

"A cosmic accident . . ."

WOODSTOCK

August 15–18, 1969
Near Bethel, New York

RICHIE HAVENS, MIRIAM YASGUR, AND
MYRA FRIEDMAN

*E*stimates of the crowd at the Woodstock Music and Art Fair—billed as "Three Days of Peace and Music"—ranged from three to four hundred thousand.

It wasn't really held at Woodstock. Because citizens of that town were afraid of being overrun by hippies, the promoters moved the event to Bethel, sixty miles away. In keeping with the chaos of the festival, some fans showed up in Woodstock anyway.

As singer Richie Havens recounts, he was the first performer to go on stage. Miriam Yasgur and her husband, Max, owned the farm where the Woodstock Music and Art Fair was held. Myra Friedman worked for Janis Joplin's manager. They told their stories to Joel Makower, author of Woodstock: The Oral History.

RICHIE HAVENS

I call it a cosmic accident myself. I call it a media event, created by the media and not by the promoters, as much as they would like it to have been more in their control. What happened was created by the media. When I did come back, 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.

I actually was afraid to go on first, basically because I knew the concert was late and I knew that people paid for this and maybe it would be a little nuts. Flying over that crowd coming in in that bubble, I knew what being nuts could mean. And I didn't want to be trampled by a billion people. So I said, "Don't put me in front of your problem like this. Don't do this to me, Michael. I'm only one guy. My bass player isn't even here." He was walking on the road for twenty-five miles because the cars were backed up. He made it as I walked off the stage, he came walking up to the stage. They'd left the car on the New York Thruway twenty-five miles back and then walked, along with a lot of other people, and they partied all the way down the line and he got there just as I got off.

. . . I just saw color to the top of the hill and beyond. When my eyes went from the foot of the stage up to the top of the hill and beyond, I went right up to the sky, I went right out to where the whole thing was. The best sound that I have ever played on outdoors to date happened at Woodstock. As a matter of fact, they said they heard it ten miles away in every direction, because they put those towers up there, and it bounced through those mountains. We not only did it for the crowd there, we did it for the whole countryside at that point. So it was a modular saturation level of vibrations into the planet. This was not just in that spot, it went ten miles all around, and that's a big circle of sound wave.

I did about four or five encores, till I had nothing else to sing, and then "Freedom" was created right there on the stage. That's how "Freedom" was created, on the stage. It was the last thing that I could think of to sing. I made it up. It was what I thought of, what I felt—the vibration which was freedom—which I thought at that point we had already accomplished. And I thought, "God, this is a miracle. Thank God I got to see it." . . . My viewpoint of it was I finally crossed over the line where I don't have to worry anymore. About the whole planet, the entire planet.

MIRIAM YASGUR

In my innocence, when they finally got this thing going, a few days before I said to Max, "You know, Joan Baez is going to be there, and I'm going to go up there for the time Joan Baez is there because I have to hear her." Some of the other people weren't as attractive, but she was one, so I had all these nice plans. I was going to go up when Joan Baez was there, maybe one or two of the other people. But, of course, there was no way I was going to get there. That went by the board.

I had to be down at the office and help take care of things. Customers were calling and routes were being diverted, the principals of the festival were getting calls on our lines, and then we had the kooks calling—you know, you would hang up and you would pick up the phone and you would get these people screaming at you and you'd hang up on them and they'd redial and scream at you. It was mostly foul language or "You're ruining the area!" or "You allowed all these hippies in!"—you know, really in more nasty tones than I'm saying. And there were a few people that were so persistent that we called the telephone company, asked them to put a check on our lines and see if they could trace back these calls, because these people were calling up and hysterically screaming on the phone at us so that we couldn't keep our lines open.

So we were involved with that, we were involved with taking food out of the cooler and feeding people, we were involved with trying to keep our business going and I really couldn't push through this. The troopers, when they would go by our office, would stop by, either to get something to drink or whatever—you know, they'd drink orange juice or chocolate milk—and they kept expressing amazement in the fact that they never saw so many youngsters together being so helpful to each other and being so peaceable that their job was really to try and keep things open as much as they could. One car with some troopers got stuck in the road. It went off the road in the crowd, you know, trying to get by, maybe a half a mile west of our office, somewhere in that area. And they said they saw all these kids coming at

them and they thought, "Oh, boy." And what these kids did was lift the car and take it and put it back on the road. I had kids come in and say, "You know, there's been a couple of troopers directing traffic on that road for the last few hours. It's so hot; they must be thirsty. Could you give me something for them to drink?" And they would take cartons of chocolate milk and orange juice and go over to the troopers.

MYRA FRIEDMAN

I didn't really know I was going to Woodstock until the last minute, so I thought, "Gee, I really ought to let my mother know because what if she calls and I'm not here and she calls again—" We didn't have answering machines then. My mother lives out in St. Louis and she was a widow and you want to tell your mother where you are—or at least I did. So, I had called and it was a very hurried conversation. I said, "Look, I'm leaving, I'm going out of town for the weekend." She said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to this big rock festival, Mother, and I'll call you on Monday when I get back."

So, I think Saturday was when they were declaring it a disaster area and I knew that it had to be just terrible in terms of the news—helicopters flying in bringing in food, God knows what, you're dying, you know. So all of a sudden from the blue I think, "Oh my God; my mother!" And I go into a trailer in the back and I called my mother. And she was, indeed, absolutely hysterical. She was frightened out of her wits. She was crying and she said, "Well, they say it's a disaster." I said, "No, no, no. It's really not." And she was just carrying on and I said, "Mother, I got to get off the phone now. I'm knee-deep in mud." And there was a lot of mud out there. She said, "You're knee-deep in mud?" I said, "No, no, no. I'm really O.K." And she kept saying, "Well, where are you?" And I guess that it was Bethel, White Lake, what the hell is this? She wouldn't know where. She couldn't get a focus on it. My mother, by the way, was a highly intelligent person and she wasn't a hysteric either. But the broadcasts were really scary. So I wanted to give her a focus. So I said, "Listen, Mother, I'm just down the road from Grossinger's." And there's this silence and she calms down and says, "Oh. Well, why don't you go *there* for the weekend?"