

# Woodstock Nation

film review

Peter Gessner

1969

Remember Bevo Francis, sports fans? Well, Abbie Hoffman does.

One of the least off-the-wall sections in "Woodstock Nation," Abbie's latest bildungsroman and advertisement for himself (the proceeds are pledged to the Motherfuckers who weren't in on the Movement's shakedown of hippie capitalist Woodstock Ventures, Inc.), deals with his visit to the one-horse college where fifteen years ago this Bevo Francis dude was the first human to score 100 points in a basketball game.

Abbie had just left the pastoral setting of Antioch College, where "people turn on and fuck everywhere, have naked swim-ins in the gym pool, a black dorm. and so much love and identity searching. It was all 'Who am I?' stuff. After three days, I was bored."

The psychic space of Bevo's Rio Grande College, however was an up. An audience of several hundred ballplayers, blacks, hillbillies and cops turned out to hear him. The next day, the school had its first action in its bucolic history, having to do with taking books out of the college library and not giving them back, which resulted in a lot of arrests and expulsions. Abbie had done his number.

Which is after all hyperbolic turn-on propaganda work for the Movement, setting people in motion. A lot of politicians these days are hostile to this kind of organizing, tending to put it down as manipulative and basically "media-oriented, without any kind of serious political follow-up.

In some cases, this charge has weight (like on the Lower East Side and Abbie's failure to work collectively with others, what was admittedly a very fragmented, uptight political space), but the charge could be made equally against some campus "radicals" who up until the last year spent a lot of time mouthing off behind network microphones.

A lot of us have still to recognize and deal with the fact that Abbie's outrageous irresponsibility" can pull out into the streets more Flower Children who have grown thorns, more street-fighting kids, than a lot of correct rhetoric about imperialism. Abbie's endemic problem is that his personal style of life and work do not root him in the job of concrete Nation building.

The White Panthers in Ann Arbor, the Young Lords in Chicago and New York, perhaps the Berkeley Liberation Movement and others are beginning to fuse the idea of struggle with the concept of Serving the People.

Another fear some people in the Movement have about Abbie is that the kinds of liberation he is into can be essentially assimilated into American capitalism. Or in the jargon of today, "the co-optation of revolutionary culture."

We now know that various government agencies and American industry, particularly those corporations whose very survival in the commodity market over the next few years will depend on the so-called Youth Market, are already planning the "next" Woodstock for next summer somewhere on Indian lands (dig it!) in the Far West.

The underground press continues to debate whether Woodstock was a "glimpse of the Future" or "a vision of the hippest concentration camp," an alternative way of dealing with the we who are the people our parents warned us against, next to total and final extermination. The book is right-on honest about dealing with this.

Abbie says, and he is correct, that Movement people were almost totally unprepared for the contradictory reality that emerged out of Woodstock. Those who went to “politicize” the huge lump of kids assembled there, including Abbie who was clubbed off the stage by Peter Townsend of The Who when he tried to make an announcement about John Sinclair, found themselves in an ambiguous service role, setting up hospitals and other survival centers.. basically helping to bail out the hippie promoters from a logistics mess they had not prepared for. Abbie saw himself as a kind of “Florence Nightingale handing out downers.”

Abbie’s visceral dislike of rock musicians and promoters hardened into active hate. Prior to Woodstock, he had seen the Movement’s access to liberal money sources dry up, and he felt that it was time to seek reparations from the top: “Revolution was becoming a salable commodity and the only way to deal with that was to try and rip off the bread and spread it around like the manure it was.” Right on. But the actual transaction proved to be partial.

In the eternal dance of buyers and sellers, partners sometimes change places and the seller gets bought. Bread for something called “The Movement Center,” in return for vague assurances that state power would not be seized (nor even rented) that weekend. But not only was the amount of bread itself marginal compared to what the Vanguard Capitalists will rake off in the months and years to come, but Abbie and other hip Movement people were plunged into roles not of their choosing, to function as bought off trustees in an enlightened, turned-on prison.

So Abbie would like to have another Woodstock:

“I guess you figured out that I had mixed feelings about what happened up there in those few hectic days.

Mostly about the cats who were running the show, some about myself but none about the folks who worked and played together...There’s still a long way to go. lots of things to do.

Take Woodstock, New York for example. Not the one you went to, the other one in Pig Nation where Bob Dylan really lives. Up in that Woodstock the cops don’t wear scarlet jackets and smoke pot in the haystacks with teenyboppers. Up in that Woodstock they belt you with a club if you sit down in the center of town. Up in that Woodstock they cut your hair-when they arrest you. Dig that, Samson of the Tulips. You gonna make that V-sign when some pig shaves your head in the other Woodstock? Dig it Samson, we gotta build an Army to defend WOODSTOCK NATION.”

Somewhere in a film I once made with Abbie Hoffman in it, a guy says in response to the Yippie thing: “a coalition of bullshit and truth!” The phrase hangs in my skull as I think, not so much about Woodstock, but about the tangled swamp of the hip white “cultural revolution” through which people like Abbie walk largely unscathed; it was the beginning, and shook a lot of us loose from a lot of things, and set us down a road from which there is no turning back.

Revolutionary change and the transformation of Amerika is on the agenda of human history.

It was only three years ago that Abbie Hoffman and Emmett Grogan went to an SDS conference somewhere in Michigan and when they saw a lot of the delegates were wearing ties, Grogan kicked over a conference table and ran a stream of obscenities that lasted several long minutes and blew many minds.

The last I heard of Grogan was that he was living in a black ghetto trading arms. But Abbie told me that, and we know Abbie isn’t serious. Right? Wrong.

—Peter Gessner / Newsreel

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