

Aquarian Angst: Woodstock at 50

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This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Woodstock music festival.

Flashing back to that “summer of love,” I’m reminded of two iconic before-and-after photos: one depicting a sea of humanity reveling in the music of their idols on Max Yasgur’s farm in upstate New York, the other revealing the horrible mess of mud and refuse left behind.

Juxtaposed, these two images are emblematic of a generation that grew up on rock and roll, loved to get high, party hard, and indulge in “free love,” often with reckless abandon. Living the Bohemian lifestyle of carefree license, unfettered by “traditional values,” became the fantasy of an entire generation — and music was at the vortex of that counterculture revolution.

The Woodstock generation waxed poetic about peace, love and universal brotherhood, and music was deemed a leading force ushering in a utopian era in which greed, selfishness and all manner of “plastic” values would be expunged. John Lennon and Yoko Ono implored us to “give peace a chance.” The hopes and dreams of an Aquarian

Age, a time when “love would steer the stars,” and “we’ll study war no more” would become a reality — or so we thought.

Our love of music became a quasi-religion. “Make love, not war” was our credo, sex and drugs our sacraments, and rock ‘n roll was the music that accompanied the liturgy. In spite of our New Age optimism about making the planet a better place for our children and “getting back to the garden,” the spirit of rebellion and defiance was pervasive, and the music of the era reflected that rebelliousness.



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In retrospect, Woodstock may have been more of a moment rather than a movement. As that “after” photo might suggest, the Woodstock generation has been rather messy in the ensuing decades with regard to love, life and its pursuit of happiness.

In spite of the Aquarian optimism, any honest assessment regarding the ramifications of the “free love generation” reveals many unfortunate circumstances due to a plethora of missed opportunities, moral confusion and “sell outs” to the very hypocrisies that the counterculture generation decried.

The naïve idea that life without restrictions and responsibilities was the path to Nirvana now seems imprudent in the extreme, and there are “messes” everywhere as a result. As we question why the world seems so hopelessly lost

50 years hence, it is Mahatma Gandhi who provides sagacious insight to our query: “If you think the world is all wrong, remember that it contains people like you.”

A central ethos of the social consciousness in the 1960s was the outright disdain for authority figures. “Don’t trust anyone over 30” (an axiom attributed to UC Berkeley activist Jack Weinberg) became a popular counterculture mantra as the groundswell of liberal populism permeated everything from politics to the media to the entertainment industry.

“I am he/as you are he/as you are me/and we are all together,” according to a tripped-out John Lennon. Well, yes, we all had a hand in creating this mess and we all bear some responsibility as adults to clean it up. Regarding the deleterious effects of the 1960s counterculture, columnist Jonah Goldberg observes:

“It is no coincidence that the post-World War II era of peace, prosperity and conformity largely created the idea of the teenager. The buttoned-down 1950s gave adolescents something to rebel against. Similarly, the peace and prosperity of the post-Cold War world created the adolescent

forty-year-old. The comfort of prosperity leads...to a cultural backlash against the established order and bourgeois values.”

Sociocultural liberation, especially sexual liberation, was seen as a cosmic “coming of age” where people would be free from the inhibitions put upon them by their parents and their respective catechisms. Decades earlier, Nietzsche and his sexual revolutionary brethren advocated similar ideas with regard to sexual liberation. (The term “sexual liberation” is attributed to neo-Marxist philosopher Wilhelm Reich, and it was his Frankfurt School colleague, Herbert Marcuse, who advocated “polymorphous perversity” and coined the phrase, “make love, not war.”)

The folly of this circumstance is typified in Stephen Still’s musical ode to sexual objectification, “Love the One You’re With”:

*Don't be angry, don't be sad
and don't sit cryin' over good times you've had
There's a girl right next to you
and she's just waitin' for something to do.
And there's a rose in the fisted glove
and the eagle flies with the dove
and if you can't be with the one you love, honey
love the one you're with, love the one you're with.*

Love the one you’re with, no matter what the consequences. The Woodstock generation was into Tantric sexuality but without the spirituality. As moral virtue declined, our culture became all the more coarse, hedonistic and secular. Wasn’t all that Transcendental Meditation, free sex and drug use supposed to enlighten us (“open your mind, man!”), and help us avoid the trappings and proclivities that made the world so cruel and callous in the first place? And wasn’t music — sweet, sweet music — going to soothe all the savagery and supplant the alienation that made living in this world so horrid and hideous with something more virtuous and decent?



A depiction of an aerial view of the Woodstock Festival in August 1969, which attracted over 400,000 people.

Because musicians were thought to possess a high-minded and progressive view of life’s great mysteries, what they composed and sang about was increasingly viewed as an expression of contemporary social gospel. Anti-establishment expression in music wasn’t the sole province of rock or soul music.

Eventually, Broadway would get into the act with the production of that paean to tribal love and counterculture ethics, *Hair*. Leonard Bernstein’s *Mass*, commissioned by Jacqueline Kennedy for the opening of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC in 1971, provided an aura of establishment legitimacy to the Aquarian ethos as one of classical music’s most iconic figures joined the parade of progressive, anti-establishment antagonists. *Mass*, which employs a rock band in the scoring, is decidedly more musical theater than highbrow art music, but it created quite a buzz for its unabashed foray into the realm of popular art and its decidedly Bohemian approach to Catholic liturgical music.

The continual objectification of that which has intrinsic spiritual dimensions has had deleterious effects

on our culture, and this became antipodal to our Aquarian fantasies. Music and sexuality were such casualties in this regard. The adolescent predilection for instant gratification in our live-for-the-moment culture, combined with crass commercialism (which the counterculture detested), fostered a condition where a good deal of popular music became increasingly shallow and degenerate, and without much in the way of any redeeming social value (e.g., Miley Cyrus as salacious paramour, or gangsta rap).

Moreover, any objection or critique of the destructive effects of popular culture is often met with charges of intolerance or insensitivity, as if there is no legitimate or rational concern about how popular music often succumbs to our most base instincts. The emerging censoriousness regarding moral and ethical concerns that too often permeates the progressive mindset has had the effect of becoming a buffer against legitimate skepticism and any corrective sensibilities.

In her iconic song, “Woodstock,” songstress Joni Mitchell sings:

*We are stardust
Billion year old carbon
We are golden
Caught in the devil’s bargain
And we’ve got to get ourselves
Back to the garden.*



Joni Mitchell and “Woodstock”

A film clip of Joni Mitchell’s first public performance of her song, “Woodstock,” at the Big Sur Folk Festival in mid-September 1969. She was invited to perform live at Woodstock a month earlier, but her manager, David Geffen, asked her to remain at her hotel due to Mitchell’s scheduled TV taping of The Dick Cavett Show the day after the festival. Thus, her perspective of Woodstock, she said, was of an observer, not a performer. Mitchell later wrote: “Woodstock, for some reason, impressed me as being a modern miracle, like a modern-day fishes-and-loaves story. For a herd of people that large to cooperate so well, it was pretty remarkable and there was tremendous optimism. So I wrote the song ‘Woodstock’ out of these feelings, and the first three times I performed it in public, I burst into tears, because it brought back the intensity of the experience and was so moving.”

Getting “back to the garden” requires a serious reorientation of our priorities, and as Mitchell notes in her lyrics, recognizing the spiritual cause of our entrapment is the necessary first step in the process. In “Sympathy for the Devil,” Mick Jagger sings about the devil’s clever deception in diverting our attention away from the causal dimension of our fallen nature. According to Mick, what’s puzzling us is the nature of the devil’s game. Understanding the original nature of creation and our responsibilities as citizens (and artists), as well as understanding the course and motivation of the human fall, will allow us to initiate the corrective measures needed to restore that lost garden.

In the *Cheon Seong Gyeong* (Book 10, “Philosophy of Peace”), Dr. Sun Myung Moon states:

“The ultimate goal of artists, and those who work with the arts, is to reach the world of God’s heart. God, the Creator, wants to feel boundless joy through all the different things He personally created with His own hands, one by one, as works of art. God’s heart is such that He wants to give again after He has given. After doing things for others He wants to do more for them, and even after investing unconditionally He wants to forget what He has done. That heart is the basis

of the world of true love. God's ideal of creation for the created world arose from that heart. The starting point of art is the desire to represent that heart.

“Accordingly, in the world of art there are no national boundaries. The purpose of art is not to serve as a tool of an ideology or an agenda. Its fundamental principles are harmony and unity. Divisiveness and conflict are fruits of fallen nature. Therefore the world of art demonstrates universal characteristics in all directions, bringing the East to understand the West and the West to accept the East.”

In this context, we should view our creative endeavors with an eye on motivation and intent. Ego, greed, self-aggrandizement, nihilism, and secularism are anathema to the ideals that our founders articulated in the Principle of Creation. In many respects, the Woodstock generation didn't take enough stock in the ethic of living for a higher purpose in concert with God as described by our founders.

Regarding issues of social responsibility, many in the Woodstock generation became obfuscators and prevaricators, more willing to talk-the-talk than walk-the-walk — or live-the-lyric — at least not to the degree necessary to actualize the social gospel that we sang about in our songs or protested about in our social and political activism. In fact, by assailing important foundational enterprises such as family and religion, entities that historically instructed society in the ways of compassion, self-discipline, charity, and community cooperation, we unwittingly participated in our own cultural demise. As we are finding out in our autumn years, that kind of social irresponsibility has lasting consequences.

Vincent van Gogh asserted that “the best way to know God was to love many things.” But to love often takes courage, especially on an Aquarian scale. Legendary cellist and humanitarian, Pablo Casals, believed that each person has great potential goodness but it required courage to be good and decent in a world beset by selfishness. For Casals, music wasn't just for his personal fulfillment: “Music must serve a purpose; it must be part of something larger than itself, a part of humanity.” Artists need to fully grasp what Casals, and our founders, instructed.

Is it too late to make a difference? For those of us who decades ago experienced an epiphany regarding higher consciousness and the possibility of fulfilling the Aquarian ideal of peace and love, doing nothing ought not be an option. If, as Michael Jackson suggested, “we are the world” and “the ones who'll make a brighter day,” then yes, “let's start giving” in the attempt to recover the glory of that lost garden.

David Eaton has been Music Director of the New York City Symphony since 1985. In addition to his conducting career, he has been an active composer, arranger and producer with 64 original compositions and over 800 arrangements and transcriptions to his credit. One of his recent compositions, “70 and Counting!” was performed at the United Nations as part of its 70th Anniversary concert in 2015. Another recent composition, “Sing Praise, Halleluia!” was recently performed in Korea. In 2016, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by UTS.

First in a series. The AU Blog invites from readers their own article-length submissions reflecting on the 50th anniversary of Woodstock, to be published on our site through August.

Photo at top: *The iconic 1969 poster for the Woodstock Music & Art Fair, as it was officially called.*