

## What I Recall of Woodstock

Yes, I was there. And I remember it. 'If you remember it you weren't there' is a common utter nonsense phrase you might still hear from those who wish it never happened. Sorry folks. It happened.

Here's what I remember. (Yes. This is how I remember it. Despite the amount of time. I have an unusual memory. I concede I don't recall where we bought our tickets.)

I was 15 years old at the time. That Spring I had skedaddled before the end of term from a boarding school in Massachusetts. It was my family's ancestral school, and 9 months of sheer hell for me. I had no idea where I was going that Fall, and scary or not, I liked not knowing.

My friend Bob told me about a wonderful event about to happen upstate, and he insisted I join him. Like a great many children of divorce, we knew how to play our parents off against each other and work out whatever permission we needed. Although that was a challenge even for us. We bought the tickets somewhere near Bob's mother's or father's home. So either the Bronx or East Orange New Jersey.

At the time I lived in Stuyvesant Town and was working a summer job at Dalton's Deli on 14<sup>th</sup> and B. The owner wouldn't let me take Friday off, so I only bought 2 tickets.

Growing up in Stuyvesant Town felt very much like growing up nowhere at all. Whoever designs these projects must despise neighborhoods. No doubt some people love the place. To me it combines a perfect balance of the most alienating aspects of an urban landscape and the most alienating aspects of a suburban landscape without the charm of either. Immense, symmetric buildings with no faces but with eyes like prisons. Chained off and perfectly trimmed lawns. For me very much a neighborhood with no soul. So went much of my childhood.

Bob and I went straight to Port Authority Bus Terminal after I finished work that Friday, sporting a backpack with two shirts, some assorted food items, and a sleeping bag.

I don't know how many of you are old enough to remember Port Authority Bus Terminal at the time. It had the visual ascetic of a cavernous urinal. The aroma too.

There we waited in an immense crowd of freaks. Hours. It was very very hot. and someone in the crowd climbed up on some scaffolding and lit a cigarette lighter under one of the sprinklers on the ceiling. It showered some of us with a cooling fluid before sputtering off. A great relief. That's the last moment I remember being truly dry all weekend. Someone walked by and held up a copy of the Daily News (or the Post – I don't remember). It said 'Traffic up-tight at Hippie Fest'. We all applauded. The more the merrier.

Bob and I had never displayed any consistency with hallucinogenics. More sensible trippers drop their tabs simultaneously. We were haphazard.

Earlier he told me he had acquired what he claimed was a tab of THC. Heaven knows what it really was, but he took his half of the second we reached Port Authority, and I decided to wait until we were snug on the bus.

More and more buses apparently arrived and took more and more passengers, but the hippie crowd kept growing. True we slowly drifted towards the door. Odd trails of conversation piecemeal:

“Nice eyes.”

“Lovely ass.”

“You too. Who are you?”

Finally one of the odder conversations included us.

“Hi,” said a total stranger with alcohol on his breath. “I’m – “ I don’t remember the man’s name but for some reason Bob and I didn’t feel comfortable with him, so I said ‘I’m George’ and Bob said ‘I’m Fred’.

The man nodded vaguely and said ‘I’m going with 7 friends of mine, and they’re all assholes.’ Then he turned to one of them and said “did you hear that?”

“Yeah -” said one of his 7 friends. “I heard it.”

Bob and I made ourselves a little scarce. I remember the man groping at me and calling me Bob Fred and me George in a forlorn tone of voice.

Strange conversation with 2 women too. I don’t remember the words except they included place of origin.

Someone in more or less a uniform separated people into groups when we reached the door. Buses lined up in the tube outside it. I kissed one of the women, thinking it was good-bye, and she said ‘I’ll see you up there.’ And then to my delight, the official included her too.

We all loaded into the bus, already thick with pungent, familiar fog and voices. She sat next to me. As we started to pull out of the station, I snuggled in next to her and then quite sensibly took my half of the THC. Someone handed me a kazoo. ‘Wow,’ I explained and the snuggling grew more intimate.

Not sure what else happened just then except that the woman put her hand down my pants. 15 year old heaven. Some time passed.

More odd snatches of conversation, this time through my head.

‘Well Janis Joplin left Big Brother and the Holding Company because – if you’ll pardon the expression – Big Brother wanted to do his own thing.’

‘Man this chick does everything.’

‘Why’d you do that?’

‘This is some traffic jam.’

‘The really cool guys sit in the back seat with sunglasses,’ I think it was Bob who said that.

“Man, the sun is like setting . . . Lord is it setting!”

I stuck my head out of the window and asked someone in a convertible going the other way what it was like up there. ‘The blue acid is poisoned,’ she said.

I pulled back in and announced that to everyone. ‘Bummer’ responded a voice out of nowhere.

Bob was going on to no one in particular. ‘We’re only partially cool. Who is it that we want to be like? We want to be like the older hippies. They want to be like the rock and roll stars. Who do the rock and roll guys want to be like?’

At some point I noticed that the woman who had been playing with me was no longer there. Some vague image of her and her friend taking their knapsacks and standing up, but that may or may not be real.

I sat back and was looking at the nightlit scenery shooting by at a fairly nice clip. Trees and streetlights zoomed by one after another in odd symmetry. The road became a nightgrey blur.

Then, all of a sudden, something utterly unaccountable occurred. Outside the bus window, under one of the streaks of passing streetlights, my friend Bob was standing, perfectly still. Right in the middle of the road.

I seriously panicked.

‘Get back in here!’ I yelled. ‘Are you crazy?’

‘What the hell for?’

‘You can’t just stand outside of a bus that’s going 60 miles an hour! It’s dangerous.’

‘Henry,’ he said in a confused voice, ‘there’s a huge traffic jam. Everything’s backed up. This bus hasn’t moved an inch in 2 hours.’

‘But the trees are shooting past us at um at least 60 miles an hour!’

‘Henry. You’re the only one still on the bus.’

I plucked my head back inside and looked around. Sure enough. Except for me the bus was empty. ‘I’m not coming out there!’ I shouted.

‘You have to Henry. They’re not driving any more!’

Somehow he convinced me.

I took my knapsack, stepped up to the door, and stuck my toe out very gingerly onto the tarmac as if testing a stream of grey water. It took me a full second actually to put my foot down and reassure myself it wasn’t moving past me at 60 miles an hour. A lesson in relativity theory. Very cautiously, in slow motion, I left the safety of the bus, walked away around the vehicle, across at least one lane of stalled traffic, and out into the middle of the road.

A lot of people from the bus had hoisted on their knapsacks and started to walk down the stalled rows of cars.

‘You sure we’re not moving?’ I asked.

Bob studied my face for a moment and said ‘Henry you are gone!’

This I needed a moment to absorb. ‘Yes’ I said.

Well, after all technically, he was right. I was gone. No longer in New York, but not yet at Woodstock. So suspended, as it were, in between two places I was in (or rather at) neither. A kind of momentous stasis was occurring or had occurred.

Therefore ‘gone’ was more an exact state of being than an appropriate adjective.

Whereupon an insight: a highway, any highway, or any road, (such as the specific road upon which I was standing – along with the mingling crowd - was technically where people do in fact experience their own state of ‘goneness’. These are in effect the only place or spaces in our universes where we engage in transit. And therefore everyone who is on or in such a place as a road is in fact experiencing the state of being ‘gone’.

Now, since we had at this particular juncture (a traffic jam) in fact stopped moving along just such a trajectory and were now standing on the road itself, suspended as it were in mid transit, we had entered exactly the space one needs to be in order to experience that exact state where one’s goneness is explicitly . . . ‘

At this point I realized that a small crowd had gathered around me and was hanging on my every word. Which meant that at some point, these insights had spilled out of my mouth, and I had been expounding.

I'll concede that as a 15 year old, I couldn't possibly have stated the insights so lucidly as I have here, but something very much like them did flash through my head, and although for some reason I don't recall the exact words, I was in fact sharing these insights with those people. Obscure metaphysics, you might say, or Zen perhaps. Bob led me away.

'Well,' I said 'you pointed it out. I was just explaining.'

'You are really gone.' Bob responded. Still impressed with his insight, I decided then to keep the explanation to myself.

One by one, my group of listeners dispersed, and I remember a woman asking her boyfriend what was going on.

'I dunno,' he said. 'I was just listening to this weird kid.'

After that we walked awhile and I remember a father and his son picking us up in a station wagon, driving us a ways, and letting us out about an hour later. Through their back window I noticed the woman I had been snuggling with on the bus, and I asked the driver to pick them up too, more snuggling I hoped. The driver ignored me. Bob told me to shut up. After that I think we had more than one ride. More than once we actually rode on the hood of someone's car.

Then more walking. I kept asking people directions.

It was pitch black, serious country night along the road. I remember noticing someone's face over a campfire oddly bodiless in the light. There were crowds and cars and faces and rain and then no rain. Bob and I were inseparable I'm glad to say. We kept getting closer as the sun came up. Never seen so many people.

A road. A line of trees. An opened field. Like a farmer's field. Then a huge sign saying 'Aquarian Parking'.

'That's premature.' I told Bob.

'What?'

'That sign is premature. The age of Aquarius isn't due for at least another 40 years.'

At this point Bob had grown accustomed to ignoring me. Then more rain. Somehow we found a truck with opened sides, and I remember crawling in there for awhile.

'This is the Ritz' someone said. First time I ever heard that expression. Very clever, I thought. To this day I find myself repeating it.

Very sleepy and tired, and I asked Bob if he could spare one of his dexedrine, but he refused to share. For some time we stayed in the truck out of the drizzle, but we found it boring. We wandered, as if by instinct over to some kind of concession stand.

As I extracted from my pocket a wad of wet cash, a man approached me. He was I'd say about 40 or 45. After sizing me up for a moment, he came out with the following pronouncement:

'People have revelations here.'

'Really?'

‘Like for me, my revelation came yesterday in the middle of an LSD trip in the middle of the largest crowd of people I’ve ever seen in my life. And I realized we’re all . . . ‘ [I promise you he did say something, and it was very profound, but what it was I have no idea. I heard every word but forgot them instantly – appropriate for an LSD insight] . . . and now I am heading home. I came here all the way from Ohio. I got my wife.’ He pointed to her. ‘And I got my 15 year old son’ and he pointed to his son. I remember thinking people age differently in the Midwest. If that kid were really my age, he looked a lot younger. ‘And I don’t know how I’m going to get them there.’

Of course, being a somewhat more cynical urban adolescent, I was waiting for the line I most expected: ‘so now my revelation about all humanity is that you should give of your own humanity, which is to say your wad of legal tender in your mitt help my get my forlorn family back to the farm’ (again I’ll concede that as a 15 year old I couldn’t have said it that clearly, but it is pretty much what I thought was coming)

But the request never happened. He just nodded and then walked away.

To this day I’ve wondered about that interchange. Maybe he was after my money. Certainly I would have helped him if he had been. I would have given him at least 10 of my 50 bucks, and at the time it would have been plenty. Maybe he just wanted to share his revelation. If so, I’m sorry I don’t retain it. Some years later, musing on the incident and thinking it odd that it happened while I was standing in line, I said out loud to no one in particular ‘they also serve who only stand and wait’. Funny. Don’t know what that means either.

At the concession stand I bought a bag of potato chips, a tootsie roll, and a pack of Pall Malls. By then I was wearing two chilly wet button down shirts. The inner bright lemon yellow or lime green, almost day-glo, the outer bright orange with yellow pinstripes. The Pall Malls I put in my knapsack, the potato chips I cradled in my free hand, and the Tootsie Roll I placed in my breast pocket. It appeared dark brown against my bright shirts.

My memory is explicit about these items because a few moments later something unpleasant occurred. Two unpleasantries to be precise happened. Bob and I hitched a ride on the hood of a car which moved slowly through the crowd, and a motorcycle zipped past us. The man on the back seat of the bike reached up and plucked the Tootsie Roll of my pocket as he passed. Somebody laughed. It wasn’t funny.

Unnerved, I shuddered. Bob muttered something supportive. The car carried us up to a small path. I don’t recall pavement. It was a dirt road, more like a path. Someone was shouting ‘Get your acid here.’ Bob and I shrugged and stood in the mingle. A large handsome African-American man (who would have gone by the label ‘black’ back then) was selling little green pills. I recall another man looking very white turning around and shooting us a hippier-than-thou glance full of contempt when he saw how young we were.

Granted I’m reading a lot into that look, but I was a little jittery at the time.

At that point some asshole standing next to him grabbed my potato chips, tore the bag open and ran off eating them.

‘No way,’ said the drug dealer. ‘You give those back!’

The thief sheepishly looked at the large fellow and handed me the half eaten bag.

‘I would’ve given them to you if you had asked.’ I said.

Very peculiar, those two men. In retrospect it all seems to me very banality of evil Hannah Arendt. In a place where people were giving away free food, they stole food they didn't need from a person who would have given it to them if they had asked. I still wish I had handed the guy the rest of the chips and said 'keep them.'

How could anyone make amends for something like that? Stealing from somebody at Woodstock. Certainly I don't want my Tootsie Roll or Chips back. They didn't steal anything meaningful from me at all. They stole it from an idea.

'Now only take half a tab, we've had a few freak outs,' the dealer said, handing me a tiny pill. "This is Green Kryptonite LSD folks!"

'He's a beat artist!' said a passerby.

'Bullshit.' Said the dealer.

'If it is,' said Bob. 'I'm coming back.'

'No problem,' said the dealer. 'I'll be over by the lake all afternoon'

We walked away and I split the tab in half. I knew it wasn't such great quality because half of it crumpled to dust.

'What the fuck, Henry!' Bob explained.

'Sorry,' I said, handing him the uncrumpled part and licking the rest off my finger.

Boy am I glad we only took half a tab. We walked about an hour it seemed. Couldn't have been that long, but time dilated a bit.

'We got burned.' I said, very annoyed.

A moment or so later Bob stopped. 'Funny, I haven't felt this feeling except when I wasn't.'

'Oh boy,' I said.

'I'm tripping.' He said.

'Me too.'

At that point we passed the line of trees, walked through another set of concession stands, up a slight rise to the rim of farmland and there we stopped and stared.

Open to the horizon beneath us was the most amazing sight I had ever beheld before or since. Surrounding a central stage pillared by erector set scaffolding, an immense basin carved out of the fields as if solely for one purpose, to contain what that stranger had just told me about: the largest crowd of people I ever saw in my life.

'Holy shit.' Bob explained.

'Yeah,' I agreed.

'Let's get down as close to the stage as possible.'

Vaguely defined elongated mud trails ran through the throng and functioned more or less as aisles. We selected one at random followed it a fair way down until we found a space just large enough for 2 teenagers. There was an American Flag sticking up a few yards ahead. And right next to us, (not associated with the flag) two men sat in beach chairs. Wow. We decided the flag and the men would make good signposts back to our places in case one or the other of us wandered off. I sat down and smiled at them. They smiled back.

'You're the only ones who had the sense to bring chairs.'

'Yes' said one. Then he introduced himself and shook my hand.

I laid out my sleeping bag and sat. 'Boy am I tripping.' I said.

'Having a good time?'

‘Uh.’ I said.

I remember the two men eating endlessly from a bag of peanuts.

Every once in awhile a joint came by. Also two young men behind us were sharing some perfumey hashish. The sky grew clear, and people threw Frisbees.

Of all the stories I’ve heard about Woodstock, no one ever mentioned those Frisbees.

These Frisbees, collectively owned it seems, from time to time and from various, arbitrary regions of the field would zoom up into the air and descend somewhere else. Then whichever person caught one would send it sailing back out and up into the sky where it would curve a bright parabola as it floated down into another corner of the throng, leaving bright trails in the sky, which of course hung a bit before dissolving like vapor. The sky retained a trace of those traces and grew brighter

Of all the odd sights, the oddest, those Frisbees. A crowd playing an endless game of catch with itself.

‘Sky’s got colors.’ I told Bob.

‘Yeah.’

‘Different from regular sky.’

At this point the sequence of events becomes muddled to say the very least. Like space, time performed all sorts of antics.

One odd fact this illustrates, whatever it was we had taken the day before THC or not, it couldn’t have been LSD. I knew that at the time because its effect was so different. But now I knew it even more because LSD never hit me if I took it two days in a row. This green kryptonite I was feeling and no doubt.

The loudspeakers played recorded music which silenced from time to time to allow a human voice to emit tidbits. Announcements. I learned for instance that the road at the top of the basin was called ‘Herd Road’. Then someone taught us Kundalini yoga exercises and several people around me started doing lotus and hyperventilating. I tried it myself and watched a woman giggle at me. Strange for a 15 year old, but I didn’t feel a jot of self consciousness. The heady breaths and stretches enhanced my already enhanced state.

Some of the announcements from the stage included peoples with names who were supposed to meet other people with names, usually at some specific place by the stage. Always associated with losing someone or medical emergencies. Also if you needed it, where you could find the bad trip tent. Hearing these anecdotes from other lives, I speculated about the people behind them. Vague impression I would meet them all in person.

Three announcements I remember most clearly, but which hour or day they happened I have no idea:

Somewhere in this crowd a woman had actually given birth. The crowd went wild at that.

Then someone or other “Don’t go home! The FBI is waiting for you.”

Everyone also applauded at that.

Then my favorite announcement of the weekend: ‘yesterday we mentioned we were having a number of bad trips associated with the brown and the blue acid. Today we’d like to suggest that you avoid the green acid.’

Bob and I stared at each other. ‘Don’t take the green acid,’ he explained to me. A shudder went through my veins, but I shrugged it off. ‘Too late now,’ I said. We both made an effort to relax.

At some point I remember striking up a conversation with the man in the beach chair. Turns out he had just come back from Viet Nam.

‘You believe we’re doing the right thing over there?’ I asked.

‘Yes – well I went,’ he said.

After some time, I remember the man and his friend standing up and going away for some reason and asking us to take their wonderful and unmuddied seats. They also told me I could partake of all the peanuts we wanted. The peanuts never ended.

‘We need some food.’ Said Bob. ‘I can just see this guy killing me for eating all his peanuts.

A large man a few yards away and to my right – big, built like a wrestler suddenly jumped up with a red flushed and cried out “I’ve got to see my mother!” He clutched and hugged his friend who took him away. The day became very bright when he screamed.

Some time came the famous statement ‘the man next to you is your brother’ and more applause. I don’t remember exactly.

Several times the voice told some people not to climb on the big towers by the stage.

This went on a while. Frisbees, announcements, laughs. The Viet Nam vet coming and going. Also a helicopter or two hovering somewhere far above us. It seemed to me to be expressing some vague curiosity, observing us and drawing mechanistic conclusions.

Some time that day I ran into 2 kids from boarding school, and we talked a little. They asked why I left just before the end of term. ‘Number of reasons,’ I said. Because it was hell for me, I thought.

Bob went away at one point and returned with two tacos. I had never seen one before.

My first taco. August 16<sup>th</sup> 1969. Do you know anyone else who could remember the exact date of their first taco?

Odd. The announcements were saying there just isn’t enough food, and Bob and I were not too far from a Taco stand. A mystery of Woodstock, one of many.

Then finally music.

A group named Quill started performing rock and roll. And I remember noticing a few yards below me to my right, a man with an orange aura, his back to me, luxurious orange hair flowing down an orange vest surrounded by orange air. And with the first song, he rose up and started clapping his hands above his head, and then the entire crowd was rising and clapping to the rhythm, all their hands above their heads. The heartbeat of some odd alternative God.

At that moment, I noticed my own hands clapping above my head and that I was also standing. I don’t remember when I stood up. There had been no voluntary decision on my own part. I had stood because the crowd had stood.

For one split second, I was all the crowd, and all the crowd was me.

Then, from some vantage point, far up in that bewildering sky, somewhere far above, I could somehow see that crowd that was somehow me. I had hitched a ride on



one of those random Frisbees and, now hovering at the apex of its ascent, I could watch an immense field of total strangers into which my mind had spilled as if I were one of many thoughts.

And then I descended like a meteor. Back into the field where I chose one arbitrary target, a forlorn fifteen year old in one bright orange, one bright lime green shirt, shoulder length hair, eyes too used to seeing, and a face haggard beyond his years from growing up in a bewildered state. Thin body full of fear and insight past his years. Wiry too, and wired, and wired together like an artifice. Quite the portrait, I think, of an American (teenage or not) Portrait of a culture, really. A gadget, a device, or unit. An artificial child.

Me myself and I again. I felt the air. Full of sound, and noiseless. Bob was dancing beside me.

‘Clap,’ I commanded. ‘Clap Bob.’

He began to clap. Then he looked at me. ‘It’s about time somebody did this,’ he said.

Again, the sequence of events becomes a little confused in my head at this point. I remember the announcer kept interrupting the group’s set and telling people who were climbing the scaffolding to come down. And then someone else on the stage yelled something about the ‘little people’ interfering with the group that was playing its heart out for them.

Quill finished at some point and I sat back down. The ground felt so damp. I chatted with the Viet Nam veteran. There were more announcements.

Another person walking by remarked to the men in beach chairs that they used them as road signs as well.

There was a man on the other side of us who I kept thinking looked exactly like a stereotyped 1950’s beatnik. He wore a turtle necked sweatshirt and had a perfectly coifed goatee. He asked us if we had any more acid, and if I recall it was the only statement he made the whole time. I also don’t remember him moving once from his place. Not even to take a whiz. Then he ceased to be there, but I don’t remember him leaving.

What came next I’m trying to remember. I have no memory of Keef Hartley, but I’ll never forget Country Joe McDonald, especially the Fish Cheer. In the movie or not, I remember instead of F-I-S-H, we did F-U-C-K which galvanized the crowd. And then the anti-war song. It was not the first time I recall someone saying there were half a million of us ‘there must be at least four hundred thousand of you fuckers out there . . .’ apparently we were not making enough noise for Country Joe. The noise increased. In retrospect I think now we may actually have shortened the South East Asian debacle. Hard to say. Hard not to say. Country Joe finished to much applause.

Santana played his customary poignancy, mellow and intense and exquisite guitar. He calmed us down.

Somewhere around this time, Bob became to declaim. ‘There are four hundred thousand people out here. Do you realize this place has ten times the population of East Orange New Jersey!’ Several people cracked up.

Then John Sebastian who hadn’t been posted came to perform. I remember him telling us he loved us people. Also he might have been the one who remarked about that previously announced childbirth: ‘there really is a village here’.

By then 1950's beatnik to my left had vanished and two men with wide brimmed hats came down to the empty space he left just to hear John Sebastian. They looked very cool.

One of these men dropped a remark I don't remember. Maybe it was something like 'nice weather for a change', but whatever it was it stumped me. It felt very elaborate, and I shrugged and looked around. 'Um . . . ' I tried to say.

Bob nodded.

'We're tripping,' I explained.

'Having a good time?' the stranger asked.

This question also gave me pause. It felt like the guy was giving a multiple choice exam and I tried to guess the right answer: 'Having a good time . . . having a good time . . . '.

But Bob rescued me. 'Yes,' he said.

Accurate or not, at least concise.

After John Sebastian I imagined beating my crazy head against the sky. I focused on a mountain in the distance until it shifted. 'I can move mountains' I said. The acid had turned serious.

Then more announcements, mostly about medical emergencies and some guy whose name kept changing and had to meet someone else at some spot near the stage I think. At least the location never changed. 'The service desk'? 'The servant's entrance'? This I don't recall. Maybe there's a recording somewhere.

Then The Incredible String Band. They started not with music but a spoken invocation, and I remember it ending with the pronouncement 'I will consider it beauty.' And it seemed to me the speaker was extemporizing out of his own experience of the event he was sitting backstage witnessing for the last hour or so. Pure speculation in my dancing mind. Very soothing. Quite peaceful.

(One note on The Incredible String Band. I remembered their performance, and I remember telling a friend of mine about them, and I remember her envy. But some historian or other recording the event stated years later [with some authority I might add – and I believe you can find this in Wikipedia – ] that they had performed Friday. Thanks to my standard American susceptibility to the myth of expertise, I always decided the historian must have been right and my memory wrong. I concluded that I had somehow confused the sight of them in the movie with actually seeing them on the stage. For years I kept saying 'that must have been some powerful acid, I hallucinated one groups entire set'.

Just recently I had the privilege of speaking to Chip Monck himself who actually was nice enough to e-mail me the definitive Michael Lang list of acts, and surely enough, I actually saw the Incredible String Band and did not hallucinate them. Upon discovering this, I shouted the inaccurate statement 'I knew it!' Come to think of it, I told my friend about that set only a week or so after the event. Couldn't have seen it in the movie at all. I think this digression has gone on long enough.)

Canned Heat next. Them I will never forget. First of all Bob Hite was immense. He seemed to take up half the stage and he said that the orange he was eating 'kind of reminded him of something,' and there was no place to pee.

I kept thinking his voice was incongruous for a body that size. As usual I could not keep the insight to myself, but by now my mind could no more manage complexity than my mouth could sustain any words.

‘Large guy small voice,’ I uttered.

Some time in the group’s second song ‘Goin up the country’, the Viet Nam veteran looked up over his left shoulder and said ‘Oh no, not another one’. And I looked where he was looking. There was a man dancing some yards above us and wearing nothing but a pair of dark glasses and a hat.

For a moment this naked individual stayed in one place, and then suddenly he started prancing down through the audience towards the stage, leading a trail of clapping hands like a wake as everyone he passed burst into applause when he entered their line of sight.

You can see a few brief shots of this man in the film. He leapt up on some platform or other and people began laughing and snapping photographs. From where I sat, he completely upstaged that giant of a man on the stage. Nudity is noticeable. I think even Bob Hite might have mentioned him.

After Canned Heat’s standing ovation the naked man vanished. Someone, perhaps Bob said ‘the nude police got him.’

Then more announcements. More Frisbees. More pleas with people to climb off the towers. And ‘those of you who’ve joined us on the stage, please remove yourselves’.

Then came Mountain. I remember especially Leslie West telling us to try to clap to the drummer’s solo, and we couldn’t.

Here my memory must be way off. I remember very clearly that the drummer was in the middle of a spot light and that all around him it was very dark. They did several numbers and told us they were glad to be a part of it. But I remember it as taking place in very dark night. If you look at any historic record of the event, Mountain preceded the Grateful Dead. But then I remember performing in broad daylight. Perhaps a view of the movie would clear that up, but the movie I have only watched once in a theatre and sporadically on video tape. It unnerves me a little, that film.

The Grateful Dead. Less than memorable. Never so mediocre. I’m sure Jerry Garcia admitted as much some time later, but he did tell us all ‘only take half a tab.’ Having already heeded the advice some hours earlier, Bob and I nodded to each other, much relieved at the grateful words.

I will maintain that I remember the advice occurring in broad daylight. Although realistically it came after Mountain who had performed at night. Maybe it wasn’t Jerry Garcia who said it. Please don’t try to clarify this confusion for me. I won’t make any more sense of your explanation that I have of the memory. Maybe Time itself went backwards, but I doubt it.

(Another event I can’t quite fit into sequence is that at some point during the night I actually met Wavy Gravy. Still hard to believe, but the announcer said something about how everyone who took the green acid should come down to the medical tent. I have no idea when that happened, how Bob and I found our way down there, but I do remember this funny man in a floppy hat and white clothes telling us all to go back. ‘There’s nothing wrong with it,’ he said. ‘They called you down here for nothing.’

‘I was afraid,’ I said, either to him or to someone else.

‘Don’t be,’ said a disembodied voice.

‘Whoever did that, you kick his ass,’ I told the noted pacifist. He more or less shrugged at me. I always wanted to thank him for that. And to apologize for my assertion. Maybe the only violent statement made that weekend.

If you ever read this Hugh, I do apologize, and I’ll remain forever grateful to you. [Also please tell your distant cousin Mitt never to quit politics. We need more divisive Republicans.]

Using the flag and Viet Nam veteran as lighthouses in the sea of people, Somehow we made it back to where we had been sitting.

Then I fell asleep. Pity that I missed Creedence. I love them. I remember vaguely a few songs and the sound of Bob’s voice trying to wake me along with the Viet Nam Veteran saying ‘let him sleep’.

Then Sly woke me up. And how. As long as I live I will never forget ‘Want to Take You Higher’. Especially the 9 base notes that follow the refrain. And the way he coaxed us all into shooting up a peace sign into the air and singing along despite that we might think it was a little ‘old fashioned’. ‘It is not a fashion, it is a feeling’. As far as I’m concerned, Sly and the Family Stone were by far the best performance of the weekend.

Then Janis Joplin. Always a stunner. She said something about ‘Cosmic Blues’ and I looked up at the sky. She also said something about how ‘you’re staying stoned and you know where to find food and water?’ Did she really say that? I don’t know. I do remember her giggling with her fellow performer on the stage, and the way her strap kept coming off her shoulder. Also I very clearly recall a melodic repetition she went into *a cappella* as her band went silent behind her. That was eerie and hypnotic, but in general it wasn’t her greatest performance either. To see a spectacle, watch her at Monterey.

Then came The Who. Bob’s favorite band. He was on his feet right away. To this day I can’t hear Tommy without a shudder. True, the green acid was taking us down but more like a roller coaster than a soft landing.

Some dork jumped up on stage and started telling us that we the whole purpose of this should be to liberate someone who was in jail somewhere. Something about ‘it’s all very well and good to be having fun out here, but there’s . . . this that and the other.’ Self righteous radical. He interrupted The Who, and I have no idea who he was, but I heard some time later that it was Abbie Hoffman himself. What he was trying to accomplish I have no idea.

‘Why was he interrupting The Who?’ I asked Bob.

‘You know,’ he said. ‘They’re real controversial.’

Okay, I thought. Still can’t make much sense of this. The whole enterprise seemed pretty controversial. Did Bob really say that? I have a hard time imagining a 15 year old using the word ‘controversial’. But that’s what I recall him saying.

Of the Who’s set I remember all the way up to ‘Smash the Mirror’.

And that’s it. Maybe a faint memory of ‘we’re not gonna take it’ and ‘see me feel me touch me heal me’, but not much else. Afternoon evening of hashish and weed on the edge of an LSD trip after a sleepless night, I went out like a light.

Must have slept for some time. Missed Jefferson Airplane ‘Morning Maniac Music’ completely. Too bad, I love them too, especially the intro. Nice lines, but if you listen closely to Grace Slick’s voice, however commanding, it quavers slightly when she says ‘it’s a new dawn’. Almost as if she might be asking ‘is this a new dawn?’ Semi-

conviction, wavering somewhere between futility and hope. America's cultural revolution is never a very safe place.

But as I say, I was fast asleep at the time. Sometime Sunday morning I woke up and heard the announcer say that we were planning breakfast in bed for half a million people and there's always a spirit of togetherness in a disaster area. Or something like that. I've heard that that voice belonged to Wavy Gravy.

Sunday morning droned on with more messages, but by then I don't recall Frisbees. We went up by the taco stand but no one was there, and we bought some mescaline from someone or other, but heaven knows that wasn't going to do anything to us after the two days we had.

Funny, THC Friday, LSD Saturday, Mescaline Sunday, Marijuana all weekend long in varying amounts. Many years later I said to a friend 'I took a Molotov cocktail of hallucinogenic drugs that weekend'.

Sorry. I know the commercial media has been telling itself and its audience for decades that we all either died or repented, but that doesn't really work. So be it.

Later that morning after I went off to take a leak in the trees, I was tracing my way back to the beach chairs and flag once again, I ran into another student from my boarding school. Although I don't recall our exact words, I remember we realized, almost at the same moment that we were walking right next to each other and had been for quite a few paces. I didn't know the word synchronicity at the time, but I remember feeling as if the both of us were thoughts.

A group called 'the Grease Band' played some instrumentals which passed by with some applause. By now I was decidedly down. A contented après LSD haze.

Then Joe Cocker with his galvanic voice. I couldn't believe the gesticulations. Especially 'A little help from my friends'

Then downpour.

The Viet Nam veteran went inside his sleeping bag like a turtle, and Bob and I looked at each other, grabbed our stuff and left.

The storm took us up the road. And we hitchhiked all the way to Monticello.

That was one of the oddest events of the weekend. We rode all the way there on the outside of someone's car, standing on the back bumper and holding the lip of the rear window with my finger tips. We must have been going 60 miles an hour, but occasionally I would actually let go of the car in order to flip a peace sign at a total stranger in another car or by the side of the road. I think someone inside may have noticed the habit because at one point a hand reached out the window, grabbed my wrist, and held it tight. Bob's face had turned violet.

We pulled into Monticello, I thanked the driver and his posse, and we took a bus back to the city. Any number of shivering wet people mingled in the bus station, clearly from the concert, and a man came up, took off his coat and placed it around a woman's shoulders. She smiled and thanked him and he walked away. I don't think they knew each other.

Several of us loaded ourselves onto the bus. One man said 'I feel like I spent the weekend in Biafra'.

Then there was a repeated interchange 'Where'd you spend the weekend dear?'  
'Oh Biafra of course.'

You could smoke on buses back then and we all produced these cigarettes and sat there chatting. Finally I said ‘Anyone have a match?’

For one reason or another everyone cracked up at that.

Then came the skyline finally and we arrived at Port Authority bus terminal. Skanky and fumed as ever. People who hadn’t made it, given up halfway up the turnpike or whatever came running up to us and asked us how it was. They recognized us by virtue of the mud on our pants and shoes.

A young woman was talking to a policeman about how in God’s name she could make it home. I gave her a dollar and a longwinded explanation of something or other, Even the policeman seemed to be hanging on my every word.

“I just wanted to hear him explain it all,” he said.

At that point came a synchronism in the form of an echo of a moment from an earlier night. The policeman’s partner wandered up to him and asked what was going on. ‘I dunno,’ he said. ‘I was just listening to this weird kid.’

The woman hugged me and said ‘peace and love’. It was the only time all weekend that I heard those words. Curious that happened away from the place.

Now my Woodstock tickets are set in a frame that hangs on my study wall. Just now I took them down and set them in my lap before I returned to my writing.

As I said, since I wasn’t planning to go on Friday, I only bought two of them:

Woodstock Music and Art Fair

Saturday

AUGUST 16, 1969

10:00 A. M.

\$7.00 Good For One Admission Only

M01642 NO REFUNDS globe ticket company

Woodstock Music and Art Fair

Sunday

AUGUST 17, 1969

10:00 A. M.

\$7.00 Good For One Admission Only

M00587 NO REFUNDS globe ticket company

Orange with black letters. The stumps are still attached. No one collected them. Unnerving. I’ve looked at them a half a million times. An odd crease runs down the middle of both from where they were folded in my wallet. For a few years they lived in the bottom of a few drawers. On the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary I had them framed. I remember the woman at the frame store looking at them with a shrug. It was uncomfortable to let them out of my sight and relieving to take them home again.

I never had a numerologist look at the ticket numbers. If anyone does, please don’t tell me their divinatory significance. If God only knows, then I don’t need to.

But the same question comes up in my mind every time I look at them. Why did I keep these tickets? Why did it matter so much to me? Certainly I never guessed it would become a household word or that someone might want to hear about it 50 years away.

What conclusions to draw. What's the point? What was the point? What was the whole point of that weekend?

Well where do I begin?

'I'm the one who's going to die when it's time for me to die,  
so let me live my life the way I want to'. Jimi Hendrix

That's the quote that trickles through my head when I think of Woodstock. Freedom. The experience, not the idea.

What that weekend did to these benighted states and the rest of the planet, I have a plethora of opinions. They'd take volumes. Maybe some day I'll set them down.

What that weekend did for me personally is easier to say. Concerning that I have no opinions at all.

It's not the only reason I survived, but it is one of them. And there weren't many. When I look back, Woodstock is one of the few moments of hope or joy which puncture my nightmare childhood. Another was a young lover I had for awhile before she all but succumbed to the violence of her family and some act of divine intervention shipped her off to relative safety in Colorado. Another was one friend or two I met at school. Another was a spiritual teacher I found later. These all gave or perhaps lent me a reason and ability to survive.

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776, we declared war on an insane tyranny perhaps on the insanity of tyranny itself. Against all odds, by miracle, we prevailed. And we then carved in stone for all humanity, a declaration that we are born equal under the law, all of us, all with unalienable rights, and that the purpose of government is to secure those rights. Not to preserve tradition, but to secure our rights. Not to service a dream, but to secure our rights. Not to induce us to be moral, but to secure our rights. Not to enforce a social norm, but to secure our rights.

Extraordinary promise. As yet unfulfilled.

Perhaps we really are the revolutionary state. But for all our claims and promise, a free society doesn't wage war on its own people in the name of a war on drugs. A democracy doesn't force them to fight for healthcare. I could go on, but this would also take volumes.

Woodstock was never the isolated event the commercial media needs it to be. There is a reason why one weekend has become a household word. It never went away. It happened for a reason. And it never went away for a reason.

For some of us - however few - democracy and freedom are not acceptable as promises alone. We need them in order to breathe. However much the commercial media has misrepresented us, scapegoated us, demonized us, and labeled us something called counter culture, we never did what they most fervently promised themselves. We did not go away. And as long as we don't the promise of freedom and democracy will also never go away.

'If you remember it, you weren't there.' Sorry folks. I remember it, and I was there.

Now I don't believe any of the convenient abstractions that measure something as malleable as Time. I don't believe in Weekends. I don't believe in Decades. I don't believe in Generations. I also don't believe the American Dream. I believe in American Reality.

This nation, this land of liberty, this America, is neither freedom nor democracy. America is a tyranny of the clever. Unfortunately for the clever, however, the promise refuses to die. I pray that I'll never be clever but always aspire to be wise.

And that's what I recall of Woodstock.