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Chaos and Success: Understanding Woodstock

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Good afternoon.

My name is Sabine Nikolay. I am a historian, currently working for the Austrian Broadcasting Network as a journalist of the public national radio station Ö1. Even though my station is one of the “classic” stations, usually emphasising on classical music, a little bit of jazz and world music, I managed to establish a series of features which deal with popular music - its history, impact and cultural effects. Being based at the science department of my station, this was not an easy task.

It helped that I am used to look at things from a meta-level. Being a rock fan myself and having been fascinated by the culture of the Sixties as long as I remember I always sought information about that time in various media: newspaper articles, photographs, magazines, movies, records, tapes and literature. Together they formed a picture in my head, an image, and a lot of prejudices of course. Coming from a rather poor background I had to wait until I was 21 until I was able to travel to the US for the first time. At that time there was not much to be found about the Sixties anymore. It was the time of venture capital and the booming start ups. The computer age had started and banks started to play a major role. But maybe the latter was always the case in America.

As a young European who did not grow up anywhere near the big money here in Europe everything in the States seemed strange to me. The citizens of the United States seemed to be obsessed with three things: Money. Their cars. And directions. Almost all the time, everywhere, people were giving me directions how to get from A to B, how to manage my life, how to find a proper job, how to meet Mr so and so. All in all they gave me the impression of a very stressed and deeply disoriented people.

I grew up in a country which is very attached to its old – and I mean really old – culture. In the time and in the family I grew up in nobody seemed to be keen on talking about the nearer past. And so we retreated into a dream land of classical music: My grand parents went to the opera on a regular basis, my mother loved the Viennese classics, my grand mother played Chopin and Schubert on the piano and my father fancied big orchestras and the symphonies of Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. The way I was raised I always got the impression that culture and music are serious matters. If you went to a concert you did it with an earnestness almost solemn. It matched going to mass, or at least what I imagined mass to be like. My family wasn't religious.

It was only in America that I detected that cultural events can be pure fun without a higher, greater meaning attached to them. People who attended Prince concert, loved the rhythm, loved to dance, and simply had fun. Afterwards they had a beer together and went home. It was like that until I attended my first Grateful Dead concert, and my first Bob Dylan concert after that. These were fun too. But they also had an almost religious element. The travelling circus. The fans who could name you setlists of concerts having taken place ages ago. It was then that I heard friends discuss "Woodstock" for the first time in America.

"Woodstock" - the mythical greatest music festival of all times.

Woodstock - the biggest event in rock history - by numbers of visitors in the audience as well as musicians on stage and losses of dollars.

Woodstock.

I knew what that was.

A friend had given me an old cassette when I was 11. I remember it clearly. It was yellow. It always crumbled up in my cassette player. I had to fix it using a ball point pen or a pencil of the right size to rewind it and carefully put the tape back into its plastic case. Back to where it once belonged.

Ah, the quote! Get back to where you once belonged. But that is something different! I mention that because sentimentalists like myself have the ambition to quote as many songs and song titles as possible.

My Woodstock tape was yellow and had a hand written title on it: It said: Janis Joplin. Woodstock 1969. I listened to it in my room which at that time still contained stuffed animals and animal posters on the wall. While listening to Janis' roar I read a book titled "On The Road".

I of course understood nothing of it all.

But I felt that there was something meaningful there. In the book. And in this strange music which was so different from everything that I had been listening to until then. I started to realize that there seemed to be a different kind of approach to culture out there in the big world on the other side of the walls of my little girl's room. And I wanted to learn more about it.

Three decades later, this desire eventually brought me to White Lake, New York, where I stood in the middle of the famous field trying to imagine what it actually had been like to be there while Janis was singing "Summertime" and "Try (Just A Little Bit Harder)".

0. Janis, Summertime, Woodstock 1969, credits in PP

Woodstock always had this special air around it. As if it had not been a carefully planned and anticipated cultural event, invented and created by people who worked in the culture business. To me it seemed more like a natural phenomenon. Thinking back and analyzing this perception of a European teenager I think it had a lot to do with the stories about the big storm, the wind, the rain, the heat, the mud.

It had to do with naked people walking around, swimming in the lake nearby and of course it had to do with all the talk about free love and the brotherhood of man. Woodstock somehow created a myth about peace and freedom which was hard to understand. There had been music, too, and over the years I found out about the people who had been on stage there, at least some of them - but the music was not what created the special atmosphere around the event.

Now I am here. 30 years later – or, rather, almost 44 years after the event took place. I am here to entertain you with a hopefully fun and atmospheric lecture. We are in the 21st century after all and we have certain standards. You are all used to hearing talks and lectures and to participate in panel discussions where you of course have access to microphones and amplifiers, where the air condition is quietly humming away and the Power Point Presentations all work smoothly. And, of course, not to mention, the rest rooms are clean and well equipped with soap, paper towels and fresh water.

Let me just state one thing: Real life begins at the end of your comfort zone.

With all the comfort and safety that surrounds us now, none of the Woodstock Myth would ever have happened. Had everything worked out as planned, Woodstock would have been a great success, also economically. It would have boosted some musicians' and bands' career. People would have been happy to have been there. And most of them would remember it as “one of the festivals in the Sixties I went to, like.....wait..... Monterey. Miami Pops. Denver. Newport. Woodstock, yeah, and also..... Montreux, or Isle of Whight.Wait.....Who played there? Well, the usual people, you know.....”.

Woodstock was different. Everybody knew about Woodstock. Even I, a 11 year old girl from small town Austria who didn't have access to the internet, because the internet didn't exist. I had not randomly stumbled over it. People had told me about it.

They even dressed like the hippies in Woodstock. And it was already the eighties! So this festival seemed to have been more than just a cultural event. Friends of mine who were older than I treated it like a sanctuary. They showed me the record and played me the music. And only years after my first encounter with Woodstock I asked myself why on earth this couple wrapped up in that blanket was standing on a field full of garbage and mud.

01. Woodstock Original Cover

The dichotomy on that record cover must have impressed me deeply when I noticed its double message.

Much later I started right there: I was assigned to put together a radio feature on the famous festival for its 40th anniversary. And I took it seriously. Instead of talking to professors at universities who would be quoting books and magazines, instead of talking to music critics or representatives of Warner Brothers, the label that bought the Woodstock rights from the producers after the financial disaster became common knowledge. I did not conduct business as usual to create that feature. Instead, I decided to travel to America and try to find people who actually were there, people who created the event, people who performed there and would share some of their genuine memories.

In my research I came across many more dichotomies:

On the record cover it was: a couple obviously attached and close, full of love on a heap of garbage.

Later on I found out that there are other couples, like:

Freedom. A true Woodstock stereotype. And its counterpart was: Money!

Also, another big message of the event: Anti War! Peace!

And its counterpart was: profit!

There also is this stereotype of: brotherhood of man, eternal friendship and love!

And its counterpart seems to have been: copyright infringement!

And, last but not least: "Woodstock Nation".

And the backside of it was: Corporate Music Industries!

In 1969 on the hillside in the Catskills, there was a famous echo. It went like this:

1. Country Joe McDonald, solo, Gimme An F! / credits in PP

This is Joe McDonald. When Woodstock took place he was a young man, not as young as many others who were there, but fairly young, still not quite 30 years old. Joe who had also performed at Monterey with his band "The Fish" was a big festival traveller at that time. He had arrived in White Lake early. And, according to his story as he told it to me when I visited him the first time at his home in Berkeley, California, he was the second performer on stage at the Woodstock Festival. A year later he told me a different story.

The thing is: In the Woodstock movie as well as on the 6 CD box set, a combination of the Woodstock hits and formerly unreleased material that Warner Brothers published for the 40th anniversary, Joe's solo performance appears in the middle of the festival. As everyone can see, he performed in bright day light. No rain, no clouds, a lot of people already in the audience, but still some space on the sides and on top of the hill. Also, his band wasn't there and his guitar has a string tied to it rather than a proper strap. As he told me at our first interview, the guitar wasn't even his own. All the instruments of the band were in a truck, which was stuck on the New York Thru Way as so many others. Also, he was scheduled to perform on the second day of the festival, as Country Joe And The Fish. Which he did anyway. Joe McDonald actually performed twice at the Woodstock Festival, and is the only artist who did so.

His solo performance, however, originated in the desperate situation that about 300.000 people in the audience needed to be entertained. The performers who had been engaged to play on stage on the first festival day, Friday, August 15, 1969, arrived late at the site as all the roads were blocked with people trying to reach the festival. Joe McDonald at that time had never performed solo. Nobody knew him on the East Coast. He was a local hippie of the Bay Area, with a blue collar workers' family background, who had a couple of anti war songs in his repertoire, but most of his oeuvre consisted of the usual folk and country music, as was the fashion at that time spiced with a little bit of psychedelic influence.

When Joe was sent out onto the stage nobody listened to him. People were talking, wandering around, looking for their friends and family, eating, drinking, and smoking. After half an hour Joe decided to quit the stage and was stopped by the stage speaker, John Morris. At that time John Morris worked for one of the most innovative

and creative men in the music business of the United States. Bill Graham. Morris was the manager of the most important concert venue on the East Coast, the “Fillmore East” in Greenwich Village, New York City, Graham’s extension of the San Francisco “Fillmore”, a concert hall that bore most of the Sixties’ music giants. It certainly did so for The Jefferson Airplane, The Grateful Dead, Country Joe And The Fish, Joan Baez, and Santana.

John Morris, who I met at his house in Malibu, confirmed this story. He told me that they had convinced Joe to play and that Joe had been reluctant to perform, not being used to doing solo performances. It was John Morris who stopped him from leaving the stage and sent him back out.

And that was when he started to do the “Fixin’ To Die Rag”, which later on became something like the anthem of The Woodstock Festival. On the West Coast, the “Rag” was an already well known protest song with sarcastic lyrics that criticized not only the government but also the all too ready parents who were sacrificing their sons for the home of the brave.

“And be the first one on your block whose son is coming back in a box” sings Joe.

1. Country Joe McDonald, solo, Gimme An F! / credits in PP

We all know that song. We all know that performance. The heart piece of the Woodstock movie. And we know it only because the camera crew had arrived early as well to capture not only the festival itself but also the last days of building the site. The enormous stage, the light towers, the fences, they filmed it all – and also the hordes of young people who started to set up their tents on the field already on Wednesday, two days before the festival started. So the camera crew filmed Joe McDonald’s solo performance. As the film reels were not numbered while they were working on the movie, as nobody wrote date and time onto them and there were always three crews shooting at the same time, nobody knows about the order of appearances at the festival. The film reels were all thrown into a truck which was carefully locked to make sure nothing was stolen. Editing the film must have been a genuine nightmare. They had shot 120 miles of film, which corresponds to 192 km. As most of the time three teams were filming synchronously and the sound had been recorded extra, they had to find the footage that matched the sound. Michael

Wadleigh invented the split screen as he turned what at first seemed a nightmare into his greatest triumph: He avoided to decide which images to use by using them all on a split screen. The movie won the Academy Award for best documentary movie in 1970, and was also nominated for best editing. If we think about the circumstance of the production we understand why. Michael Wadleigh, 30 at the time, made a fortune with the movie. Production costs were 600.000 dollars. Up to this day the movie earned over 50 million dollars in theatres, video and DVD copies.

The creation of the film is an important detail when it comes to the Woodstock Myth: As nobody took the time and effort to write down who appeared, and when, and what the set lists were, editing the movie turned not into a documentarian's work but into artist's work. I invested a lot of time to find out what the correct order of appearance was and can tell you as much – only for the first day:

1.A

Richie Havens

The Swami Satchindananda– and Indian guru who had made his way out to White Lake via helicopter and who was sent out onto the stage by John Morris to meditate with the crowd by lack of another performer.

Next was the afore mentioned Joe McDonald

After him came John Sebastian

Bert Summer

Tim Hardin

Ravi Shankar

Arlo Guthrie

Joan Baez

Melanie (according to Joe Boyd)

In the movie the order of appearance goes like this:

1.B

Crosby Stills and Nash

Canned Heat

Richie Havens

Joan Baez

The Who
Sha Na Na
Joe Cocker
Country Joe and The Fish
Arlo Guthrie
C S & N
10 Years After
Jefferson Airlplane
John Sebastian
Country Joe McDonald
Santana
Sly And The Family Stone
Janis
Hendrix

Over the years I managed to put together bits and pieces. I collected a lot of information as to who performed when. But – many informations cannot be trusted. There are people who pretend to having been there and can't get our of their lie when you ask further questions. There are people who actually attended but were stoned out of their heads thus having only a vague memory of what was going on. Woodstock is a good example for oral history and the problems you run into with projects like this.

For instance Joe Boyd. Boyd is a well known British music producer, band manager and writer. He went down in history as the producer of Pink Floyd, Fairport Convention and the one who detected Nick Drake. He attended Woodstock as the manager of the Incredible String Band. The ISB was scheduled to perform after Joan Baez on the first night and gave their spot to Melanie, as John Morris offered to give them a time to perform on Saturday. On the next day they appeared after Canned Heat, says Joe Boyd, and their performance was not well received.

The accurate order of appearance still remains unknown. There is a notebook up in White Lake at the Bethelwoods Museum in which a member of the audience seems to have noted down everything that was going on on stage. Still, I have not received a copy of that notebook yet. For the first day, August 15 1969, the Friday of the

festival, also referred to as the “folk day” by the American writer T.C. Boyle who still hasn’t gotten over the fact that he missed that first day of the festival, I am pretty sure what the order of appearance was. But it does not matter, really.

The movie was edited in a way that it told a story. The story people wanted to see. A story, that confirmed what was told about the festival: that it had been an anti war event, a political manifestation, a moment of peace and love and happiness in a world of cruelty and pain.

The ones who appeared in Woodstock were said to be the greatest artists of their time. Or, no, they were said to have been the greatest artists of their time after the event, because Woodstock made them famous.

But that is a myth too. Woodstock made people famous. Santana for instance was one of them. Joe Cocker who is also said to having grown famous for his Woodstock appearance things are not as easy. Cocker at the time was touring the US to promote his album “With A Little Help From My Friends”, a Beatles cover which earned him gold in the U.S. eventually. So – Woodstock’s range in his career stands to be discussed. There were The Jefferson Airplane, The Grateful Dead, Hendrix – big stars of their times already. The Who – big Brits who had already turned Monterey into an “International” Pop Festival. It can be stated, I think, that the chance to become famous through Woodstock was closely linked to two things: You had to appear on the album and you had to appear in the movie.

Do some of you know who Quill were?

Or the Keef Hartley Band?

Mountain? The afore mentioned Incredible String Band?

Those are the “lost bands” of Woodstock, the ones that performed while the members of the camera crews slept off their intoxication from the early morning relaxation after an exhaustingly long day and night of performances. These bands were not in the movie. Not many people know about them.

The collective memory is short when there are no documentaries to notable events, namely if the events are not recorded somewhere. Other than in the old times in Europe where songs and events were mentioned in literature and songbooks, in oral history, and stories, that were handed down the generations, interestingly, in Woodstock barely anyone found it worth documenting what happened on stage.

Even though there were many journalists there of all the big newspapers of the US as well as staff members of the local papers, only one journalist found it worthwhile to

write about the bands that performed. Over a period of three months I was sitting in the newspaper reading room of the public library on 5th Avenue in New York City every day that it was open and looked at every single Times and Post of that time finding only one article in which bands were mentioned. That was the only article that could be called a music critique. All the other hundreds of articles that came out during or right after the event dealt with: the sheer enormousness of the event, audiencewise, the blocked New York Thruway and the crazy weather on that particular weekend. They wrote about the food and water shortage, about the declaration of the region as a disaster area and the National Guard and even the army coming to the rescue. The Governor of New York, a man called J.D. Rockefeller, sent an official to find out what was going on up there.

That the hippies at White Lake were saved from thirst, starvation, wetness and cold by soldiers who were bringing in survival packages, blankets and water bottles with helicopters is more than ironic.

Woodstock was pure force of nature in many different ways. And it founded a new kind of awareness for the American values, for patriotism and a country standing together.

Woodstock also was pure chaos, like nature itself.

The title of this lecture is:

2. Chaos and Success. Understanding Woodstock.

It is of course not a title I picked randomly. It is a title that includes a citation: "Understanding Media" was a benchmark book by the Canadian philosopher and English Major Herbert Marshall McLuhan. The book came out in 1964, in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement of the Sixties, influencing not only people who worked in the emerging media and entertainment business but also people in general who understood by exploring this book that they themselves were media in the metaphoric meaning of the word. One person can be a medium. To illustrate this let's think of a charismatic man like Dr. Martin Luther King. His actions, words and goals, his life and even his death were illustrating the words he spoke in a sense that he BECAME his words. He lived according to his goals and even died for them.

To his life-work the key sentence of Mashall McLuhan's book "Understanding Media" applies in a way that's stunning and unique. The sentence goes like this:

3. The Medium Is The Message.

The same can be said about groups of people: Be it the local teenagers on their way to school or sports somewhere in rural America, be it women doing their shopping in the big malls, be it blue collar workers in the oil fields of the South West, or white collar workers in midtown Manhattan – lawyers, attorneys, tax accountants, business men – be it brokers on Wall Street or secretaries on their way to work in the big Apple or elsewhere, be it technicians going after their research business in the computer labs of Stanford and Palo Alto in the region that later on developed into what's known as "Silicon Valley" today – they all underwent fundamental changes during the Sixties. Suddenly, you made a statement by the way you dressed. You made a political statement by growing out your hair or cutting it short. You distinguished yourself from others and declared yourself as a member of a certain group by the clothes you were wearing, the choice to grow a beard or not to wear make up.

The label "medium" also applies to bigger groups of people, groups in the sense of: a bunch of people come together and follow the same goals. They are throwing in their ideas, energy and efforts, even their money and other worldly goods to reach an aim they share. Think of the rallies in the Sixties, the marches towards Washington as part of the Anti War Movement, the marches against racism and segregation in the South, the Siege of Chicago, as the writer Norman Mailer called it, during the Democratic Convention of 1968.

Huge crowds roaming the streets, shouting out their frustration with a Corporate America whose leaders accepted thousands to be killed and disabled for the sake of what the government called "A Free World". These huge crowds had their own perception of freedom and they showed their moral superiority by having themselves beaten up by soldiers, members of the National Guards, and the Police, all over the United States, up to the steps of the Congress Building in Washington.

What better statement about the cruelty and unrighteousness of the government could you make than having yourself victimized in the eyes of cameras and broadcasting journalists who spread the news all over the world into what the grey

eminence behind this lecture, Marshall McLuhan, in sheer prophesy and wisdom called "The Global Village".

In America – and yes, by "America" we mean the Corporate America of the North, the United States – the Sixties were a time of fundamental changes. After the decade was over, the values of the Western hemisphere had changed:

"Obedience" then was a matter of social discourse rather than self-evident as before.

"Women's Liberation" got a new direction in the Sixties. From something perceived as ridiculous at the beginning of the century, it had changed to a threat of peace and tranquillity of family life over the course of the Fifties, and came to a completely new meaning in the Sixties. Although there is still hostility against women who fight for their rights even now in the 21st century, in the Sixties a turn of the movement occurred which led to more acceptance and consensus with the women's cause. This was, I pitifully have to continue, not due to understanding or solidarity from the male part of the society.

It came disguised as a little orange tablet - at a time when tablet meant medication rather than portable computers. Due to the chemical revolution in the Sixties the pill emerged for the sake of the human race, enabling the females of the free world to gain and keep control over their bodies and consequently over the course of their lives. We need not to conceal, however, that men also profited from this new way of independence of nature's ways. Since I am talking about the United States, I need to add that some regarded the pill as a means to undermine the higher powers of God and His creation.

But let's get back on track. We are still talking about the changes in America during the Sixties.

After the decade was over, "peace" represented a value for itself, rather than "war", the perception of which had turned from something necessary in defence of the homeland, and something noble to increase the fatherland's fame, to something evil in the hands of big corporate industries and reckless politicians that exploit and destroy for profit, corrupted by the prospect of wealth and personal benefits.

Why am I talking about all these matters while this lecture is supposed to deal with music and its impact on the dancing hordes? Why am I talking about politics, social environment, political choices and historic changes?

4. **Richie Havens: Freedom einspielen /credits in PP**

45''

Again: Why am I talking about all these matters while this lecture is supposed to deal with nothing but music and its impact on the dancing hordes? Why am I talking about politics, social environment, political choices and historic changes?

Because

5. Music Is A Medium Itself.

And

6. The Music of the Woodstock Music and Art Fair, in particular, was not received as “music for entertainment” but to the contrary, as a political message, as was the whole scenery at the Festival. It was read as a manifestation for peace, and as the beginning of a new age.

So before we talk about music, let's sum up what we delivered until now:

7. **Peace, Obedience, Equality, Brotherhood of Man, Civil Rights Movement, Cultural Changes, Women's Liberation, Social Changes.**

All these values build up to the amalgam of what created the Myth around one of Music History's most unsuccessful and most successful events. I need to point this out specifically: I said ONE event, in singular, because I am talking about one single festival only. I am talking about the Woodstock Music and Art Fair which was a commercial disaster **and** the most successful music festival in American History so far.

How is that possible?

Before we explore Woodstock, let me bring one other famous philosopher to your attention. He came from a francophone country as Mr McLuhan, with the distinction that he lived on this side of the big pond, in France. His name: Roland Barthes. He is known as the author of fundamental philosophical studies on human behaviour, media and myth. His book "Mythologies" to this day counts as one of the key works on this matter even though the text's first edition in French was published in 1957 - 56 years ago.

Funnily, Roland Barthes reached the same conclusions as Marshall McLuhan when he turned his attention to media in public space. In France of the Fifties television did not yet play a major role when it came to media. Barthes explored radio, magazines, newspapers, and also took into account huge posters and panels that were used for advertisements and announcements. In his book he talks about the effect of advertisements and radio commercials as well as the importance of the appearance of the individual and also groups of people. The underlying thesis of his work being that media does not communicate truth but creates myths by the reduced means of language it can use.

And thus, in 1957, almost a decade before McLuhan's book was accessible for the public, Roland Barthes stated in the French first edition of his "Mythologies":

8. "Myth is Communication. Myth is a Message."

Seven years later, in 1964, Marshall McLuhan's "Understanding Media" could be broken down to the famous statement:

9. "The Medium Is The Message".

It is easy to understand how that applies to the Woodstock Festival if we look at one scene from the Woodstock movie. The particular scene takes us behind the stage of the festival right after the BIG RAIN

10. Mike Lang und Artie Kornfeld on stage, in the beautiful storm, holding flowers.

As is the case in many mythical events, certainly so in the myths of ancient Greece, even the Gods of the Weather are playing a big role in the events. There was the big storm that sent Ulysses onto his Odyssey, and Woodstock had its big rain as well. People were chanting “NO RAIN NO RAIN” as if they could change nature’s forces. That is something which was reflected by Joe McDonald’s shouting: “There are 400.000 of you suckers out there, how do you think we can stop the war if you can’t do better than that?” What he really did was animating the people to start singing the Fixin’ To Die-Rag with him. But he delivered it as a political statement.

All media, and all myth for that matter, is man made. How big the role of the master mind behind an event can be, or should be, or mostly is, stands yet to be explored.

11. Anfang Radiokolleg mit der Frage nach der Wahrheit /credits in PP 1’

This lecture is based on research accomplished in preparation of my PhD dissertation, which, alas, is still a work in progress. It will be titled:

12. “Success Through Myth – The creation of cultural values using the example of the 1969 Woodstock Festival”.

In my head, however, I have another title which might be more accurate for the book:

13. Playground Of The Millionaires.

How Woodstock tricked Millions of People Into Believing In Freedom, Brotherhood And A New Society.

The Woodstock Music and Art Fair did not take place in Woodstock. It was named after this little rural town in upstate New York due to the plan to present it there - which never actually happened. When the organizers of the festival were in search for a site where they were welcome to hold the concert event they decided to stick to the originally planned name of the event. After moving the whole venture to the town of Wallkill, an hour North of the City of New York, they eventually had to move the whole scenery once again to a place called White Lake. White Lake is a town in the

Catskill Mountains upstate New York. There, on a cow pasture, the world's most famous music festival was held from August 15 to 18, 1969. It went down in history as an unprecedented success story: the "most successful music festival" ever. One might think that professionalism and careful planning were important factors for such success. On closer inspection, however, this impression proves false.

Woodstock was planned and organized by four young men.

14. Bild: Lang und Kornfeld

Only two of them, Michael Lang and Arthur Kornfeld, had experience in the music industry. Michael Lang, the man with the wild curly hair, had organized a music festival in Miami in 1968 which had not been a huge success, but had done fairly well. In 1968 Lang took the money he had earned with the Miami Pops Festival and moved to the small town of Woodstock, upstate New York. Woodstock at that time was known as an artist's retreat. Many famous protagonists of the Sixties' music culture lived there, some even continue to living in Woodstock to this very day. In 1968 the most famous inhabitant of Woodstock, N.Y., was Bob Dylan, who had retreated to the country after his motorcycle accident in 1966. He lead a quiet life with his wife and small children at the time and had stopped to appear in concerts. It had been over 2 years since the last Bob Dylan concert had taken place.

Very soon after he had moved to Woodstock Michael Lang became friends with his neighbour, Arthur Kornfeld, and eventually moved in with him, his wife Linda and their children. Arthur Kornfeld worked as a CEO at Capital Records at that time and also produced a band called the "Cowsills". He had earned serious money as composer of the song "The Pied Piper" and others. Very soon after the friendship had started, Kornfeld and Lang engaged in discussing business ideas. Both were well connected in the music scene, they had a lot of ideas and were experienced record and concert producers. But they had a problem: They needed money to turn their ideas into reality.

Right now we are stepping over one of the most prominent issues connected to culture all around the globe: someone has to pay for it – to make it happen, to enable

creation, to encourage ideas, and to help new means of performance or recording become reality. Someone has to invest to bring culture into this world.

The problem with the money is: it is owned mostly by those who are no artists. And those who have money very often are not willing to give it away for nothing. Whoever finances a cultural event expects one thing before anything else: profit.

When they set out to look for financiers, Artie Kornfeld and Mike Lang were well aware of that fact. Before we introduce the people they found as investors for their project we have to clarify which project they needed the money for. This is one of the fundamental misunderstandings of the whole Woodstock reception. We always think of Woodstock in terms of “Freedom. Anti-War. Women’s Liberation. Brotherhood of Man. Back to Nature” and so forth. But what did the producers of the festival actually have in mind when they started to create the event?

Luckily, whenever a business idea – and that’s what we are talking about: a business idea – arises, legal advice is sought, and eventually a contract is set up, agreed upon and signed by all parties. So let’s take a look at the original Woodstock contract, as it was presented to me by Michael Lang in his Manhattan office in early 2011:

15. [Original Woodstock Contract, February 28, 1969, p 1:](#)

WHEREAS, Lang has presented to Rosenman and Roberts two business ventures, one calling for the establishment of a Music Festival in Saugerties, N.Y., and the other calling for the creation of a Sound Studio in Woodstock, New York.....

As you can see, in the original version of the contract, the two places where the intended businesses should be established, were put down in the wrong order. Only later the text of the contract was corrected and the three parties initialled to confirm this adaptation.

Furthermore, as you can see, in the beginning there was talk over an actual business investment into something lasting, a recording studio, which should be established upstate New York in the small town of Woodstock.

We have to take a little detour and explain why this plan at that time was actually a good idea. Two circumstances predestined the small town two and a half hour North of New York City to develop into a hub for recording music:

A) Woodstock was looking back onto a long tradition of music. Since the mid 1800s Woodstock had hosted the so called “Mavericks” which brought together the best – known musicians in country, folk and traditional American music in a big annual festival. This festival was held right outside town. Many concerts took place out in the open, on a meadow right next to a big barn, which was used when the weather did not allow performances in the open. So there was already a historical and musical tradition existent. The producers thought that there might be interest in a new style of American music. However, the creators of the event thought wrong.

And, also:

B) Some of the most famous musicians of the time lived in Woodstock. Some of them did so all year round, others went to Woodstock only for a part of the year. Amongst these artists, besides the afore mentioned Bob Dylan, were stars like Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, the recently deceased Richie Havens, Tim Hardin, John Sebastian from the Loving Spoonful and others who spent their vacation up there. Woodstock is in the heart of the Catskill Mountains, a region also known as the “Jewish Alps”, where Jewish settlers had specialised in dairy products since the mid 1800s. It is an idyllic and rural area, undisturbed by industries, mining or big cities.

[16. Photo of Woodstock with surrounding mountains](#)

Since the Monterey Festival had taken place in California in the early summer of 1967, the Music Business had boomed like no other cultural industry before. And since Monterey the expression “industry” fits quite well. Monterey was the place where new technical equipment was tested. The place where agents of the major record labels looked for new talent. Monterey also was not only a music event, it was also a meeting point for the industry in terms of technology: Technical equipment was presented and sold in special areas around the festival arena. Monterey, in a way, was where the music of the Sixties lost its innocence and turned into big business.

After Monterey big music festivals were organised in the United States every year, and they were commercially successful. There had been music festivals before, like Newport – so the idea itself was not new, but it had reached a point where it turned from being something fresh and new into entertainment and big business.

Having said so, it might come as a surprise that the original intention which eventually lead to the creation of the Woodstock Festival was not to hold an International Music Festival, but to build something solid, something that should last. A recording studio up in the woods of Woodstock. This studio should enable the vacationing musicians to record their new compositions right there, on the spot during their vacation. And of course there was an idea that maybe even Bob Dylan - should he plan a comeback - would rather record in his remote little home town than commute to New York or fly out to the West Coast to record in L.A. So to make this clear: Michael Lang and Arthur Kornfeld did not think of organising a concert event . Their main goal was to create a professional recording studio in Woodstock, New York.

That was the venture they were seeking investors for.

And they were successful in their search. They found the investors in the duo of two friends who had moved to New York after graduating from college. They shared an apartment on the Upper East Side in Manhattan which they also used as their office.

17. Bild: Roberts and Rosenman

John Roberts, on the right, was the heir of a notable fortune of several million dollars from his who had died young. His trust fund, the first rate of which was at Robert's disposal when he turned 21, contained money earned in the pharmaceutical industries. Nowadays the amount of money would correspond to a sum of Euro-millions in the two digit range.

John Roberts' personality was that of a rather shy young man. He was not much of a business man. He had majored in history in college, very much to the disappointment of his father who expected him to continue the family's tradition and turn towards big business. Quite to the opposite, John Roberts didn't have much of a plan for the time after his graduation. By returning home to his father's estate he found himself under

great pressure to prove that he was a real man. So John Roberts was a little bit at a loss. In the summer of 1966 he went to Long Island for a game of golf with a friend from college, Douglas Rosenman, who brought his older brother Joel along to join them playing. As it turned out golf was not quite their cup of tea, but doing business together was more to their liking. At that time Roberts was a young man of only 22 years of age. His new friend Joel Rosenman, who we can see on the left hand side, was two years older. After majoring in English literature in Princeton Rosenman had gone to Yale, to study law. After graduating he passed the New York bar exam and started working in his uncle's law firm. He also had ambitions to become a singer in a band and thus led a quite exhausting life. He worked in the law firm during the day and appeared on stage in various night clubs several times per week for a period of almost a year. By joining forces with John Roberts he laid both his plans for the future to rest and started something completely new. He came from a middle class family and was all but rich. The world of big business and seemingly unlimited capital was quite new to him.

Roberts and Rosenman formed an interesting partnership: they wanted to be venture capitalists but also hosted a liking of the beautiful arts in their hearts. John Roberts, the shy and quiet heir of millions found a congenial partner in the eloquent lawyer Joel Rosenman. They rented an apartment in New York which they also used as their headquarters. Roberts provided the money, Rosenman threw in ideas and legal advice. In 1967 they started to seriously seek for investment opportunities by putting an ad into The New York Times:

[18. Young men with unlimited capital looking for interesting, legitimate investment opportunities and business propositions.](#)

[The New York Times, March 22 1967, p 54.](#)

Joel Rosenman in retrospect can't help but making fun of himself. "It didn't help any that I had been green enough to call our firm 'Challenge International, Limited'." Roberts and Rosenman were inexperienced young men who set out to make a lot of money. What they didn't dream of at that time was that they'd become famous for one of the biggest business failures and greatest money losses ever occurring in the cultural industries.

The rumour has it that the afore mentioned advertisement in the New York Times eventually led to the founding of an enterprise called Woodstock Ventures. That is not a fact but a myth. It was not the advertisement that brought Mike Lang, Artie Kornfeld, John Roberts and Joel Rosenman together, even though this story has been told in many variations ever since. It is true that the advertisement led to several business propositions for the two young men with unlimited capital, but Woodstock was not amongst them.

In fact, it took quite long – over a year – until Roberts and Rosenman's firm Challenge International, Limited, closed its first deal. The first business opportunity the two young financiers invested their money in, was the founding of the famed Media Sound Studio in the old Baptist Church at 311 West 57th Street in Manhattan. Although the two young men with unlimited capital were total newcomers to the business of music, and to hippie culture, they quickly established a name for themselves as the founders of one of the most modern professional recording studios in New York. Media Sound opened in June 1969 and quickly turned out to be a great success. The studio was open for recording sessions over almost four decades and closed its gates forever not too long ago.

The reputation Roberts and Rosenman had gained by financing a high scale recording studio eventually led to a telephone call between Joel Rosenman and Artie Kornfeld's lawyer Miles Lourie, in which Lourie told Rosenman, that there were two young guys from upstate New York who had earned themselves quite some reputation in the music business. These two were now looking for investors for some business up in Woodstock, New York. So.....while hundreds of thousands of young people believed in the unique opportunity to celebrate a party with their peers, a free party, as it turned out, the beginnings of the festival were quite profane. John Roberts and Joel Rosenman met Mike Lang and Artie Kornfeld for the first time on February 6, 1969 in their apartment and office on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

In talking to many of those involved in the creation of the festival I tried to find out who came up with the idea to produce a festival. I failed. I have to admit that that's not so hard to understand: One of the greatest events in music history – who would not want to be credited for its creation?

Joel Rosenman writes in his book that it was his idea. In their proposal, Lang and Kornfeld mentioned that they wanted to organize a concert with local talent for the opening party of the recording studio. Local talent that consisted of well known, famous musicians. The idea of a press release party with a concert seemed striking. In the interview I conducted with Rosenman in May 2009 he only referred to a Bob Dylan concert that he wanted to hold up in Woodstock. As I mentioned before, Dylan had not appeared on stage for almost three years.

When I talked about the matter with John Morris in Malibu in April 2009, Morris stated that Mike and Artie invented Woodstock right there, on the spot, at the office, when they noticed that the young investors were not interested in building another recording studio. According to Morris the two of them asked for a break, went out into the hall and put together a rough outline of a two day concert event.

So even the beginnings of the festival lie in the dark and will certainly remain there.

Before I end let me just add a few words about the issue of the “free concert”: Woodstock was never planned to be a free concert. Actually, admission was quite expensive. A one day ticket cost 8 \$, a three day festival pass went for 20 \$. Tickets were sold mail order, in record shops and at concert venues. Until the festival around 100.000 tickets were sold. Four times as many people came to attend. Upon their arrival they found fences, but no gates. They just wandered onto the field and nothing made them leave their spot in the mud before the festival was over. Up to this day there are still 200.000 unsold tickets lying around at Joel Rosenman’s and Mike Lang’s place. One of those were given to me by Michael, and, alas, later stolen with my purse. But I still have a photograph of the one valuable, unused Woodstock ticket:

[19. Woodstock Ticket](#)

There are many more stories about Woodstock worth knowing if you look at cultural events and try to find out why they work, become part of a collective memory and even make profit – and why they are sometimes unsuccessful. If it comes to Woodstock, what counts today is the insight:

20. There is more to cultural events than great artists and good event management. There are “irrational” factors also to be taken into account: emotions, traditions, spontaneity and a certain feeling of togetherness (which in the case of the Woodstock Festival was nicely called “Woodstock Nation” by Abbie Hofmann) and the sensation of something completely new. Careful planning is certainly no mistake, but too much planning can kill the event.

More is yet to be explored in my dissertation.