

Michael Lydon

Two outdoor rock musical spectacles attracting many thousands of young people ended the decade of the Sixties—the Woodstock music festival in upstate New York in August 1969, followed four months later by the concert at the Altamont Speedway in Northern California. The Altamont concert resulted in a riot near the stage in which the Hell's Angels attacked and stabbed to death one of the spectators, an eighteen-year-old young man named Meredith Hunter. Reporter Michael Lydon was among the crowd at Altamont on December 6, 1969. His article "The Rolling Stones—At Play in the Apocalypse" was published in 1970 in Ramparts Magazine and expanded in a chapter profiling the Rolling Stones in his book RockFolk: Portraits from the Rock 'n' Roll Pantheon (1971), the version included here.

THE ROLLING STONES—AT PLAY IN THE APOCALYPSE

IT ALL CAME DOWN AT ALTAMONT on that strange day. A cold sun alternated with bright clouds, and 300,000 young Americans stepped into the future (or was it?), looked at each other, and were frightened by what they saw. It was the biggest gathering in California (the population of San Francisco is 756,000) since the Human Be-In three years before, not only in numbers but in expectation. In common with all the voluntary mass events of the sixties—was the Sproul Hall sit-in the first?—it would, all believed, advance the trip, i.e., reveal some important lesson intrinsic to and yet beyond its physical fact. The 300,000, all in unspoken social contract, came not only to hear music, but to bear living testimony to their own lives.

The Stones as well as the audience—and whether such a distinction should or could be made was one of the day's questions. They had wanted it to be in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, their gift to the city and its culture. As their long hair, outrageous manners, and music had helped make San Francisco possible, San Francisco had helped make the past three years possible. Like thousands before

them, the Stones were coming to say thank you. They hoped it would be in all senses a free concert, an event spiritually outside the commercial realm of the tour. It both was and was not. Neither the tour's footnote nor quite its denouement, that long Saturday was the drama's second and enigmatic ending which proved all endings as false and hard to mark as beginnings.

When the Stones left for Muscle Shoals, first Sam, then Jo, Ronnie and John, flew to San Francisco. Sam was met at the plane by Rick Scully, a long-time manager of the Grateful Dead, and concert planning began at the Dead's office and communal ranch. The Dead, hosts of more free concerts than any other band, are still the best embodiment of the San Francisco spirit that in 1967 captured the imagination of the world. True if harried believers in the psychedelic revolution, the Dead promised full cooperation (which they never gave the ill-fated *Wild West*), and the concert seemed to be in good if freaky hands. On Tuesday no site had been secured; by Wednesday morning the director of the Sears Point Raceway promised his grounds free of charge. Chip and his crew, aided by the Dead's extended family, started moving tons of equipment to the drag strip north of San Francisco. Then came the problems.

An essential element of free concerts is simplicity. You want to hear music? Okay, do it! Get a place, a source of power, a few flatbed trucks or a stage, a few bands, spread the word, trust to God, and have the thing. But this free concert was also a Stones concert, free or not, and everybody wanted a piece of the action. Hustlers of every stripe swarmed to the new scene like piranhas to the scent of blood.

The Sears Point man got cold feet or itchy palms or both and asked for six thousand dollars, plus five thousand dollars to be held in escrow against possible damages. Costs mounted on a dozen fronts; fearful of huge losses, Ronnie decided on a film designed for a TV special to be made by the Maysle brothers, who had already been shooting the final stages of the tour. Any profits would go to charity—"as yet unspecified," said John. The actual owners of the raceway, a Hollywood-based company called Filmways Corporation, which had promoted two of the town's concerts, heard about that and demanded film distribution rights as part of their fee. Ronnie refused, and Filmways, overriding their local management, responded by upping the fee to \$100,000.

That was late Thursday. The San Francisco papers and radio stations were announcing Sears Point as the site, and a large volunteer vanguard had already encamped. That blatantly colorful attorney,

Melvin Belli, offered his help in the fight with Filmways; Ronnie accepted it. The Dead office was abandoned as the HQ, and was replaced by Belli's office in San Francisco's financial district, and by Ronnie's suites in the posh Huntington Hotel. Managers of local bands started calling to get their groups on the stage for the priceless exposure; the city's rival Top-40 stations, KFRC and KYA, started running hourly bulletins, each trying to be the unofficial "Stones Station." Underground KSAN-FM, which had had the best coverage early in the week, was slowly edged out. Communes of ordinary hippies offering their services were rebuffed. The radical community, suspicious from the start, started talking about the festival as "one more shuck."

By midmorning Friday, Filmways was still adamant, but then got left when another track, this one a stock car oval called Altamont, offered its several hundred acres of rolling hills. Track director Dick Carter thought it would be "great publicity." The half-built stage at Sears Point was dismantled, and radio stations blasted the new directions with frantic assurances that, yes, the Stones concert was still on.

By late Friday afternoon the concert was the sole and obsessive topic of hip conversation, and Altamont a familiar name. KFRC had on-the-spot reporters on every spot worth being on, and KYA's DJ's bemoaned the fact that "some stations are trying to turn something that should be free and groovy into a commercial event." Both stations carried hi-fi store ads for "all new stereo tape recorders so you can make the Stones concert more than a memory." The scores of equipment trucks got to Altamont, fifty miles east of Berkeley, by early Friday evening; a huge volunteer crew worked like ants under blue floodlights amid a growing tangle of wires, planking and staging. "No one will be allowed on the grounds until 7:00 A.M. Saturday, so *stay home*," was the broadcast word, but by midnight there were traffic jams miles from the site. The Stones got to the Huntington by ten, exhausted. In Alabama they had heard only the confusing rumors, but were determined to go ahead. "We'll have it in a bloody parking lot if we have to," said Keith. He and Mick flew out to see Altamont. Mick went back to get some sleep; Keith stayed all night.

As the stage crew labored, a few thousand people who had missed the roadblocks slept before the stage or stood by campfires; other thousands waited behind a fence for official opening time. I wandered from fire to fire; place was immediately made for any stranger, and joints steadily circled the impromptu hearths. I made scores of friends I'll never see again.

One girl told me solemnly that it would be a heavy day "because the sun, Venus, Mercury, and some other planet are all in Sagittarius, and the moon's on the Libra-Scorpio cusp." Another presented me with a grotesque doll made by her dead husband. "He lives in the doll; I know it," she said, nodding her head uncontrollably. "He sees everything." I said I was sorry. "Oh, that's okay, he was shot through the heart and lungs and the liver, but I really don't mind, 'cause he must have been meant to die, and anyway, I have the doll." Still nodding and smiling, she took it back and wrapped it in her shawl.

They came from everywhere. Two boys boasted that they had seen the Stones in LA, Chicago, Philly, and Palm Beach without ever buying a seat; someone countered by saying he had been to fourteen festivals plus Woodstock. A girl said she was from Akron, had run away to New Orleans, got an abortion in Houston, and had been on her way to Seattle ("I heard it's groovy there"), when she met a dealer in Phoenix who took her to San Francisco, then split to avoid a bust. "It's all so far out," she said. Somebody with a phonograph played *Abbey Road* over and over. The spindly light towers grew tall, generators roared, helicopters clattered overhead, and as night became grey dawn, Altamont looked strikingly like the mad consummation of Fellini's *8½*.

At 7:00 A.M. the gates are opened. Over the hill and down into the hollow by the stage comes a whooping, running, rattle-tattle mob. From sleeping bags peer sleepy heads that duck back as the mob leaps over them and dashes between them. In minutes the meadow is a crush of bodies pressed so close that it takes ten minutes to walk fifty yards. Only the bravest blades of grass still peep up through the floor of wadded bedding. On and on comes the crowd; by ten it spreads a quarter mile back from the stage, fanning out like lichen clinging to a rock.

There are the dancing beaded girls, the Christlike young men, and smiling babies familiar from countless stories on the "Love Generation," but the weirdos too, whose perverse and penetrating intensity no camera ever captures. Speed freaks with hollow eyes and missing teeth, dead-faced acid heads burned out by countless flashes, old beatniks clutching gallons of red wine, Hare Krishna chanters with shaved heads and acned cheeks. Two young men in filthy serapes and scraggly beards lean against a crushed and brightly painted derelict veteran of the Demolition Derby. In the brims of their cowboy hats are little white cards: "Acid \$2." A shirtless black man stands in the center of a cheering circle. "I have in my hand," he barks, "one

little purple tab of 100 percent pure LSD. Who wants this cosmic jewel?" A dozen hands reach out eagerly. "Who really wants it?" "I do, I do, I want it, me, me, me." "Going, going, gone to that freaky chick with the blue bandana." He tosses it to her, and reaches again into his leather bag. "I have in my hand one cap of mescaline, guaranteed organic. . . ."

Two middle-aged men with pinched Okie faces set up a card table and hawk Rolling Stones programs left over from another tour. They've only sold a few when a milling crowd of radicals surrounds them. "It's free, man, nothing is sold today." "Better give the stuff away, man, or we'll rip it off in the name of the people." The men are frightened. A kid dashes up and grabs a handful of the glossy books. The table collapses. One man scoops the programs from the dirt, the other brandishes the table in wild-eyed defense. They retreat, walking backwards, as the brave guerrillas search for other targets.

Face by face, body by body, the crowd is recognizable, comprehensible. As ugly beautiful mass, it is bewilderingly unfamiliar—a timeless lake of humanity climbing together through the first swirling, buzzing, euphoric-demonic hours of acid. Is this Bosch or Cecil B. DeMille; biblical, medieval, or millennial? Are we lost or found? Are we *we*, and if we are, who are we?

Whoever or whatever, we are *here*, all here, and gripped by the ever-amazing intensity of psychedelics, we *know* that this being here is no accident but the inevitable and present realization of our whole lives until this moment. One third of a million post-war boom babies gathered in a Demolition Derby junkyard by a California freeway to get stoned and listen to rock 'n' roll—is that what it has all been about? And someone, thinking maybe to help feed us, brought a split-open crate of dirty, wilted cabbage heads. They got kicked around in the dust until they rolled under cars and were forgotten.

Some call us Woodstock West, but we are not. Woodstock was a three-day encampment at which cooperation was necessary for survival; it was an event only because it became an event. The Altamont crowd is *demanding* that an event come to pass, be delivered, in a single day; should it go bad—well, it'll be over by evening. And it's four months later, and it's California, where inevitably everything is that wee but significant bit less known, less sure, less safe. . . .

And more political; if concert isn't the right word for the day, festival isn't either. The week's maneuverings, still known only by rumor, have raised a hard edge of suspicion; the day's vibes include aggressive paranoid frequencies that demand self-justification. Some

come in bitter mourning for two Chicago Black Panthers shot to death just days before; a concert without confrontation would be frivolous escapism for them. But it is more than the radicals; large segments of the crowd share a dangerous desire to tighten up that festival idea a few notches, to move to a new level—just how weird can you stand it, brother, before your love will crack?

It isn't that the morning is not a groove; it is, friendly enough and loose. But . . . but what? There is too much of something; is it the people, the dope, the tension? Maybe it is the *wanting*, the concentration, not just of flesh, but of unfulfilled desire, of hope for (or is it fear of) deliverance. ("There must be some way out of here, said the joker to the thief; there's too much confusion, I can't get no relief.") What is our oppression that in escaping it we so oppress ourselves? Have we jammed ourselves together on these sere hills miles from home hoping to find a way out of such masses? If that is our paradox, is Altamont our self-made trap? And yet . . . might we just, in acting out the paradox so intensely, transcend it?

The Jefferson Airplane are on stage, knocking out "3/5's of a Mile in 9/10's of a Second" with a mad fury—when suddenly all eyes rivet on an upraised pool cue. It is slashing downward, held by a mammoth Hell's Angel, and when it hits its unseen target there is a burst of water as if it had crushed a jellyfish. A wave of horror ripples madly across the crowd. The music stops and the stage is full of Angels in raunchy phalanx. The music starts, falters, stops. Thousands hold their breath and wave pathetic V signs. No one wants the Angels. A few scream, "Pigs, pigs." The odds against the Angels are maybe five-thousand to one, but the crowd is passive and afraid. The Angels stay on stage, sure of their power.

Now something is definitely wrong, but there is no time or space to set it right. The Angels become the villains, but why are they here? They just came, of course, as they always do, but, we hoped, as friends. Since Ken Kesey faced them down and turned them on, San Francisco has had a sentimental romance with the Angels: the consummate outlaws, true rolling stones, street fighting men: they're so bad they're good, went the line. It turns out later that they were actually hired by the Stones on the suggestion of the Dead; their fee, five-hundred-dollars worth of beer. But now their open appetite for violence mocks our unfocused love of peace; their grim solidarity, our fearful hopes of community.

Community? It just doesn't feel like that anymore. Though participants in the whole rite, we are not actively engaged in it; we are

spectators who came to "see" the Stones, passive voyeurs hoping, like all voyeurs, that "something" will happen. But since we're just watching, we can say we're not to blame—it's the Stones and the Angels, the Stars, they did it all, so they're to blame, right? The *I Ching* says all communities must have a leader, but every community member must be willing to become that leader at any time.

So we're all voyeurs, but what do you have to do in late 1969 to get 300,000 people to watch it?

The day drags on. Many leave; as many more arrive. Invisibly and inevitably the crowd squeezes toward the stage until the first fifty yards around it are suffocatingly dense. Occasionally it becomes too much for someone, and while twitching in the grip of some apocalyptic vision ("We are all going to die, we are all going to die, right here, right here, we've been tricked!"), he is carried by friends to the medical tent for some Thorazine and, if he's lucky, some thoughtful attention.

Darkness begins to fall. "The Stones are here." "I saw their helicopter." "Somebody said they're not gonna show." The lights come on, and a new wave sweeps thousands more toward the stage. The stage itself is so full that it is sagging in the center. The Angels continue their random attacks. "The Stones are here." "That's why they turned on the lights."

In fact, they are—packed into a tiny trailer filled with stale smoke and spilled food. Charley's happy; he needs only to get through this final set and he can go home to Shirley and Serafina. Mick is upset; as he got off the helicopter a freak had rushed him, screaming, "I hate you, I hate you," then punched him in the face. For all his presence, Mick Jagger is not fearless; on tour, when the engine of one small chartered plane had flamed briefly as it coughed to a start, Mick leapt from his seat, crying that the plane was about to explode. Keith, up all night and in the trailer all day, is exhausted. Crying girls peer and shout through the small screen windows. Jo Bergman is huddled in a corner waiting for it to be over. Ronnie cracks nervous jokes.

It is time. Surrounded by security men, they squeeze the few yards to a tent directly behind the stage. Mick Taylor, Keith, and Bill tune up. A dozen Angels stand guard, punching at faces that peek through holes in the canvas. They are ready. The Angels form a wedge; they file between two equipment trucks, up four steps, and they are there. It is fully dark now but for the stage; in its incandescence, the Rolling Stones are as fine as ever. Mick bows low, sweeping his Uncle Sam hat wide in an ironic circle, and on Keith's signal,

the band begins "Jumping Jack Flash." That incredible moment is there again. In those first seconds when Keith's shirt is sparkling, and Charley has just set his big cymbal shimmering with a snap of his right wrist, and Mick bends forward biting out the first defiant words, that enormous pressure of wants, material and spiritual, dissolves—phiss! like that in thin air. For it is just that moment, that achievement of perfect beauty after impossible trial, that is the object of all those longings.

*'Cause it's all right now,
In fact it's a gas,
I'm Jumping Jack Flash,
It's a gas gas gas!*

And then it is irrevocably gone. Four Angels flash from behind the amps, one vaulting almost over Charley's head. One jumps from the stage, and the crowd scatters into itself in total panic. There appears to be a fight. Then it seems to be over. The music goes on. Again: more Angels, this time wandering around among the Stones. They stop playing.

"Fellows, fellows," says Mick, "move back, won't you, fellows?" His sarcasm gets him through, and they start again. Trouble for the third time, and it is serious. Two Angels (I saw two) wade deep into the crowd. There are screams. Rows of faces fishtail away before these thugs from some very modern nightmare. Boos rise from the mass of the crowd who can't see what's wrong and who just want the show to go on. The band starts again, but something unmistakably weird is still going on down in front. A few kids escape to the stage, streaking to the safety of its far corners. Sam comes out. He has been begging this crowd all day for cooperation; his voice is flat and hoarse.

"This is an important announcement. Someone has been hurt and a doctor is leaving the stage right now; that's him with his arm raised, he's got a green jacket on. Will you please let him through. Someone has been badly hurt."

Security men are begging that all those who do not absolutely need to be on the stage leave it. I leave, not unhappily, and walk through the burnt-out campfires, small piles of trash, and rakishly tilted motorcycles behind the stage, then up a slope where the kids are standing on cars, maybe thirty to a car. A girl comes by asking for her friends; she has cut her leg on barbed wire and wants to go home, but she lost her friends with the car at noon.

The Stones are going again, and the crowd is with them. We can't see them, but the music sounds good—not great, not free festival great, but no one hopes for that anymore. It is enough that it is here. Around me a few people are dancing gently. The morning's dope is wearing off; all the trips are nearly over. We do glimpse the basket flying through the air, trailing petals. We all cheer one last massive cheer. Friends find friends; the crowd becomes fragments that get into cars that back up on the freeway for miles and for hours. Luckily it is only about eight; but it feels like the very end of the night. The only want left is for rest. I realize that the Grateful Dead did not get a chance to play and figure that I won't go to any more of these things.

In the days that follow, the free concert becomes "the disaster at Altamont." There is wide disagreement on what happened and what it meant; everyone, it seems, had their own day, and that was, we all say, one of the problems. The only common emotion is disappointment and impotent sorrow. "If only . . . if only. . ." The papers report that there were three births (though later the figure cannot be substantiated) and four deaths. Mark Feiger, twenty-two, and Richard Savlov, twenty-two, friends who had recently moved to Berkeley from New Jersey, were killed when a car on its way out to the freeway plowed into their campfire hours after the concert was over. A young man with long hair, moustache, and sideburns, with a metal cross through his pierced right ear, still listed as "John Doe," stumbled stoned into an irrigation canal and drowned. Another, a young black man, Meredith Hunter, was stabbed, kicked, and beaten by Angels right before the stage while the Stones were playing. His body was battered so badly that doctors knew, the moment they reached him, there was no chance to save him.

So far, no murder charges have been brought. It was not until a week later, when someone asked me about it, that I even considered the possibility that the police, whom no one would have wanted at Altamont in the morning, would actually investigate the horrendous act that closed it and bring any person or persons to trial. We all seemed beyond the law at Altamont, out there willingly, all 300,000 of us, Stones and Angels included, and on our own. And anyway the tour is over.
