

Jimi Hendrix's Concert At Woodstock

Posted on October 6, 2022

Woodstock

"Woodstock Music and Art Fair", also known as Woodstock, is a widely acclaimed three-day music festival held in August 1969. Regarded as "An Aquarian Exposition: Three Days of Peace and Music", the fiesta was held in New York at a farm belonging to Max Yasgur. The landmark concert is alternatively referred to as the "Woodstock Rock Festival", and despite intermittent rain, the outdoor event constituted 32 acts and was attended by more than 400,000 people (Schinder & Schwartz, 2007). The music festival is remembered today for its pivotal role in music history and as a landmark gathering for the proponents of the counter-culture generation (Kilgannon, 2009).

The significance of this event has been reiterated through a documentary film released in 1970 and its accompanying soundtrack album. Woodstock anniversary events have been organized to mark the monumental occasion. In 2004, the event was rated number nineteen among the "50 Moments That Changed the History of Rock and Roll" by "Rolling Stone Magazine" (Rolling Stone, 2004). "The National Register of Historic Places" listed the festival site in 2017. The three-day event rolled into four days, and thirty-two acts were performed by artists like "Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Grateful Dead, Joe Cocker, and Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young" (Geslani, 2015). Although many legendary performances took place at Woodstock, Jimi Hendrix remains the most memorable one, immortalizing him as an icon of that era.

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At Woodstock, Hendrix was reserved as the headliner for the event. However, he didn't make an appearance, waiting for the festival to end. On Monday at 9:00 a.m., Hendrix took the stage and performed for two hours. Though the exhausted crowd had dwindled to approximately 30,000 people, yet Hendrix remained the highest-earning performer of the festival. Hendrix did not headline the event as planned owing to a contract stipulation "that no act could follow his performance" (Onion et al., 2021). On 18th August, at 8:30 a.m. Jimi Hendrix walked onto the stage accompanied by his band. Chip Monck, the event announcer, introduced them on stage as the "Jimi Hendrix Experience". Hendrix, however, corrected him, declaring that they had changed it to Gypsy, Sun, and Rainbows. As stated by Hendrix, "We got tired of the Experience, and every once in a while, we were blowing our minds too much, so we decided to change the whole thing around and call it Gypsy, Sun, and Rainbows". Earlier that summer, Jimi Hendrix Experience had broken up, and a temporary band, "Gypsy, Sun, and Rainbows", was formed. Billy Cox was the bass player, Larry Lee was on rhythm guitar, Gerry Velez and Juma Sultan were on percussion, and Mitch Mitchell was on drums. The band

lasted a month and gave four performances, including the Woodstock (Huber, 2021).

The band opened their performance with “Message to Love”. This track was unreleased at that time and was included in *Band of Gypsys*, the live album of 1970. The set included improvised renditions of several hits along with some new tracks. The band was fairly well synchronized, with the music majorly dominated by a white Fender Stratocaster owned by Hendrix. The set consisted of songs such as “Getting My Heart Back Together” and some familiar numbers such as the “Spanish Castle Magic” from one of the 1967 albums “*Axis: Bold as Love*”. This was followed by Hendrix’s personal favourite slow blues, “Red House”. A lengthy guitar solo performance by Larry Lee was also included in the mix. However, major issues of intonation and tuning affected the act. To step up the performance, “*Lover Man*” was performed by Hendrix, which was another unreleased track. To satisfy the crowd’s requests for more familiar material, Hendrix followed with an intense rendering of the “*Foxy Lady*” – a track taken from the 1st album. The set also consisted of two brand new tracks, i.e., “*Beginning*”, featuring a drum solo from Mitchell, and “*Izabella*”, which was an anti-war anthem. For Curtis Mayfield’s “*Gypsy Woman*” and “*Master Mind*”, Larry Lee was the lead vocalist (Bethel Woods Center for the Arts, 2021). The epitome moment of the performance was, however, Hendrix’s enchanting understanding of “*The Star-Spangled Banner*”. Initially, the band attempted to join in by following Hendrix but instead decided to let him create the magic. His consummate musical rendition of the national anthem conveyed the emotional mayhem that had engulfed America at the time; frightening visualizations of war and devastation took hold of the audience before he settled it with a calm reading of the ending note. Hendrix’s performance of “*The Star-Spangled Banner*” is truly astonishing, and it became “one of the most enduring of all Woodstock moments and memories”(Bethel Woods Center for the Arts, 2021). A piece that started as an innocent strumming of chords soon turned into an improvised performance with the sound of bombs and machine guns filling the air. Considering the time of this performance when the Vietnam War was at its peak during the Summer of Love, many have attributed it to being an anti-war protest. It rightfully captured the countercultural essence of Woodstock.

“*The Star-Spangled Banner*” was part of a medley that lasted for more than thirty minutes and included smash hits like “*Purple Haze*”, “*Voodoo Child*”, and “*Villanova Junction*”. This performance was also rare in the sense that Hendrix performed an encore for the first time. The performance ended around 10:30 a.m., and ever since, it has remained etched into the landscape of American pop culture. It is interesting to note that Hendrix had performed the National Anthem twenty-eight times before this performance. Throughout his career, he has played it more than fifty times; however, none of the other performances could exceed the level achieved at Woodstock. The melody created in Hendrix’s rebellious interpretation of the National Anthem with the sirens, wails, bursting bombs, and machine-gun fire, was a perfect ending to the festival that marked the era of the counter-culture generation (Huber, 2021; Jimi Hendrix, 2013).

Cultural Impact

The concert of Woodstock gained immense mythic significance. The classic three-hour movie and the best-selling Woodstock record not only added to the importance of this epic event but also earned it some profit. The great significance of the event can be established by the fact that the generation of young adult Americans from the era of Woodstock is often referred to as the “Woodstock Nation” or “Woodstock Generation”. Many people debate the significance of Woodstock, as even before the concert, the youth culture of the 1960s was defined by popular music and political protest. Irrespective of this fact, Woodstock gained eminence as a powerful symbol of the 1960s youth culture. Alternatively, the conservatives have critiqued the event and have highlighted the hedonistic values and the emptiness associated with the art of that era (Encyclopedia, 2021).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the counter-culture in the United States was defined by war, tensions arising from racial prejudices, and rebellious youth resisting their government. At that time, the “Woodstock Music and Arts Festival” was a cultural setup dominated by rock and roll, drugs, and sex – all that was symbolic of the social and political order of that time. Several events played a central role in shaping the history of America before this festival of “peace, love, and music”. The most important factor was the Vietnam War, which was at its peak at that time, and the anti-war emotion was spreading among the masses. The Americans had begun to realize the brutal reality of war as broadcasted on television. The nation was gripped with fear. Therefore, the festival itself signified this anti-war movement, a place where pro-drug citizens could gather and blow off some steam through music, which was used as a protest against the war. The era was also marked by the “civil rights movement”. Despite the 1964 “Civil Rights Act”, racial hate crimes were prevalent, and the “Black Power Movement” was fully geared up. At such a time, Woodstock offered African Americans such as Richi Havens and Jimi Hendrix a chance to take the stage. This was a highly symbolic moment for the people of colour and a message for all of the changing eras. Described as a “psychedelic rendition”, Hendrix’s version of the anthem left people in a state of awe as it captured the spirit of the people of Woodstock. The third important factor of that era was the counter-culture movement prevalent in the United States at that time, which was marked by a hippie lifestyle. As Hippies promoted the notion of non-violence, the mantra of “make love, not war” was the essence of the Woodstock festival. Hippies were categorized as youth with long hair, a pro-drug attitude, nomadic lifestyles, and sexual freedom. Even today, the American culture of the 1960s is associated with Woodstock attendees, i.e., “long-haired youth wearing bright clothing and dancing with flowers in their hair” (Ramos, 2020). Jimi Hendrix adopted the hippie dress-up style, and he took the stage in a fringed shirt and a turquoise beaded necklace (Hechkoff & Pace, 2020).

The untraditional piece performed by Hendrix not only promoted his ideals of freedom but also displayed the notion of supporting the different movements prevalent in the country at the time. The way he played the rendition was enough for the audience to paint an image of their own. Words were not required to propagate the emotion, rather Hendrix’s guitar enabled the audience to create their own experience. As an innovative artist of his time, his performance was, indeed, a major step to

gaining individuality during that time. Being an African American, Hendrix stood up for change at a time when the country was struggling with the very idea of transformation. He opted for innovation rather than the stereotypical tradition. He amplified the message through his music, and it has reverberated throughout history since then and is acclaimed even today. His performance was a symbol of hope for the Americans healing from the emotional trauma of war. The “super hippies” dress up the style of the band and added colour and life to the performance (Clague, 2019). Hendrix’s influence on the countercultural music industry also addressed the issues of race and the presence of people of colour in the white-dominated music industry. This was evident through the African American band he created.

Concluding Note

Conclusively, Jimi Hendrix’s performance at Woodstock has remained an epic moment in the history of music to date. It propagated a message of being free in the truest sense. It not only appealed to the masses but also reflected Hendrix’s struggles in prejudiced America. He not only created history by introducing African American culture to the predominantly white industry but also propagated innovation and the ideals of the counter-cultural generation.

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