

The Rock Imperialists

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Editors' Note: As of this writing the Woodstock Rock Festival may not happen. It seems the town council of Wallkill, N.Y. (the site of the festival) voted unanimously not to allow the festival to be held in their town. This came after almost a quarter of a million dollars in advance sales had been taken in.

NEW YORK (LNS)—The list of stars who will show up at the Woodstock Rock Festival this August is mighty impressive, as fine as any ever.

There's everyone: Joan Baez, the Who, Joe Cocker, Janis Joplin, the Jefferson Airplane, Ravi Shankar, Blood Sweat and Tears, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Richie Havens, Canned Heat, Arlo Guthrie, Tim Hardin, Johnny Winter, the Band, Iron Butterfly, The Grateful Dead, and the Incredible String Band, for example.

The arrangements to help you spend three days in the wild sound as impressive as the list of stars—free campgrounds, ample water and outhouses, free rice kitchen for the poor and hungry; catering by Nathan's of Coney Island; craft booths which might just be bivouac head shoppes, and which might be craft shops.

So the rock imperialists deliver the goods. When you want a banana, United Fruit sells a good banana. And when you want a rock festival, Woodstock Music and Air Fair, Inc. sells a good rock festival—at \$7 a day.

The Guatemalans who grew the bananas get to eat an occasional bruised model. And the street people, the denizens of the lower east side, of the Haight, let them eat free rice and maybe they'll hear the sounds wafting out past the gates.

But they made the culture which the rich fops imitate. Walk down St. Marks Place in the East Village and dig the crowd on either side of the velvet rope which separates those with the bread (\$10 a couple) to get into the Electric Circus from those who beg spare change to buy a knish.

On the rich side, the same outfits as the poor side, except ironed and cut from finer cloth—bell-bottoms, groovy vests, mucho hair, svelte girls in granny glasses. On the poor side, it's hip...on the rich side, it's a shuck, it's an imitation of Hip. It's fancy boutique clothes cut to look like the old surplus clothes which the street people once wore out of poverty, thereby creating a style.

For some, the dress constitutes a case of 'going native' for a night on the Bowery. For others, it's simply high fashion. The impulse for kids to dress 'well' is plugged in nasty trend-setting magazines like "Seventeen," and supported by the huge cloth and garment companies, the cosmetics companies and the hygiene freaks companies.

The sales job for fashion is easier than others—for the styles come complete with a built-in image. Marlboro has to spend millions to rope together its cancer-sticks and he-manhood. But the Fashion-makers have it easy this year, because the Clothes styles which they plug were once part of a genuine revolutionary and romantic lifestyle.

So America's teenagers are exploited by big companies that hold 'lifestyle' out as bait. "BUY THIS AND YOU WILL BE..." You will be what? Hip?

You'll own another piece of snappy clothing, you'll be able to crowd the poor girl down the block still further, you'll earn your ticket to daydream about running toward him through tall fields of hay, arms stretched toward the sun—the kind of daydream they push in ads for cunt deodorant.

And the kind of daydream they push on...album covers. "But (you say) album covers are great. I trip, and look at album covers, and...etc." But it ain't that way. Rock may have come from the street people, along with styles that grew out of buying surplus clothing, and daydreams that grew out of mystic studies and sunshine state habits. And the communication between the performing artists and you may still bear the same free-you up message.

But in between you and the performer there's billions of dollars that you're paying and (for the most part) he's not getting. Who is getting it? The huge companies that own the record empires.

Here's the puzzle: the same companies that own the recording contracts and record studios which make 'liberated' music, also own government contracts and subsidiary companies which make electronic bombing equipment, spying equipment, death equipment which is used in Vietnam and in our other colonies.

The companies don't care how they make money, as long as they make the money. If they can make it from anti-war, youth culture by coming on hip, they'll do it. And if they can make it from killing Vietnamese and killing off thousands of years of Vietnamese culture with expensive weapons systems for the government, they'll do that too.

For example, CBS owns Columbia records, Masterworks, Blue Horizon, Odyssey, Harmony, Date, Okeh and several other record companies. They have invested heavily in defense contracts as well, working especially in the areas of laser beams, radar, spy photography & underwater detection—the sorts of technological work which keeps up the arms race and makes fat profits.

It's the same story with most of the other major record companies. Like true imperialists, they'll go wherever the market is, talk whatever language (be it Vietnamese or hipese) needs talking, sell whatever people will pay for, as long as they make a profit.

Does this mean you shouldn't buy records? No, of course not. If you wanted to live in this country without supporting the death machine, you couldn't eat or turn on an electric light. What it means is that you should understand a few facts of life. When you sit down with a sandwich, (made of food processed by big business) and when you take a bit of the sandwich, and start listening to music of YOUR culture, then dig it.

That's the corner they've got you backed into. Supporting the very things you hate the most in order to get the few things you want. There's a revolutionary movement growing in this country to fight just that form of oppression.

What has this got to do with Woodstock? You might go 'there and have a fine time, but just remember that someone is making a million on your fun, and it isn't the performers, many of whom come for little or nothing.

We interviewed the promoters setting up the Woodstock Festival, at a press conference arranged by the mid-town publicity company they hired. The conference itself was a slick operation. It passed itself off as a consultation between "leaders of the rock community" and the underground press on how to have peaceful good times for everyone.

They didn't need to consult with anyone. Way back in April they had hired a federal law enforcement official, Wes Pomeroy, whom they described to me as "a very progressive kind of cat."

A very progressive kind of cat who had worked with Johnson on the Safe Streets' Act, and with Republican big-wigs in planning security for their '64 convention at the Cow Palace. That's who the investors ("leaders of the rock community") consulted with when they wanted security for their investment, not the underground press people.

Even though the press conference handout reads, "We have called a special meeting of the underground press and rock community leaders to discuss ways of developing...safe and harmonious pop music festivals." Mike Lang and Artie Kornfall and two other partners put up half-a-million bucks.

They're expecting big returns from ticket sales, a cut of concession sales, and also from selling TV and movie rights. Artie used to head Columbia Records. He told me, "I'd dig my daughter to be able to eat too."

What about the street people? Mike says "We're not turning our backs on these people—we've got to feed them." And let them in?

"Don't you feel you're exploiting hip culture for your own gain?" Artie said, "Much of us have the same goal. We want to be able to cut out—not take shit—and go live in the country."

Except that for most, it is a dream, not a goal, as long as Artie collects from every freak who wants to hear his music. And except that now that so many people want to cut out, they might find it easier to get together and put a stop to the conditions they want to escape.

What about the riot that happened at the LA rock festival, Artie? "We are them—when they attack us, they are attacking themselves. If you talk about an army, it's got a lot of different wings. We're just another wing."

Maybe Artie and Mike are fooling themselves and maybe not. But they have extracted from the movement those things which can make them some money—talent, excitement, revolutionary energy, identity with hip looks and talk. But they have missed the heart of the movement.

The revolutionary energy of rock and of the movement is a response to oppression—it grew out of the blues, out of the poor white country music, out of the emancipated poverty of the street people and their drug scene, out of the anger about national leaders representing corporate interests, while killing people angry about how students get lied to and treated in public schools.

The movement is made and sung by people who oppose exploitation, whether by war elsewhere, or by high prices, racism, and low wages at home.

The movement is not represented in any way by rich investors getting richer by the profits of rock festivals—even if the investors do look hip and talk hip and know hip people.

By the way, if you do go to the Woodstock festival, Wes Pomeroy has a staff of 400 security people working for him, in and out of costume.

When he was asked about kids smoking dope there, he said, “We’ll do nothing to protect them. There will be narcs there, same as everywhere—they’re going to have to pay \$7 too.”

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“The Woodstock Nation,” FE #87, September 4–17, 1969.

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