

Historical Memory and the Woodstock Legacy

Written, narrated, and produced by Geoff Storm

Maurice Isserman: The *Times* editorial was entitled “Nightmare in the Catskills.”

Arlo Guthrie [archival audio clip]: The New York State Thruway’s closed, man.

Walter Cronkite [archival audio clip]: The festival was declared a disaster area.

Isserman: Traffic jams and drug overdoses...

Stage announcer [archival audio clip]: If you’re gonna take some acid, don’t take the blue ones.

Tom Starr: Shortages of food, and the shortages of bathroom facilities...

Cronkite [archival audio clip]: And stormy weather...

Starr: It was an absolute miracle that the event came off as smoothly as it did.

Wavy Gravy [archival audio clip]: There is always a little bit of heaven in a disaster area.

Geoff Storm: On a mid-August weekend in 1969, an estimated 400,000 young people descended upon Bethel, New York for an event that was billed—and is still remembered as—three days of peace, love, and music.

CBS News Anchor Bill Whitney [archival audio clip]: A 52-year-old man who was at the first Woodstock music festival says what happened in Rome, New York last night completely blew him away.

Storm: Thirty years later...

Woodstock ‘99 concert promoter John Scher [archival audio clip]: Calm down a minute. Whoa...

Storm: An inferno of destruction became the final act of a mega concert intended to commemorate the anniversary...

Scher [archival audio clip]: As you can see if you look behind you, we have a bit of a problem.

Storm: Of Woodstock.

(Music plays: Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, “Woodstock”)

Storm: Why did Woodstock 1999 degenerate into mayhem?

Whitney [archival audio clip]: Some in the crowd set fires, overturned vehicles, and toppled sound towers.

Storm: What might the strikingly polarized climax of the anniversary festival tell us about our idealistic visions of the original?

Maurice Isserman: Well, there are two things. There's history, and then there's historical memory. History is what happened, and historical memory is what we think happened, and that "we" is both historians, but also ordinary people.

Storm: Maurice Isserman is James L. Ferguson Professor of History at Hamilton College, and co-author of *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*.

Isserman: The Woodstock myth is that it was at one and the same time part of the '60s—it was the product of an entire decade of challenges and changes in social values and social mores—but it stood apart from the '60s because it didn't have any of the darker aspects. Ang Lee, the director of "Taking Woodstock," in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* earlier this year referred to Woodstock as "the last moment of American innocence." Well, I don't think America was all that innocent in the 1960s—you had race riots and you had the Vietnam War—it just so happened that this particular gathering reflected all the better aspects of the 1960s, the communalism, the sense of adventure and exploration, and the desire to "get back to the garden," to get back to a simpler way of life.

Storm: Isserman offers an explanation for Woodstock's somewhat illusionary legacy.

Isserman: It's one of those quirks of historical memory that Woodstock comes down to us as this kind of transcendently wonderful event. It could have been remembered as "Nightmare in the Catskills" if a different emphasis had come to the fore, if they'd only talked about the drug overdoses. One person was killed. Historical memory is selective. Historical memory tends to bring certain things to the fore and tends to forget about other things. So it reflects our present day concerns and anxieties that we tend to look back and latch onto certain moments of history as a greater, more fulfilling time than our own.

Stage announcer [archival audio clip]: Let's welcome Mr. Richie Havens.

Storm: Tom Starr is a former longtime rock radio personality and programmer who was 17 years old when he attended Woodstock in 1969.

Starr: My sister, after promising my parents she would look after me—we got there as Richie Havens started playing on the first afternoon—she said, "Okay, I'm going to go get us something to eat and go to the bathroom, and I'll be back." Well, when I saw her again three days later—and she wasn't dumping me, either—she was horrified. She'd

actually gone back to the car to wait for me and missed two days of it because she was thinking I'd go back there. But I didn't.

Isserman: It was a pain in the rear end to get to.

Storm: Maurice Isserman.

Isserman: We drove up Friday night, and fortunately the New York State Thruway was closed Saturday morning, so we were probably among the last to get in. And we made it into Bethel, but still a couple of miles away from the festival grounds, and we pulled over into a meadow where other cars were parked—who knows whether that was legal or not—and we camped out for the night. It rained, so we were already famously wet and muddy like everybody else. And we walked in the last two miles to the festival, and it was just this unending stream of youthful humanity who were making their way. You kind of felt like you were part of the Children's Army or something. And then of course we had tickets. We were expecting to be going into this well-organized, slick operation and all we saw was a trampled down fence and nobody there to collect our tickets. You walked through some woods, and you came out into the field, and you crested the hilltop to look down on this natural amphitheater on Max Yasgur's farm that ended in the stage and the lake behind that, and my jaw dropping. I mean, there were a lot of people walking in, but to see suddenly, two, three, four hundred thousand people arrayed on this hillside was mind-boggling—mind-blowing, as we might have said at the time. It was very impressive.

Stage announcer [archival audio clip]: This is one thing that I was going to wait awhile before we talked about, but maybe we'll talk about it now so you can think about it. It's a free concert from now on. That doesn't mean that anything goes. What that means is we're going to put the music up here for free. What it means is that the people who are backing this thing, who have put up the money for it, are going to take a bit of a bath. A big bath.

Starr: I think that there was a good deal of communal, community sense about the process.

Storm: Tom Starr.

Starr: And an understanding on the part of a lot of people there, I think, that clearly it was evident right from the start that they did not have the scene as together as it was going to need to be. And the only way it was going to continue to be a good scene was if everybody was as accommodating of one another as they could be, and as peaceful as they could be, and made the best of it.

Joe Cocker [archival audio clip]: As I've said to many people, this title just about puts it all into focus. It's called "With a Little Help From My Friends." Remember it.

Isserman: It wasn't entirely a hippy, trippy crowd. I went up with a bunch of high school friends. I don't think any of them, apart from myself and my girlfriend, would have described ourselves as hippies, or protestors, or any of the '60s stereotypes. They were just music lovers and wanted to hear the big bands. So there were all kinds of people there.

Starr: For those who did go, most of them went with a fairly good idea of what they were getting into. And they were of the right mindset to get through all of the adversity that Mother Nature threw, and the shortages of food, and the shortages of bathroom facilities. Portable toilets were just completely overwhelmed.

Stage announcer [archival audio clip]: Hey, if we think really hard, maybe we can stop this rain.

Isserman: The thing about the original Woodstock was that it was not very well organized.

Storm: Maurice Isserman.

Isserman: There was a homemade quality to it. It was like Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney in one of those '30s movies saying, "Let's put on a show, kids." It was obvious to everyone that this thing was not very well run. And it sort of instilled a desire to make it work.

Wavy Gravy [archival audio clip]: What we have in mind is breakfast in bed for 400,000. Now, it's not gonna be steak and eggs or anything. But it's gonna be good food, and we're gonna get it to you.

Grace Slick [archival audio clip]: It's a new dawn

(Music plays: Jefferson Airplane, "Volunteers")

Isserman: And one of the reasons Woodstock worked as well as it did was because of its location. You were on Max Yasgur's farm, these 600 acres. And you were surrounded by this beautiful Catskills countryside. There was a real anti-modernism in the '60s counterculture, a desire to sort of get back to the garden.

(Music plays: Canned Heat, "Going Up the Country")

Isserman: Despite the anti-war songs, this wasn't a protest; it wasn't a confrontation.

(Music plays: Country Joe MacDonald, "I Feel Like I'm Fixin' To Die Rag")

Isserman: There was no politics to Woodstock aside from three days of peace and love in the countryside.

Max Yasgur [archival audio clip]: I'm a farmer. I don't know how to speak to twenty people at one time, let alone a crowd like this. This is the largest group of people ever assembled in one place. But I think you people have proven something to the world: that a half-a-million kids can get together for three days of fun and music, and have nothing but fun and music. And I God bless you for it.

Storm: Tom Starr.

Starr: I didn't see any evidence at any point of any kind of altercation, any kind of aggressiveness, any kind of anything. And that unfortunately really became the kind of branding that the subsequent event ended up with.

Isserman: There was a different feel to it. It was the woods, and the lake, and the cows, and Max Yasgur coming out and talking to the crowd. It had a very calming effect. And I think that made everyone a little more mellow than at a place like a Strategic Air Command Base in Rome, New York thirty years later.

(Woodstock '99 radio commercial plays)

Storm: As it turned out, Woodstock 1999 was indeed "not your parents' Woodstock." But in the weeks leading up to the festival, local young people like Sean Salce did hope for a sense of déjà vu.

Sean Salce: I just remember how excited everybody was, and the sense of pride that started going through the community. Thinking that, "Hey, we can be a part of history, here. We're going to host a historical event."

Kristy Clifford: The name Woodstock drew you in.

Storm: Kristy Clifford lives in Utica, a few miles from the concert site.

Clifford: You wanted to be a part of Woodstock. Because, I mean, for me, growing up all my life all I heard about was Woodstock '69. Woodstock, Woodstock, Woodstock.

Phil Stern [archival audio clip]: Good afternoon and welcome to the Phil Stern Show here on Newsradio 950 WIBX. I am Phil Stern, your host, taking your calls this afternoon.

Storm: Enthusiasm for the event was not universal.

Stern [archival audio clip]: The detractors of Woodstock have had some good points to make. There's no doubt about that. And in fact, the detractors may turn out to be correct. For all we know, this could be the disaster that a lot of people are predicting.

Caller [archival audio clip]: I think we're heading into one of the worst man-made disasters we're ever going to run into.

Storm: Local concerns over the effects of a predicted 250,000 concertgoers flooding into the small Upstate New York city left Woodstock 1999's fate in question until mere days before the event.

WIBX News Reporter Tina Mineo [archival audio clip]: The show will go on. So says county and Woodstock officials WIBX's Mike Rogers has the story.

WIBX News Reporter Mike Rogers (Aaron Brillbeck) [archival audio clip]: Woodstock '99 gets the green light. There was some concern over whether the mega-concert in Rome would come to fruition after Woodstock promoters racked up more than one-and-a-half million dollars in fines for not complying with a mass gathering permit issued by Oneida County. Oneida County Executive Ralph Eannace says they've worked out a deal, and will continue to negotiate the amount of the fines. Meanwhile, he says, the concert will go on as planned.

Storm: Though he didn't attend Woodstock 1999, former radio personality and programmer Tom Starr notes that the festival did appear to be a much better planned event than its predecessor.

Starr: The concert production industry had grown into a very efficient and incredibly well organized business. And as a consequence, they had just about every base covered. And the first and foremost would be making certain that there wasn't going to be gate crashing, making certain that they were going to come out of it with a reasonable chance of making money.

WIBX News Reporter Chad Erickson [archival audio clip]: The gates are open now and ticketholders are streaming in, walking and being bussed in. Where once thundered the eight engines of B-52 bombers will rock a crowd that may grow to over two hundred-fifty thousand people by tomorrow afternoon. That crowd will be surrounded by a painted wall of wood and canvas—twelve feet high, three miles long. It's called the Peace Wall, but this barrier is designed to do more than look pretty. It's to keep out people who don't have tickets.

Storm: Inside the Peace Wall, Woodstock's own private security force patrolled the grounds. Uniformed law enforcement officers were to remain outside the barrier.

Steve Reynolds: I would say that security was not A-1 quality. And maybe because they felt they had the whole place boarded up.

Storm: Steve Reynolds worked for MJI Broadcasting, and was assigned to Woodstock 1999 to interview musicians and file reports on the festival.

Reynolds: We stayed in an old barracks, actually. And that also was kind of a weird thing. I was like, "Well, we're staying in an old barracks. It's an old Air Force Base. This

is not the most comfortable vibe for a concert.” Especially with all the pavement, and it was so hot. It was just, I remember, viciously, viciously hot.

(Music plays: James Brown, “Sex Machine”)

CBS News Reporter Sam Litzinger [archival audio clip]: How hot is it here at Woodstock '99? Well, the crowd has been yelling for water. They don't want to drink it. They want it sprayed on them.

Storm: Phil Stern broadcasted his local radio talk show live from Woodstock on Friday afternoon.

Stern [archival audio clip]: We are joined now by WIBX's own Mike Rogers. Mike, how's it going this afternoon?

Rogers [archival audio clip]: Phil, it's going hot this afternoon.

Stern [archival audio clip]: God, is it hot this afternoon. I've never seen you looking so flushed as a matter of fact.

Rogers [archival audio clip]: It's just mostly sunburn I think at this point. We've got some problems out at Woodstock right now.

Stern [archival audio clip]: Oh, we do?

Rogers [archival audio clip]: Several hundred people at this point are being treated for heat exhaustion. It seems that the problem is, there was such a demand for water that all of the water fountains all over the place no longer have water pressure. So people have no way of keeping cool; medics are passing out bottled water right now, but not able to get to people quickly enough to keep them from literally dropping like flies.

Mike Kohli: There was water available on the grounds. It was very difficult to get to if it was even available once you got to it.

Storm: Mike Kohli is a Rome resident who attended Woodstock for all three days.

Kohli: So you were kind of stuck, if you needed water, it was the four-dollar bottles of water, which is what the mantra of the whole weekend was. Four-dollar bottles of water.

Storm: Despite the heat and what some would come to see as price gouging, on Friday afternoon the festival seemed to be going flawlessly, as Woodstock Security Director Ken Donahue noted in a press conference.

Donahue [archival audio clip]: Once again, thirty years later, history has repeated itself. There's nothing going on but peace and love and music inside.

(Music plays: Sheryl Crow, “If It Makes You Happy”)

Salce: It was a great day. Solid music, lots to do, lots of sights and sounds and things to participate in.

Storm: Sean Salce.

Salce: There was still a positive vibe. You did start to hear the rumblings of complaints, cost of food, cost of water.

Clifford: More than anything I remember being hot and thinking, “Man, we’re walking on this tarmac, it’s so hot.”

Storm: Kristy Clifford says that by Saturday afternoon there was a noticeable deterioration in both the conditions of the site, and the crowd’s mood.

Clifford: And walking around trying to find water and just seeing filth everywhere. It seemed like garbage cans were overflowing or tipped over. Port-a-potties were surrounded by mud, I guess you could say. I don’t know if it was mud or not, but it just was disgusting. Everybody seemed, I don’t want to say tense, but anxious maybe is a better word. You felt something, but you didn’t know what. I couldn’t tell if it was the excitement in the air from the event itself, or if it was people getting fed up. I did hear a lot of people complaining about prices.

(Music plays: Korn, “Blind”)

Reynolds: I remember Saturday walking out—it was probably around lunchtime—and I remember...

Storm: Steve Reynolds.

Reynolds: People looking like they had been in a desert already. And this was only at noon. And you could kind of tell that people were just not happy.

Fred Durst, lead singer of Limp Bizkit [archival audio clip]: How many people here ever woke up one morning and just decided it wasn’t one of those days and you’re gonna break some (expletive)? Well this is one of them days, yo.

(Music plays: Limp Bizkit, “Break Stuff”)

Salce: For me...

Storm: Sean Salce.

Salce: The event on Saturday that I felt really started to kick it off was Kid Rock’s set.

(Music plays: Kid Rock, “Bawitdaba”)

Salce: And I remember standing there, I was about a hundred yards back from the stage, and he just started to encourage everybody: “whatever you have, pick it up and start throwing it.” Now I’ve never been in a tornado—and I hope to never be—but I think that that may have been the closest thing to a tornado that I hope I will ever experience. Just bottles and cans—glass, plastic—flying all over the place. Dirt, mud. That kind of started to set the tone for the rest of that evening, and the next day where people were starting to really show their discontentment with the conditions, their wallets quickly dwindling.

Reynolds: Saturday was a very, very testosterone-heavy, angry day of music.

James Hetfield [archival audio clip]: I think you all brought your Metallica energy with you, didn’t you?

Reynolds: And I think that sent an edge through the crowd that never really dissipated.

Scher [archival audio clip]: Hey guys. Calm down a minute, whoa. Whoa. As you can see if you look behind you, we have a bit of a problem.

Storm: The real trouble began sometime during the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ closing set on Sunday evening.

Kohli: There was this group that was giving out candles.

Storm: Mike Kohli.

Kohli: They were planning on doing this mass, kind of like a peace thing, where they wanted everybody to light a candle and pray for peace or something like that. As soon as these candles were starting to be passed out, people were lighting things on fire—trash or what not.

Salce: You have a bunch of upset people; they’ve been getting crankier throughout the weekend.

Storm: Sean Salce.

Salce: And then you pretty much give them the ultimate thing to rebel with, which is fire. Everything that made them disgruntled and upset fans, well, “How do we get rid of it? How do we erase the memory of how they screwed me over in that tent for four-dollar bottles of water? Burn it down.”

Scher [archival audio clip]: The Chili Peppers are going to come back. Calm down. We got three days through, we need... Calm down. We don’t want anybody to get hurt. The delay tower is on fire, as you can see. It’s not part of the show. It really is a problem. So the fire department’s going to have to come in with a fire truck to put the fire out. If

everybody can cooperate with the good firemen that are going to help, we'd appreciate it. You guys back there, all the way back near the fire, if you can hear me, back away. There's only a couple of hundred thousand of you guys, but we need your help. So let's back away, let's let the fire department do their job, and make sure nobody gets hurt. We'll be ready to go in just a little while.

Storm: The Red Hot Chili peppers returned to the stage, and in a pre-planned salute to the original Woodstock's closing act Jimi Hendrix, performed a version of his song "Fire."

Reynolds: When things started to really get out of hand during the Chili Peppers' set...

Storm: Steve Reynolds.

Reynolds: My coworker Sal and I decided, "Hey, let's go out and see what's going on here." Because, you know, this might turn into something. Because you could see the fires were getting bigger, and you could actually smell it in the big press area.

Storm: According to most accounts, security forces had dwindled throughout the weekend, and on Sunday evening seemed to evaporate as the situation escalated.

Reynolds: And the Chili Peppers had ended, and people were still, like, breaking stuff and lighting it on fire, and the bonfires kept growing. And it wasn't just a couple of hundred people. It was a lot of people joining in on this.

Salce: You know, it was dark out at that point, but as I recall looking up over the hangars—because you didn't have direct line of site between the West and the East Stage...

Storm: Sean Salce.

Salce: You had to go around the bend to see the hangars. But I remember starting to see this unnatural glow that wasn't the lights from the East Stage. Something didn't look right there. And I just remember coming around that bend and just starting... you're getting a full glimpse of the trailers that were on fire, and all the separate bonfires that were set, cars being flipped over, the concession tents being completely overrun.

Reynolds: It just had a sense of rage at the corporate man for ruining their rock show. I never was able to put my finger upon exactly what it was. But it was a vibe where, living in New York where you can walk into a situation and you automatically think: "You know what? I should really keep walking as fast as I possibly can," like if you're walking on a block that's kind of shady, that's exactly the feeling that I had when we were walking out there.

Mineo [archival audio clip]: The chaotic finale to the Woodstock '99 concert resulted in seven arrests and five injured. That's the word this morning from the head of the New York State Police.

Storm: In the aftermath, debate centered on just what had gone wrong. Was it negligent or nonexistent security? The heat? Price-gouging? Aggressive music? Was it evidence of some sort of failings on the part of this Woodstock generation? Historian Maurice Isserman.

Isserman: Maybe they were disappointed. Maybe it didn't add up. Maybe they felt ripped off because it wasn't as advertised in popular memory: a thoroughly transcendent experience.

Caller [archival audio clip]: The kids I met were nice kids.

Storm: As Phil Stern pointed out on his talk show, one thing was certain: the legacy of Woodstock 1999 would be far different from that of the original.

Caller [archival audio clip]: Friendly, "Thank you. Please." Good kids. So it couldn't have been everybody.

Stern [archival audio clip]: I'm sure most of them were. But there was somebody rioting last night, and it wasn't good kids saying please and thank you. Unless it was "please pass me the accelerant and thank you for the firewood."

Caller [archival audio clip]: But you're talking about a few hours out of seventy-two.

Stern [archival audio clip]: That's true, but you know what? It's those few hours that people are going to remember.

Kohli: The lasting legacy of Woodstock?

Storm: Mike Kohli.

Kohli: I think it says something about this country. It's "What's in it for me?" Instead of "Let's all get together and have a good time."

Starr: You know there's a chicken and egg thing. The culture, the music, the writing, and everything else reflects, to some extent, the mood of the country and of a segment of people in the country. But the music also influences the mood.

Storm: Former radio personality and programmer Tom Starr.

Starr: And I think when you look at the lineup from the '99 festival, there was a real change toward angst, anger, and aggression in the music. A lot of those bands had a much more aggressive crowd.

Isserman: The original Woodstock involved a lot of serendipity. It could have turned out a lot worse. Governor Rockefeller was thinking of sending in the National Guard, and if he had not been persuaded otherwise—the organizers instead got him instead to send in medical teams and food—it could have degenerated into a riot. If all these armed soldiers in helmets suddenly showed up on the perimeter of Yasgur’s farm, who knows how we would have remembered it.

Salce: I think that people look at the original festival as this big monumental event in the history of the United States.

Storm: Sean Salce.

Salce: And I think everybody just felt, you know, maybe this is going to be another major turning point in society. And, you know, as it turned out, by the end of Sunday night, everybody just obviously saw us in a different light.

Isserman: Imagine Woodstock ’99 ending on the second day. No riot—there would have been incidents that were disturbing—but it wouldn’t come down to us as this sort of great commentary on the 1990s, or on the failings of young people in the 1990s, or on even the music business in the 1990s. We’d have a different memory of it. So there’s a lot of chance in this, and I wouldn’t want to see this as an indictment of a later generation for not living up to the values of an earlier generation.

(Woodstock cheer)

Reynolds: The 1999 Woodstock definitely ruined the brand, I think for myself—I mean, I’m 40, so I’m as old as the original Woodstock.

Storm: Steve Reynolds.

Reynolds: I think it ruined it maybe for a lot of people who were older, because all of the sudden you’re like, “There goes the peace and love ideals of the original.” And I think that’s why they’ve never been able to do another Woodstock branded concert, because no one would want to take the risk of history repeating itself because it has the Woodstock name.

Isserman: There’s always been a problem with trying to reenact Woodstock, because you’ll never get back there. There will never be an event again—under that name—that has such a dramatic impact or creates such a durable myth. And it would be better, I think, if other future events were organized that may be were like Woodstock, but they had a different name, and a different logo, and a different set of expectations, and you don’t bring in a few of the old acts to make it feels as if it’s just a continuation of the original. Every generation should create its own mythology and have its own transcendent experience.

Starr: If it had been something that went off flawlessly, and everybody had enough space, and enough food, and enough water, and there wasn't a sea of mud, and there weren't overflowing toilets, then it would have been probably a pretty good event. But a lot of those other things, and the way in which people compensated for them, is what made Woodstock, Woodstock. And I don't think that it's likely to be replicated on that kind of scale for quite some time. If ever.

(Music plays: Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, "Woodstock")