

Woodstock

The Woodstock Music Festival began on August 15, 1969, as half a million people waited on a dairy farm in Bethel, New York, for the three-day music festival to start. Billed as “An Aquarian Experience: 3 Days of Peace and Music,” the epic event would later be known simply as Woodstock and become synonymous with the counterculture movement of the 1960s. Woodstock was a success, but the massive concert didn’t come off without a hitch: Last-minute venue changes, bad weather and the hordes of attendees caused major headaches. Still, despite—or because of—a lot of sex, drugs, rock ‘n’ roll and rain, Woodstock was a peaceful celebration and earned its hallowed place in pop culture history.

Woodstock Ventures

The Woodstock Music Festival was the brainchild of four men, all age 27 or younger, looking for an investment opportunity: John Roberts, Joel Rosenman, Artie Kornfeld and Michael Lang.

Lang had organized the successful Miami Music Festival in 1968 and Kornfeld was the youngest vice president at Capitol Records. Roberts and Rosenman were New York entrepreneurs involved in building a Manhattan recording studio. The four men formed Woodstock Ventures, Inc., and decided to host a music festival.

Creedence Clearwater Revival was the first big-name talent to sign on and gave Woodstock the credibility it needed to attract other well-known musicians.

Where Was Woodstock?

The initial plan for Woodstock called for the event to be held at Howard Mills Industrial Park in Wallkill, New York.

Wallkill town officials got spooked, however, and backed out of the deal, passing a law that eliminated any possibility of holding the concert on their turf.

Woodstock Ventures explored a few other venues, but none panned out. Finally, just a month ahead of the concert, 49-year-old dairy farmer Max Yasgur offered to rent them part of his land in the White Lake area of Bethel, New York, surrounded by the verdant Catskill Mountains.

With the concert just a month away, the four frantic partners jumped at the opportunity and paid his asking price.

Woodstock Becomes a Free Concert

With a venue and talent secured, the partners turned to logistics. Fencing, entrance gates and ticket booths needed to be set up and a performers’ pavilion, concession stands, bathroom facilities and medical tents built.

But by the time people started arriving a couple days ahead of the concert, the fencing, gates and ticket booths still weren’t ready.

According to Lang, in an interview with *The Telegraph*, “You do everything you can to get the gates and the fences finished—but you have your priorities. People are coming, and you need to be able to feed them, and take care of them, and give them a show. So you have to prioritize.”

With no efficient way to charge concert-goers, Lang and his partners decided to make Woodstock a free event.

The Masses Arrive

Originally, about 50,000 people were expected. But by August 13, at least that number were already camped out on location and over 100,000 tickets pre-sold.

As an estimated one million people descended on Woodstock, its organizers scrambled to add more facilities. Highways and local roads came to a standstill and many concert-goers simply abandoned their cars and trekked the rest of the way on foot. Eventually, about half a million people reached the venue.

The Audience

The Woodstock audience was diverse and a reflection of the rapidly-changing times. Some were hippies who felt alienated by a society steeped in materialism.

In 1969, the country was deep into the controversial Vietnam War, a conflict that many young people vehemently opposed. It was also the era of the civil rights movement, a period of great unrest and protest. Woodstock was an opportunity for people to escape into music and spread a message of unity and peace.

Although the crowd at Woodstock experienced bad weather, muddy conditions and a lack of food, water and adequate sanitation, the overall vibe there was harmonious. Looking back, some people attribute the lack of violence to the large number of psychedelic drugs being used.

Others believe hippies were simply living out their mantra of “making love, not war.” In fact, more than a few couples at Woodstock took that command literally and made love whenever and wherever the mood hit.

Safety and Security Issues

Volunteer doctors, EMTs and nurses manned Woodstock’s medical tent. Most injuries were minor such as food poisoning and wounded bare feet.

It’s widely reported eight women experienced miscarriages. One teenager died after being run over by a tractor. Another person died a drug-related death.

Security was limited since off-duty police officers were banned. It’s estimated there were no more than a dozen police officers to keep an eye on 500,000 people.

Wavy Gravy and the Hog Farm

To pick up the slack and help create a safe festival ground, Woodstock Ventures turned to the Hog Farm, a communal pig farm in New Mexico. Its leader, known as Wavy Gravy, threatened to douse people who got out of line with seltzer water or hurl pies at them.

The Hog Farm also set up a children’s playground, a free food kitchen and a tent to assist people “freaking out” on drugs.

Woodstock Performers

Thirty-two musicians, a combination of local and world-famous talent, performed at Woodstock. Around 5:00 p.m. on Friday, August 15, Richie Havens took the stage and played a 45-minute set.

Havens was followed by an unscheduled blessing by yoga guru Sri Swami Satchidananda. The other performers on day one were:

Bert Sommer

Sweetwater

Melanie

Tim Hardin

Ravi Shanker

Arlo Guthrie

Joan Baez

Baez famously played the end of her set in a torrential downpour. Day one wrapped up around 2:00 a.m. on August 16.

Day two officially began around 12:15 p.m. Day two's line-up was:

Quill

Country Joe McDonald

John Sebastian

Keef Hartley Band

Santana

The Incredible String Band

Canned Heat

Mountain

The Grateful Dead

Credence Clearwater Revival

Janis Joplin

Sly and the Family Stone

The Who

Jefferson Airplane

Day two ended around 9:45 a.m. on Sunday, August 17.

Day three began around 2:00 p.m. Joe Cocker was the first musician to perform. The remaining line up included:

Country Joe and The Fish

Ten Years After

The Band

Johnny Winter

Blood Sweat and Tears

Crosby Stills Nash and Young

Paul Butterfield Blues Band

Sha Na Na

Jimi Hendrix

Hendrix was the last musician to perform at Woodstock. Rain delays prevented him from taking the stage until early Monday morning and by the time he went on, the crowd had thinned to around 25,000 people.

Musicians who declined to perform at Woodstock included:

Simon and Garfunkel

Led Zeppelin

Bob Dylan

The Byrds

The Moody Blues

The Doors

Roy Rogers

John Lennon

Chicago Transit Authority

The Rolling Stones

Legacy of Woodstock

Woodstock officially ended on Monday, August 18, after Hendrix left the stage. Leaving Woodstock wasn't much easier than getting there. Roads and highways quickly became jammed again as festival-goers made their way home.

Cleaning up the venue was a mammoth task and required several days, many bulldozers and tens of thousands of dollars.

In 2006, Bethel Woods Center for the Arts opened on the hill where the Woodstock Music Festival took place. Today, it hosts outdoor concerts in its beautiful pavilion. There's also a 1960s museum on site.

Many popular musicians have performed at Bethel Woods, including some who took the stage at Woodstock such as Crosby Stills Nash and Young, Santana, Arlo Guthrie and Joe Cocker.

Woodstock is perhaps best described by Max Yasgur, the humble farmer who lent his land for the occasion. Addressing the audience on day three he said, "...You've proven something to the world...the important thing that you've proven to the world is that a half a million kids, and I call you kids because I have children

who 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 God bless you for it!"