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hey were somewhere around Rome, N.Y., when the drugs began to take hold. “Can we stop somewhere?” Ashley asked Brianna, who was driving. “I’m parched.”

“Oh Ash, we’re nearly there,” Brianna said. But she pulled the Ford Escort into a Kwik-Stop, and the girls got out to pee. The lady in the store smiled when she saw the two of them in their cut-off jeans and spaghetti-string T-shirts. “Going back to the Garden?” she asked kindly. Ashley and Brianna just looked at her. They had no idea what she was talking about.

Ashley and Brianna are mythical constructs who are meant to embody the Everygirl teenage rock fans of 1999. Their story is a composite I drew from a study of scores of written accounts of Woodstock '99, ranging from daily newspaper and wire-service coverage, to think pieces written for magazines long after the fact, to a string of e-mails passed from concert-goers to journalists the week after the concert.

Ashley and Brianna aspire to be the kind of girls they see on MTV’s “Spring Break,” wearing bikini tops and seated on the shoulders of boys, screaming into the sun. To that end, on July 23, 1999, Ashley and Brianna

drove to Griffiss Air Force Base in Rome, parked in a field, hiked to the grounds, handed over their \$150 tickets and joined 250,000 others in what was to become one of the filthiest, scariest and most degenerate crowd situations in rock 'n' roll history.

Brianna had gotten her driver’s license only six months earlier, so she was a little surprised that her dad was willing to let her take the car for the four-and-a-half hour drive from Erie to Rome to see Woodstock '99. He had forbidden her to see Marilyn Manson at an arena in Pittsburgh the previous February, and that had been a lot closer.

To her father, an all-day, outdoor festival like Woodstock '99 (he assumed most of the concert would take place during daylight hours) would be safer than seeing a shock-rocker in an enclosed arena at night. And the line-up included Sheryl Crow and Alanis Morissette. Her father knew their music, knew that they attracted a mellow crowd.

“Have a nice time, girls,” Brianna’s mom said as she saw them off. “Drink lots of water! And be careful.”

Brianna and Ashley waved and smiled and honked once for luck. Then they cranked up the radio and backed out of the driveway. In their food bag, they had four one-liter bottles of water and a two-liter of Diet Coke, some grapes and apples and bananas, cheese, yogurt and a Tupperware container of Jell-O that Ashley’s mom had made the night before. In their pockets, they each had \$60 and their ticket to Woodstock '99.

Around the corner, they stopped the car and took some Ecstasy. Once they got onto I-90 and headed east, they were flying, shouting out the lyrics to Kid Rock’s “I’m a Cowboy”:

*“I ain’t no G, I’m just a regular failure
I ain’t straight outta Compton, I’m straight out the trailer
Cuss like a sailor, Drink like a Mick
My only words of wisdom are just ‘Suck My Dick.’ ”*

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They laughed loudly as they sang. “I will always remember this,” Ashley thought at the time, as Brianna put her foot down on the accelerator. “I will always remember the summer I was 17 and I went to Woodstock ’99.”

Remember it they will, though not for the reasons they’d expected. By midnight on Friday, Ashley had already had sex with a cute guy from Great Neck whose name she never learned. Not to be outdone, Brianna disappeared into a tent and made out with several other guys from somewhere on Long Island. By Saturday afternoon, their campsite was flooded by a sea of sewage from overflowing toilets, the stench worsened by the 90-degree heat. By Sunday, both young women had spent time passed out in the emergency tents.

As bleak as their experience sounded, they fared somewhat better than the real-life women who were “forced into unclean porto-jons [sic] and A) punched in face, pants pulled down, fingered vaginally/anally, punched again for crying, ass spit on, fucked in ass B) slammed face into wall of stall, pants pulled down spit covered hand vaginal fisting, spit covered dick anal fuck, dropped to floor.” That gritty quotation comes from an e-mail that photographer Chris Habib forwarded to journalists and to rock bands such as Sonic Youth, whose members distributed it widely via the Internet shortly after the event.

There is very little doubt that this scenario occurred dozens of times at Woodstock ’99. Nevertheless, many of the women have kept quiet about the events of the weekend, for several reasons. In the case of Ashley and Brianna, Brianna’s father trusted them with his car. Also, they had been high most of the time, which dissuaded them from seeking the authorities. And at age 17, with only two previous rock concerts under their belts and a whole lot of lore swimming around their heads about the fabulousness of Woodstock, the super-cool aura of MTV-style live rock, and the legendary marriage of drugs

and rock ’n’ roll, Ashley and Brianna lacked the judgment to discern what was merely a bad time and what the mayor of Rome called “despicable.”

They did not have the strength of mind to go home early. Sunday night, during the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ set, the crowd rioted, and Brianna and Ashley finally found themselves hefted onto the shoulders of giants, so to speak. The scary and uncomfortable bits would fade, like the bruises Brianna got on her legs when some guy gripped them too hard as she crowd-surfed during the Chemical Brothers’ set at the overnight rave.

Ashley and Brianna were caught up in the mythmaking that surrounds rock ’n’ roll. They had been told by parents, peers and nostalgic media outlets that the word “Woodstock” means “peace, love and understanding.” They were inundated as well with a lifelong sense that rock concerts, particularly large festival shows, are bastions of a certain type of salacious and sexy fun. They were told it was a privilege to gather in fields under crappy and uncomfortable circumstances. Having paid dearly, they had a vested interest in continuing to perpetuate that myth, and no incentive to provoke changes.

Instead, since Woodstock, Ashley and Brianna have told everyone who has asked that they were happy to be there, even though by most conventional standards, Woodstock ’99—nicknamed Rapestock by some music journalists—was a failure. It failed to make a profit, and it failed to generate the kind of good press that other festivals of its ilk (and name) have generated. According to the pundits, it besmirched the good name of Woodstock, not because Woodstock was a bad idea, but because today’s kids are unable to come together peacefully without invoking mob rule.

Woodstock ’99 was a cultural signifier whose awful overtones did not make a lasting impression on the media and the world at large. As vilified as it was in America’s opinion pages and in magazines like *Spin*, *Harper’s* and *Rolling Stone*—all of which weighed in with pieces about rock and violence in America today—Woodstock ’99 generated very little reporting or analysis

about what was, by all accounts, a world gone frighteningly wrong. Indeed, Woodstock '99 demonstrated how mere journalism—even good journalism—can fail to tell the whole story. Despite all the head-shaking and finger-pointing, much has been left unsaid in the Woodstock saga.

Partly, this is because the sheer size and length of the concert made reporting difficult. Deadlines had to be met that worked against the likelihood of a well-rounded view. No one got the big picture until a year had passed, when Sonicnet.com published a scathing investigative report. Some revelations included: Woodstock '99 was knowingly booked on a hazardous waste site; health and public safety officials had given the promoters repeated warnings and threats about safety violations; local officials had an incentive to turn a blind eye to unsanitary conditions because of a clause in the contract with the promoters that could have led to the county losing \$500,000; 200 security personnel were fired before the concert began for bullying behavior—and many similar examples of poor planning, corruption and mismanagement.

146 The Sonicnet.com report, published in July 2000, has not been picked up by the mainstream media. Why not? Because when it comes to this type of story, there is an even more insidious power at work suppressing the coverage: a miasma of preconceived notions about rock music, violence and rape, coupled with a corporate control of culture, has strangled most sentient thought on the subject. The irony is that in this land of ultimate freedom, one can find a slew of taboos that reporters are unwilling to violate.

The most obvious taboo subject is rape. Even under the best of circumstances, rape is unusually difficult to report. Victims of rape such as the ones who e-mailed Habib are often unwilling to come forward. Witnesses and culprits disappear, and the blame for such crimes is still often attributed to the victim.

Woodstock '99 was especially protected from reports of rape because the young girls in attendance had so many reasons not to report any molestation they suffered. Given the amount of evidence that such molestations occurred, it is astounding that little effort was made to charge the assailants.

The first rape at Woodstock was reported at 11 p.m. Friday, the evening of the first day of the concert. By the next day, wire services were reporting up to eight sexual assaults, a number that was reduced to five by Sunday and four on Monday. By then, there were 44 arrests on charges that ranged from disorderly conduct to sodomy, and two deaths. Twelve hundred people were treated each day at the on-site medical facilities, and Rome Memorial Hospital treated more than 120 Woodstock attendees.

Eyewitness accounts put the incidence of sexual molestation much higher. Story after story mentions groping, touching and violation, from women being fingered while being passed hand-over-hand above the crowd or sitting on boyfriends' shoulders, to far worse activities in the woods and in the portable toilets. Woodstock volunteer David Schneider gave one eyewitness account that appeared in wire-service stories the week after Woodstock: "I saw someone push this girl into the mosh pit, a very skinny girl, maybe 90 to 100 pounds," Schneider said. "Then a couple of guys started taking her clothes off—not so much her top but her bottom. They pulled her pants down and were violating her and were passing her back and forth. There were five guys that were raping this girl and having sex with her."

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Hearsay evidence is generally disallowed in conventional reporting. Only documented rapes—in which the victim has a positive rape test and pressed charges—are followed up in the media, so newspaper accounts of Woodstock rapes were minimal, and only two rapes were subsequently prosecuted. Later, police officers were reprimanded for urging groups of girls to take off their tops so they could snap pictures. Finally, the Associated Press and Syracuse Online legally forced the New York state police to remove 14 pictures taken at the concert from their web pages, a step taken in order to identify culprits in rioting and looting incidents. At the same time, Woodstock's promoters voluntarily removed 200 photos of nude concertgoers from the Woodstock web site.

Many newspapers published an AP story reporting the rapes at some point during the weekend. After that, most coverage of Woodstock wound up

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in the arts and entertainment sections of dailies. (The exception was the *Buffalo News*, which kept its coverage in the news section throughout.) One paper, the *Washington Post*, ran an item about rape directly in front of the announcement of Oasis singer Liam Gallagher's newborn son. Three days later, the *Post* ran letters protesting this sort of coverage by, among other groups, the National Organization for Women and the National Center for Victims of Crime.

But there the subject ended. Indeed, the word "rape" rarely appears in the many magazine articles on Woodstock '99, or in the think pieces that began appearing in dailies on Sunday, August 8. Although many writers had already received Habib's e-mail and/or had heard similar reports from other unofficial sources, the gist of almost every story was the same: The food was overpriced and the music was bad, and all of it incited the kids—who, for the most part, were stupid—to riot. Much was made of the fact that Korn led a chant that goes, "I don't know you / So what? Let's fuck," and that Limp Bizkit's Fred Durst told the crowd to "smash things up."

But the music at Woodstock wasn't universally violent in tone: In addition to the hard-rock acts, singers like Sheryl Crow and Alanis Morissette appeared. And although food and water were high-priced, many people had brought their own supplies. The music and food and pricing alone could not have prompted Woodstock's degeneration. It seems in retrospect to have been widespread, random and not particularly tied to any one band, moment or feeling. Anecdotal evidence from field reporters like Jeff Stark in *Salon.com* and David Samuels in *Harper's*—both of whom spent more time on the grounds than many other reporters—indicates the festival was rife with violence.

Samuels saw a kid get his nose broken in the mosh pit. His response: "This is not a good place to be." He promptly turned tail. Later, he saw a kid beaten up almost to the point of death. Stark observed similar acts of violence.

Woodstock promoter Michael Lang told the *Washington Post* that he thought it would be "impossible" to sexually assault someone in such a crowd-

ed space. “I don’t think it’s conceivable,” Lang said. “You can barely move in a mosh pit. It’s worse than a subway at rush hour.”

The media pundits, many of whom already had axes to grind with the concert, did not fully recognize the nature of the violence. For the most part, they focused on—and in several cases condoned—the outbreak of rioting on the last night of Woodstock, when patrons burned many of the food booths to the ground. A few pundits saw this as an appropriate response to the greed and irresponsibility of the promoters.

“The scene . . . will be described as a riot,” wrote Samuels, “yet what is happening feels oddly light. [What they’ve done] is no worse . . . than what other people would have done in their place.”

Strauss of *The New York Times* commented that, “Perhaps it is less a statement about this generation than about the combustibility between youth and mass gatherings, between the individual and authority, between rock and commerce, and sadly, between men and women.”

150 These reporters were appalled by what happened at Woodstock ’99, but the fact that women were raped and assaulted hardly registered, or if it did, these crimes were registered only as part of the paradigm. The women were naked, the bands were singing about sex. The consensus: What do you expect? Rock is cray-zee, man—it’s rebel music.

Such specious conclusions reinforce the view that rock music will happily take part in its own victimization.

It’s hard not to believe that the promoters of Woodstock aren’t entirely aware of that fact. They trade on the idea that rock is wild, crazy, dangerous and profane—just as they trade on the idea that Woodstock is anti-corporate, anti-capitalist and anti-mainstream when, in fact, Woodstock is anything but counter cultural.

Another notion that has helped Woodstock perpetuate its golden myth is that rock doesn’t lend itself to pure reporting. Not only are rock concerts difficult to get a bead on—your good time is my personal Gethsemane, and vice versa—but the events that occur in those mosh pits rely on assertions and

leaps of logic that are uncomfortable to read about in hard-news outlets. Like rape, race is a topic that rock analysts dislike discussing because it invariably muddles many a truism. For example, in the last 20 years, most popular rap bands in America have toured only rarely for fear of violence in the audience. Despite the obvious profits to be made, no promoter is willing to mount a large stadium tour with bands such as DMX, Mos Def or other big rap stars. Insurance premiums are simply too high.

Among other things, Woodstock ’99 proves that rap music is far from the only racial/musical subculture that has the potential for violence. Once, at Lollapalooza in St. Louis, I met a security guard who told me how tame he found the fans of Pearl Jam and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

“Nothing compared to last night,” he said. “We had 27 injuries, all serious.”

“Who played?” I asked, expecting an answer like Megadeth or Pantera. His reply: “Trisha Yearwood.”

That brings up another unspoken subject in rock music: class differences. Rock ’n’ roll belies the idea that America is a classless society. There are college-rock bands that appeal to college kids, just as there are bubblegum-pop groups for the pre-adolescent. And there are also several types of music that draw a lower-middle-class crowd. One of these is country music, particularly glitzy, new-country acts such as Yearwood. Heavy metal is traditionally blue-collar. And in the last decade, white rap-metal like that by Korn, Limp Bizkit, Eminem and Rage Against the Machine has also grown deep roots in the red-neck, blue-collar, white world.

It’s easy to infer from Woodstock’s lineup that the crowd was 99-percent white, and that many didn’t have a college education. This would help explain two puzzling aspects of the festival, namely the low incidence of officially reported sexual assaults and of charges pressed, as well as the subsequent lack of lawsuits over the toilet and trash problems (the grounds were described as lakes of raw sewage). People don’t file lawsuits if they’re not familiar with lawyers and torts and legal responsibilities.

WHAT CONCERT PROMOTER WOULD OF PATRONS AT THE RISK OF ANSWER: ONE WITH A STAKE IN

WISH TO MAXIMIZE THE NUMBER INCURRING SEVERE DAMAGE? EASY THE FOOD SALES.

Thanks again to the magic word “Woodstock,” plenty of parents like Ashley and Brianna’s prefer their kids to be at an outdoor festival setting than at an arena seeing a single band with a naughty name. But in fact, indoor concerts, even ones by rougher bands, are safer than enormous outdoor festivals because they are more secure. According to Stuart Ross, who teaches a class in concert promotion at UCLA and is a former tour manager of Lollapalooza (which usually played to venues with capacity above 20,000), Woodstock’s lack of control was inevitable.

“If you put 250,000 people into an enclosed space where they are entirely reliant on you for food, water, health and well-being, something terrible will happen,” he told me last year. His words were prophetic. In June 2000, nine people died during Pearl Jam’s set at Roskilde, a three-day festival in Denmark attended by about 150,000 people. Roskilde’s 30-year history has been characterized by mellowness and good safety measures, but this tragedy occurred anyway. Even in the best of outdoor concerts, such situations invite terror and degradation.

“In my experience, 50,000 is the outside limit [for a reasonably safe festival],” Ross said. “And if you trap people there—they can’t go home for all three days—you are essentially creating a fairly large city, with no infrastructure. What do they expect?”

The costs of doing such a project are enormous, and the prospects for profit rely on more than ticket sales. “When a concert promoter talks about profit and loss,” Ross said, “they are giving you a very simple equation: ticket sales less expenses. Profit—or loss. But that’s not including ancillary incomes. These days, ancillary income is the name of the game. There’s a cut of T-shirt sales, there’s service charges on the tickets, there’s food and parking and sponsorship income. There’s the CD. They have a million streams of income.”

Those other streams provide a clue to why Woodstock ’99 really occurred. What concert promoter would wish to maximize the number of patrons at the risk of incurring severe damage? Easy answer: one with a stake in the food sales.

The concert was promoted by Scher’s company, the Metropolitan Entertainment Group, which has also been responsible for the Family Values tour (with Limp Bizkit and Korn) and various other artists, tours and rock-related events. It lost money on Woodstock ’99, according to a report that the Ogden Corporation—which then owned 50 percent of Metropolitan Entertainment—filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Ogden’s diverse international holdings include aviation, oil, and food and beverage distribution. It is responsible, among other things, for the food and beverage concessions at amusement parks, shopping malls, concert venues and various airports worldwide. Ogden rid itself of its stake in Metropolitan Entertainment in September of 1999—but not before, according to its SEC report for that year, Ogden’s food and beverage division turned a huge profit for the year.

Countless articles on Woodstock ’99 attributed the short tempers and riotous proceedings to the notion that food and water at the venue were overpriced: \$4 for a bottle of water, \$9 for a sandwich, \$12 for a pizza. Perhaps these articles wouldn’t have registered such shock if they realized that ex-hippies Scher and Lang were playing loss leader to the mammoth Ogden; that Woodstock ’99 was, in effect, being promoted by the food concessionaire.

Ashley and Brianna returned home to Erie, and did they have a tale to tell! It started as a litany of all the awesome bands they saw—Korn, Limp Bizkit, the Chili Peppers, Dave Matthews—which earned them entrée into the popular crowd at their high school. Gradually, they admitted it was from a distance of

several hundred yards that they “saw” Dave Matthews. But by then, their place in the social hierarchy, as permissive teens with a daring streak, had been established.

Later in the year, the teenagers went to see blink-182 in Pittsburgh, and they rushed the stage at the end.

“That was nothing,” they boasted to their friend, Jackie, who was complaining that she had been groped. “When we were at Woodstock it was just like that—only 5,000 times hotter, longer and scarier!” Jackie is suitably impressed.

Someday, no doubt, the tale will change. On Ashley’s 24th birthday, slightly tipsy from champagne, she may decide to tell her horrified parents that thousands of men took photos of her naked breasts with disposable cameras bought expressly for that purpose at a booth on the concert grounds. When she’s 32, she may admit to her husband that she let—or rather couldn’t prevent—15 guys from touching her breasts during the Norman Cook set at the rave, that her top had been torn off and was lost. And perhaps when she’s 47, she won’t let her own teenager go to Woodstock’s 60th anniversary on the same site.

Make no mistake: There will be more Woodstocks. That’s why any current analysis of an event like Woodstock ’99 ought to include some advice for the future, because the future for rock festivals is not as dismal as the negative press about Woodstock would imply. Quite the opposite. Woodstock itself is now 30 years old, and it’s so embedded in our culture that any coverage of it all merely increases its mythic status. According to Samuels, on the last day of the concert, Scher viewed the damage and said gleefully, “What’s page A1 of *The New York Times* worth?” Scher’s point was that he wanted editorial coverage of his concert, good or bad. His was an age-old cry: Just spell my name right.

To me, that says the message that concert promoters and rock bands got from the reports on Woodstock ’99 was not “Make concerts more safe and secure,” but, “Host concerts that create controversy and cause people to

feel like they’ve taken part in some communal happening—even if that happening is a bad one.”

And this realization in turn leaves me feeling powerless and fearful. Clearly, those in charge of purveying live rock music—mega-corporations like concert promoter SFX, record companies like Interscope and businessmen-shysters like Michael Lang—hold all the cards now. To take part in such a travesty—as audience member or cultural critic—is not only to be abused, but to be used like the tool you are. That’s why, when all was said and done about Woodstock ’99, even Ashley and Brianna, straggling home to Erie in their muddy T-shirts and ripped-up clothing, could not have felt more betrayed than I did.