosphere of the concerts or seized the opportunity to craft sensational narratives and generate compelling headlines. Either way, their coverage not only showcased the objectives and impacts of these festivals but also shaped the cultural identity of an entire generation.

CONCLUSION

The narratives of Woodstock and Altamont reveal how biases in media can leave a lasting impact on public perception. As with many historical events like the Vietnam War or the Civil Rights Movement, these stories are defined by those who tell them. The distortion of narratives imposed by selective reporting and content biases can have profound consequences, influencing not only how history is recorded but also how individuals and societies understand the present.

In today's highly polarized political climate, media outlets often engage in confirmation bias, reporting selectively to align with the views of their target audiences. For instance, during major political events, news networks with clear ideological leanings frequently focus on narratives that reinforce their followers' pre-existing political beliefs.

On January 6, 2021, a group of supporters of then-President Donald Trump breached the Capitol building in an effort to disrupt the certification process and overturn election results after widespread claims of electrion fraud. Coverage of the January 6 riot serves as an example of media's effect on the legacy of these events and on society today. Liberal-leaning outlets such as *CNN* and *MSNBC* emphasized the violence, chaos, and threats to democracy on that fateful day, with *CNN* quoting former President George W. Bush and referring to the event as an"insurrection," reinforcing the narrative of January 6 as a critical threat to democratic institutions. Its coverage often critiqued right-wing media for downplaying the event, also arguing that such portrayals contributed to misinformation and extremism.

Fox News reports presented a different story. Host Tucker Carlson asserted that a few protestors became violent on January 6, and their photos and videos have been shown repeatedly by liberal-leaning outlets, while the majority of the protestors at the capitol were "peaceful" "orderly" and "meek." *Fox News* aired video footage of Donald Trump supporters "queuing up in neat little lines" and "taking cheerful selfies," concluding that the protestors clearly revered the Capitol, countering previous broadcast narratives of widespread violence. The January 6th riot serves as another example of how media can shape public memory through biased reporting.

Furthermore, modern technology and social media have amplified the role of bias in shaping public perception. Unlike traditional media outlets of the 1960s, operating with slower dissemination and limited reach, today's social media platforms enable real-time reporting of events, sometimes with little editorial oversight. Internet algorithms also prioritize engagement, often promoting polarizing content that reinforces existing biases. This intensifies the echo chambers created by divisions and affirming biases. The convenience and speed of digital media also accelerate this process, often shaping opinions before facts are fully established.

This selective framing of events by the media today mirrors the coverage of Woodstock and Altamont in the 1960s. Despite the complexity of both events, their narratives are obscured through years of biases and selective reporting. The research done in this paper underscores the lasting influence of media narratives in shaping public perception and memory. Recognizing the power of media encourages one to employ greater critical thinking and combine multiple sources to foster a more nuanced and accurate understanding of current events.

Media framing not only impacts current political outcomes but also influences how future generations remember and interpret the past. These narratives, including those about counterculture movements, shape the way future generations engage with modern political and social issues. Therefore, promoting media literacy in schools and public discourse can make individuals aware of the manipulation and biases in media, ensuring that events are remembered and analyzed critically. By equipping individuals with tools to navigate increasingly sophisticated media manipulation and the ability to understand complex issues, media literacy fosters a society that is both more informed and more cohesive.

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