

Prefatory

I didn't go to Woodstock. Word of the big party had made its way to my home in Connecticut, where I, like so many of my generation was being kept alive by music, the harbinger of adventure, the connective thread that linked me to like-minded kids coast to coast.. As the weekend ensued and news of the goings-on at Max Yasgur's farm filtered through my requisite obligations – the party on the jammed highway; stories of wild naked dancing; drugs, of course, psychedelics; and the music – I wished some more, then put my wishes away. I'd told my parents I would stay home and work so I stayed home and worked. The weekend rolled away.

North of Woodstock, New York, my parents were making their way back from Canada, when they stopped to gas up in Lake George.... They'd been seeing the painted vans, the painted children in tie-dye and flowers, making their own way home, traveling the road. There at the gas station was another gaggle of long-haired, blissed-out kids. They were out of gas and out of money. My parents, true to their nature, gave them \$5.00 – enough to fill their tank (remember when gas cost .35 cents a gallon) and told them about their son back home who had wished he had gone but had elected to stay home and work.. Just as they were pulling out of the station, one of the kids, a girl with whom my mother had made fast friends, jumped into the back of the van, grabbed something, then ran after my folks. “Here, give this to your son,” she said.

What she held was a treasure, although she did not know it at the time. It was the official Woodstock program, a gem of art, photography and graphics that highlighted all of the planned performers. Few people attending the concert ever saw it. The delivery truck bearing boxes of these programs was among the thousands of vehicles that got stuck in the monumental traffic jam along the Interstate, a jam caused by the sea of kids who didn't stay home but took the road toward ecstasy or misery, depending on their version of that memorable

weekend. The programs finally arrived late Sunday evening, near the end of the concert; with few exceptions, the boxes got dumped in the biblical mud that Woodstock attendees still talk about, mud that ruined most of the volumes.

Thus began my quest. I've been chasing that legendary event for 45 years, chasing the dream of a shared planet, a less materialistic lifestyle, the love message – all that and more, armed with the official Woodstock program my parents gave me upon their return. I may have missed Woodstock but in the intervening years, I have met and shared stories with most of the artists who were there. With my treasured program as my passport, I have journeyed from concert to private home to radio station and beyond, accompanied by my official photographer and beautiful wife, Linda, showing the program to the artists who are presented so vividly on its pages – most of whom did not know it existed – gathering their stories and autographs.

Come with me, my fellow adventurer, as I tell you of my travels back to what I missed and my journey forward, a journey of innocence lost and renewed hope.

Chapter 1: Angel Eyes

For too few years, back in the 90's, August was the month that Linda and I got to play aunt and uncle to my younger brother's kid, Catherine. The week or so in Vermont, away from her Connecticut home, seemed our only real, one on one, bonding opportunity. This year, "Cat's" visit conflicted with our second and probably last chance to catch up with the famed Woodstock guitarist, Carlos Santana. Arrangements for the August 1995 tour stop at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center had already been made through management, complete with complementary passes awaiting us at SPAC's Will Call window. I don't think our nine-year-old niece had ever been to an ear-popping rock concert before. Would she even know or care who Carlos Santana was anyway? I figured her answer would be the usual, "Whatever!" She had no good reason to trust us this time around. We'd pulled so many tricks and stunts on her, we gave little hope she'd consent. But consent she did. It was time to pack the earplugs.

Jeff Beck, the former member of the Yardbirds, whom Rolling Stone magazine ranks as the fifth greatest guitarist of all times, was opening for Santana. Both were on our list of artists who had been scheduled to appear at Yasgur's Farm on August 15, 16 and 17, 1969 at an event that would come to be known as Woodstock. The Aquarian Exposition, that pivotal event that marked that apex of the counter-culture peace movement for a baby boom generation, was, after all, the force that brought us all together on this day, 26 years later. As guests of Santana, I sensed there was a slim chance that circumstances would allow us to catch up with both artists. After a half dozen years doing what we'd dubbed The Original Woodstock Program Project, we had learned that once you cross that security line between ticket holder and credentialed pass holder or tour guest, you became part of a different dynamic, a different energy, a different set of rules and you'd better be tenacious enough to handle the twists and turns.

On this night, it seemed that all of the administration and security at SPAC, where so many of our previous meet-ups had occurred, were aware that we would be crossing that line. Instead of arriving mid afternoon, during sound check, which was our M.O., we entered the secure zone, stage left, an hour or so before the show. I checked in, as I had dozens of times before,

with Charlie, or Bill Darcey, or whoever was new to the backstage security post. In the early days of the project, my friends at SPAC would do what they could to introduce us to either the artists themselves or more often to the road manager who would become the key player in deciding our fate. All those dynamics were moot; my pass was secured firmly to my official Woodstock Program T-Shirt.

It was precisely that T-Shirt that brought us back to this very spot almost two years to the date after a snafu that might have made the national news ended in my sitting in Carlos Santana's dressing room eating fresh fruit and shoot'n the shit with his brother Jorge. I flashed back to that moment, the fright that had me stomping around, threatening to call the state police to report a theft at the concert, by none other than the star of the show, Carlos Santana. My patience had worn thin waiting for a band member who had guaranteed me he would take my prized Woodstock program to Carlos personally, get it signed and bring it right back. After 20 minutes and no sign of either the band member or my prized, one-of-a-kind artifact, my frustration became fear, my fear grew contagious and loud. Either I or someone else was going to get arrested that night if someone didn't tell me what was going on or better yet hand back the program I had never let it out of my sight, till then. A zero tolerance security guard held me back as I anxiously paced back and forth down the busy, after show, backstage hallway intersection just shouting distance from the band's dressing rooms. Eventually another band member heard my threat and asked me what had happened. "Come with me," he said, music to my ears as we strode past the security guard and maybe fifty feet down the hall to Carlos' dressing room and there was Carlos' brother Jorge, feet up on the coffee table, eating fruit and paging through my prized possession. The catharsis was immeasurable; I blurted out my relief, "Holy shit, you scared the crap out of me, Man, am I glad you have it."

I remember Jorge's answer: "Sorry, man. Hey, this thing is amazing!"

I left the program in Jorge's possession as we discussed the details of the project, ate some fruit and the time flew by. I asked him if he or Carlos had ever seen a copy of this

rare and historic document before. He gave me the answer I was hoping for. They had not. Carlos was unable to join us, he explained, as he was involved in business negotiations. However, true to his word, the band member whom I engaged to acquire the prized signature was in fact successful, having added most of the band members' signatures as well. Jorge was warm, personal and engaging. We left the dressing room at close to midnight, feeling so privileged to have been there and yet, after all these years, disappointed that, having been so close, we still hadn't met the legend himself.

Jeff Beck had finished his intro. I left Linda and Cat at the seats Carlos had given us this second time around and decided to see if I could make my way up to the first few rows reserved for band members and guests. At past events, this and backstage access was vehemently denied until after the show. No such interference occurred this time around. I sat in the front row and watched the start of the Santana set and when it came time to move backstage, security stepped aside. Walking right past Beck, I made my way back to the "scene of the crime" intersection, pulled up a plastic milk crate, and joined three others who were just shoot'n the breeze. The stage door was ten feet away. The percussion and bass shook the concrete walls and floor, the floor shook the crate, the crate shook my whole body. One of my newfound groupies turned out to be Carlos' road manager, another the keyboardist's girlfriend. I tried to contribute to the banter but spent most of my time observing drinks being shuffled back and forth to the stage. Suddenly, the band began playing a song that was a favorite of the girl to my right and she announced she was going out on stage to dance. Half our little milk carton group jumped up and headed for the door. Mustering all my nerve, I turned to the tour manager and asked if he thought it would be okay if I joined them. He looked at my credentials, looked me straight in the eye and announced, "Dude, you can go anywhere you want, you have ALL ACCESS!"

I hit the stage, trying not to look completely out of place. I was stage right, directly behind the keyboard player and his dancing hottie. My sensory receptors were on overload as I scanned about the thunderous scene. A three-story light show was to my left,

a screaming crowd of 15,000 fans on my right and Mr. Carlos Santana was performing center stage, about 15 to 20 feet away. I jumped in for the dance; no time to be shy. Even after losing my dance partners, the urge to soak it all in kept me riveted to my position as the band offered up yet another classic Santana guitar riff and I had to pinch myself just to make sure it was all really happening.

I worked my way back to the audience. "Would you like to meet Carlos," I asked Catherine. She and Linda were seated about 20 rows from stage. Sure, she would but more important she gushed, "Uncle Ron, were you just on stage dancing; it looked like you up there?"

"Come with me right now," I said as we skirted the crowd and headed for the parking lot where the tour buses and tractor trailers provided cover and a short cut backstage. Charlie was on security and was already tuned into what was happening. It was back to "Hollywood & Vine", the famous hallway intersection where you never knew who you would literally bump into.

Our moment had finally come. I was standing face to face with the icon. He received us as if he were expecting us for a late night dinner. I introduced my wife and niece. The funny thing was that it seemed so comfortable. Carlos was a gentleman in his environment. He extended his hand to each of us and when Cat drew close, he looked at her exuberant expression and said, "Catherine, you have angel eyes." We each posed for pictures, I gave Carlos the official Woodstock Program Project T-shirt that I had promised. He was visibly intrigued with the black and white motif depicting the Woodstock dove and guitar and list of all the artists, among them The Santana Blues Band.

The moment that had taken years to create was in an instant past. I had been the ALL ACCESS guest of the one and only Carlos Santana. There was only thing standing in the way of making this the perfect Woodstock program experience. . Two hours earlier, I had walked right past Jeff Beck backstage but my prized document was in safe keeping with Cat and Linda, out in the audience, and therefore I could not get his signature. Chasing Woodstock was becoming as much about missed opportunities as about sharing and discovery. It was approaching

midnight as we exited the SPAC parking lot and we all realized it had been more a lifetime since our last food. I could think of only one place that would still be preparing my favorite meal. The Saratoga Diner was right down the road and served breakfast anytime. With only one other car in the lot, this would be a quick stop before hitting the road back to Vermont. Our waitress sat us across the room from the other two customers in the joint, Jeff Beck and his road manager! Missed opportunities? Not this time.

Jeff Beck signed his page, "I was not there". He inscribed with only a brief explanation. Exhausted and realizing that Beck was too, I never asked why.

We sent our niece a print of the photo we had taken as she posed backstage. Cat was overwhelmed by the excitement but, at nine, knew little of the artist. But the following week, when it was back to school and time for "What I did on my summer vacation," Cat brought her story and photo to class. While the reaction by her 4th grade classmates was muted, her teacher went bonkers. He was one of her favorite artists. "I'm so jealous," she told my niece.



And that was that, until two years later when this boy she really liked told her that his favorite recording artist was guess who. Mr. Santana had just released his smash single "Smooth" with Rob Thomas and a new generation found another's soul. It was deja vu. It was pay it forward. It was 6 degrees of separation. It was true love. It was time to pull out the photograph, again. Woodstock lives.