

THE DAYS THE MUSIC ARRIVED



JIM SHELLEY '72

Fifty years ago some 400,000 young people converged in a field in upstate New York for a festival that rocked the world. Jim Shelley '72 was there. Still is.

BY KELLEY FREUND

On a Saturday afternoon in late April, the only sound in the grassy bowl behind the Bethel Woods Center for the Arts in Bethel, New York, is the occasional passing car. Sometimes one stops, and a few people get out to walk up a short slope, stare down at the field and read a plaque. But 50 years ago, on the weekend of August 15, 1969, the scene was different. For one thing, it was muddier, but most important was the noise. Voices sang, drums pounded, guitars rified (and one was smashed), applause roared, laughter rolled. And on that Saturday afternoon, a man named Country Joe McDonald came to a stage near the edge of that field and shouted into a mic.

"Gimme an F!"

The audience shouted back. "F!"

"Gimme a U!"

"U!"

What followed was a brief spelling lesson on one of the most liberating expressions of emphasis in the English language. The weightiness of this particular word makes it applicable to many situations, from elation to pain to frustration. For the estimated 400,000-plus people sitting in the grass that day — 400,000 who wanted to fight against the grain but not in the Vietnam War, 400,000 who wanted to be understood, who wanted to yell, who just wanted to rock — the word meant the freedom to do that.

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"What's that spell?"

Five times Country Joe asked the question, and five times the crowd sent its response rumbling back across the field. A young man seated a couple hundred yards from the stage, headed into his sophomore year at the University of Notre Dame, felt his ears pound with each word, as the exhalation of almost half a million rock music fans moved the air and carried the obscenity over the hills of Sullivan County. Those gathered for The Woodstock Music and Art Fair had something to say, and they wanted the world to know it.

"Well, come on, all you big strong men. Uncle Sam needs your help again. He's got himself in a terrible jam, way down yonder in Viet Nam."

The crowd sang along with Country Joe, quietly at first, then louder and louder.

"Put down your books and pick up a gun. We're gonna have a whole lotta fun. And it's one, two, three, what are we fighting for? Don't ask me, I don't give a damn. The next stop is Viet Nam. And it's five, six, seven, open up the pearly gates. Well, there ain't no time to wonder why. Whoopee, we're all gonna die!"

"This is a 45-minute tour."

The 15 or so people gathered in the lobby of Bethel Woods today have no idea this is a running joke among the center's docents. In fact, most of the group didn't even know docent tours were available when they arrived at the site of the infamous Woodstock in sleepy Bethel. They may have expected a self-guided trip through a world of tie-dye, hippies and rock 'n' roll,

but they decide to stick around when the woman selling tickets mentions a tour will be starting in a few minutes.

So here they stand, facing a 10-by-20-foot photograph pasted on the back wall that depicts thousands of people watching a sunrise. And as their guide starts his spiel by announcing how much time they can expect to spend wandering through the 1960s, two volunteers near the entrance exchange glances and snicker. For the group is standing in front of Jim Shelley '72, and Shelley's tours never last just 45 minutes.

"When I was here back in 1969, 50 years ago . . ." Shelley begins, his voice trailing off as he sits down on a bench, feigning surprise. The group laughs. "Fifty years ago — how can that be?"

He is wearing the typical tour-guide getup you would expect to find in a typical museum: khaki pants and a blue polo shirt. But the black Converse sneakers and beat-to-hell leather bag covered in Woodstock stickers tell you this afternoon might not be typical.

The Bethel Woods Center for the Arts does not bill itself as a Woodstock museum but as a cultural center and concert venue. The building, set back from the top of the festival hillside, houses an event space, a conservatory for arts programs and a main exhibit that places Woodstock within the context of the 1960s. In the summer of 2019, musicians ranging from Sha Na Na to Nelly are playing in the 15,000-seat amphitheater.

Shelley began volunteering at the center eight years ago, becoming a docent in 2014. Before that, no one ever asked

him about Woodstock — about his favorite performance that summer, whether the festival changed his life or if it really closed down the New York State Thruway. No one asked to hear his story.

But now, at Bethel Woods, people ask. So for the next “45 minutes,” Shelley will talk about the rise of a youth counterculture in the 1960s. He will, for the benefit of visitors with children present, come up with a surprising number of innovative euphemisms to describe the decade’s drug culture. He will pull a wireless speaker out of his bag so guests can hear Jimi Hendrix and Bob Dylan. And he will share anecdotes from his two days at the world’s most famous music festival, including the moment he snapped a photo just before Jefferson Airplane took the stage at sunrise, and how 50 years later it wound up on a museum wall.

“I ran all the way home just to say I’m sorry. What can I say? I ran all the way, yay, yay, yay.”

Shelley was born in 1950 in Cliffside Park, New Jersey, across the Hudson River from Harlem, to parents who were also born in Cliffside Park. But his story really doesn’t begin until he was 9 years old, and it begins with a “yay, yay, yay.” “Sorry (I Ran All the Way Home)” by The Impalas was the first single Shelley ever bought, and from then on, buying music was how he spent his childhood Friday nights — picking up his money from a paper route and stopping at the local record store or Woolworth’s on the way home.



BRIAN BLOOM

His father was what was known as a subway alumnus — he didn’t actually attend Notre Dame but became a fan when the football team played Army at Yankee Stadium in the 1930s and ’40s. When Jim was 10, his older brother, Patrick ’64, ’65M.A., went off to Notre Dame,

Like Shelley (below, leading one of his tours) and his friend, Tony Tufano, the young people came for the music and stayed for the tribal experience that became a symbol of their generation, freedom and peace.



JIM SHELLEY '72

so when the time came for Jim to pick a college, he said to himself, “Well, that’s where you apply, I guess.”

He thought he wanted to be an aerospace engineer, so during his first semester he took 21 credits, including courses in calculus, chemistry and engineering. He was in ROTC for about 10 minutes, joined the college radio station and eventually served as a manager for a few athletic teams. He spent way too much time playing with his Spirograph. And by December, his GPA was 1.95.

“I was kind of ostrichlike that first semester,” says Shelley. “I stuck my head underground and made believe I wasn’t having any issues. ‘If I don’t think about it, it will go away.’” He got so far behind in calculus, it became a foreign language to him, with chemistry and engineering headed in that direction, too.

But he did well in philosophy. He had an A in English, and he loved to write.

“I had ability, I just had to focus it in where my skills would be,” he says.

That opportunity came thanks to an Intro to Sociology course he took as an elective during his second semester.

“Growing up, I always had the sense I didn’t quite know what was going on,” he says. “When I was 11 years old, I thought somebody had this book with all the answers and somebody was going to give me that book. And until then, I didn’t know shit. But sociology said, ‘This is how things work, this is why things are the way they are.’ I loved that. And I succeeded in it, which was very fortunate.”

Shelley changed his major his sophomore year, and it was around that time that he took a job at The Huddle. He came home smelling like a grill, and the singles on the jukebox played over and over in his head while he tried to sleep, including a song by Gordon Lightfoot that still takes him back to his burger-flipping days. (His reaction this year when Bethel Woods announced two nights of Lightfoot? “I’m not going.”)

The important thing was that he got paid. “The need for money was always something I was aware of,” Shelley says. “My parents would send me some cash occasionally, but it wasn’t a regular thing. And I needed money to buy records.”

Shelley could buy records from the bookstore but had to rely on his friends to play them — his parents wouldn’t let him bring his portable record player to school because they didn’t want him to get distracted. He found other ways to do that, like wandering the tunnels beneath Flanner Hall, but not all distractions were bad. He frequented Notre Dame’s movie and music series, which often included art and foreign films. After Woodstock, the Midwest Blues Festivals that Notre Dame hosted would help him hear how the British rock groups he loved so much, like The Rolling Stones and The Beatles, were actually playing American music that had traveled to Great Britain and come back to the United States. By that time, he’d drunk all the Beatle juice he could. “If The Beatles played it, it was good,” he says. “Period.”

But even as Beatlemania hit in 1964, music in the U.S. had begun to change — a sign of something percolating in American society.

“But first, are you experienced? Have you ever been experienced? Well, I have.”

It wasn’t only the lyrics that were different. The sound was raw. Harder and heavier. When Jimi Hendrix and his band released *Are You Experienced* in 1967, the album not only showcased Hendrix’s creative guitar playing but combined R&B, blues, pop and rock in a way no one had before.

“When you first hear Jimi Hendrix, your reaction is, ‘What is that?’” Shelley says. “He was not the first one to play rock ‘n’ roll. But no one had ever played it like *that*. It was a whole shift in music.”

That shift took place alongside the music industry’s step away from AM radio and singles. Some teenagers, including Shelley, began listening to albums. In 1967, when the Federal Communications Commission forced radio stations to stop simulcasting all of their AM radio content on FM stations, some began experimenting with this album-oriented rock music. One example was New York City’s WNEW-FM, which Shelley listened to from Cliffside Park.

“All of a sudden, I’m hearing my music,” he says. “And here’s more of it I don’t know about yet! I was fortunate enough to be in an area where that type of music was available to me, and where the DJs

not only talked about the music, but about the issues behind it.”

In the summer of 1969, the summer of Woodstock, Shelley took a job doing electrical work on construction projects in New York City, laboring alongside the same employees who, a year later, would wrap pipes in American flags and attack 1,000 high school and college war protesters. The entire decade was tumultuous, and not just because of the Vietnam War. Beyond the students burning draft cards were race riots and political assassinations that added to the tumult, and the divide was growing between the conservative values of older generations and the new youth culture that was questioning the world around it.

The problems of the 1960s greatly influenced American music. Motown and R&B grew in popularity as the civil rights movement brought more black artists like Aretha Franklin and Smokey Robinson to mainstream airwaves — and to the ears of suburban white kids like Shelley. Meanwhile, rock ‘n’ roll increasingly reflected the shift from traditional values toward personal freedom and sexual license, spawning subgenres like psychedelic and hard rock. The reverse was also true: American music added to the tensions, as musicians like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez sang about social injustices for a younger generation that was joining the protest.

By the time music producers Michael Lang and Artie Kornfeld set out to create a three-day concert that would fund a recording studio in Woodstock, New York

(an idea that came to them at 2 a.m. after a game of bumper pool and a few joints), the rift in American society was large enough to spark immediate controversy around the festival. From Saugerties to Walkkill to White Lake, when New Yorkers heard who was coming, they wanted no part of the event and booted the organizers out.

“We don’t want *them* here,” says Shelley. “That was the feeling for a lot of the local people.”

Three weeks before the festival, dairy farmer Max Yasgur offered one of his fields in Bethel. Shelley heard about Woodstock while he was home for the summer, and the lineup — Richie Havens, Ravi Shankar, Baez, the Grateful Dead, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Janis Joplin, The Who and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young were among the headliners — was too good to pass up.

So Shelley and his high school friend Tony Tufano headed over to Village Oldies to buy tickets for Saturday and Sunday, at \$7 a show. They were two of about 150,000 people who purchased tickets for the event — but more than twice that number would make their way to Bethel.

“The New York State Thruway is closed, man.”

It wasn’t. But Arlo Guthrie was having, as Shelley says during our tour, a rather “enhanced” evening.

Somehow during the afternoon of the festival’s opening day, Friday, August 15, word got around that New York State Route 17B, which spans Sullivan County and intersects with the Thruway at its

eastern end, was shut down. This much was true: People had begun abandoning their cars and walking the rest of the way to Yasgur's farm. But as the buzz spread throughout the festival in a massive game of Telephone, 17B became the New York State Thruway.

So, in the middle of his set, before launching into a cover of Dylan's "Walkin' Down the Line," Guthrie made the announcement.

"Man, there's supposed to be a million and a half people here by tonight. Can you dig that? The New York State Thruway is closed, man. Lot of freaks."

Shelley knows the Thruway wasn't closed because he was on it. But he says the statement, although false, was symbolic.

"At the time, there was a strong sense among many people, me included, that there's them and there's us," he says. "They don't much like us. They don't like our music. They don't like the way we



Traffic was so backed up on State Route 17B that the two-lane became a parking lot.

dress. They don't like the fact that we're against the war. So anything we could do to them was cool. The idea that we could have closed a major highway — then, ha! We showed them."

When Shelley and Tufano heard about the traffic heading into Bethel, they decided to drive the hour and 45 minutes that night in Tufano's recently retransmissioned Oldsmobile. As they reached the parking lot that was 17B, the transmission began to slip, and Tufano stopped in front of a closed restaurant. Some people in the cars around them said the festival was cancelled. Others said it was still on.

Shelley turned to his friend. "What do you want to do, Tony?"

Tufano, the high school valedictorian, decided the best thing to do was take a nap in the car, then abandon it to walk to

the festival at dawn.

At 6 a.m., Shelley grabbed his sleeping bag, a borrowed camera with one roll of film, a pair of binoculars and some food money, and then he and Tufano hiked the remaining seven and a half miles to Woodstock. Their destination was a muddy field that smelled of wet hay and pot. There were no ticket-takers, and they saw no phones or food stands, but there was Country Joe, who took the stage soon after they found an open spot a couple hundred yards away.

"What's that spell?"

"F—K!"

"If you're in a classroom and someone does that, it's scandalous," Shelley says. "But if you're with 500,000 people at a concert and you do that, afterwards, you turn to Tony and say, 'This is going to be cool.'"

It was. Because they were listening to music, and it was *their* music. Santana's "Soul Sacrifice" earned a standing ovation. During Canned Heat's performance of "A Change Is Gonna Come," a fan climbed on stage. Instead of kicking him off, singer Bob Hite shared a cigarette with him. The Who played all of *Tommy* at 5 a.m. on Sunday, then added a seven-minute version of "My Generation" and "The Naked Eye," which ended with Pete Townshend smashing his guitar. Shelley stood through the entire set. He danced to Sly and the Family Stone. He yelled at two guys who stepped on a sleeping Tufano. And the vision Shelley will take to the grave is Jefferson Airplane's "Plastic Fantastic Lover," which accompanied Sunday's sunrise. He snapped a photo right before the band walked out on the stage — it was the first time he had stayed up all night.

Joe Cocker's "With a Little Help from My Friends" brought the rain on Sunday afternoon, and it was then that Shelley, Tufano and the majority of the crowd decided to head out. When Hendrix took the stage early Monday morning and played his now-famous version of "The Star-Spangled Banner," maybe 30,000 people remained.

"That's why I tell people on my tours to look for hippies in the photos," says Shelley. "You'll only find a few. Hippies would have stayed until Monday, because what else did they have to do? But most people had to go to work or school or return their parents' car."

For reasons unbeknownst to Shelley, the way back was clear. He and Tufano hitched a ride to the Oldsmobile on the roof of another car. Thankfully, the Oldsmobile started. When they returned to Cliffside Park, Shelley's parents yelled at him for getting the sleeping bag dirty and told him to wash it himself. He went to the laundromat, grinned at the "Stop the Draft" graffiti sprayed on a wall, and looked forward to listening to his new eight track of Creedence's "Green River."

"The important thing that you've proven to the world is that half a million . . . young people can get together and have three days of fun and music and have nothing but fun and music. And . . . God bless you for it!"

Woodstock was not organized as a political event, but it made a statement. By the time Max Yasgur blessed the crowd on Sunday, the world had heard that 400,000 people had gathered on a muddy field, with little to no food, water or security, and kept the peace. If that was possible, anything was.

For Shelley, Woodstock was a life-affirming event. "Back home, you had your small group of friends who liked this music or who felt this way about the world," he says. "But generally speaking, you didn't feel there were that many of you. So it was a very secure kind of feeling to know there were a lot of us out there."

It was life-affirming, but Shelley had other things to focus on, like bringing up his grades. He returned to Notre Dame for his sophomore year. He and his high school sweetheart, Joyce, were married in December 1971, and they moved back to Cliffside Park the following May so Shelley could begin a graduate program in psychology at Fairleigh Dickinson University. In January 1973, their first son was born, and by April 1985, they'd had their sixth child. Shelley worked as a teacher for 17 years before becoming a guidance counselor and, later, a school administrator.

For years, Woodstock was a distant memory, until the couple purchased a vacation home in eastern Pennsylvania 25 minutes from Bethel, and Shelley passed through the little town once again. Not long before the museum opened at Bethel



BRIAN BLOOM

Shelley in the Bethel, New York, field that Max Yasgur once opened to the raucous music festival known as Woodstock.

Woods in 2008, he showed the director his photographs, one of which stood outside the entrance for 11 years.

Shelley began volunteering in 2011, and at first, he couldn't understand how Woodstock had become so much more than a baby boomer event meaningful only to baby boomers. But one day, he had a conversation with a young German couple whose parents had been living in East Berlin under communist rule when they heard about Woodstock.

"It represented so much to them," says Shelley. "And not because of the music, but because of this thing that happened that never in a million years could happen in East Germany. They thought, 'Maybe someday we'll be as free as that?'"

It then dawned on him what Woodstock was — no mere music event, but a symbol of freedom and peace. It's a symbol Shelley says is still much-needed in 2019.

"Unfortunately, the reality of today

mirrors 1969," he says. "The things people were hoping would change 50 years ago, many people are still hoping would change. Another docent talks about this on his tour. He says, 'we've gotten through a civil war, we got through the 1960s, and we're going to get through this.' It's just easier said than done when you're in the middle of it."

Shelley works hard to spread the festival's message, and by now his Woodstock reputation has reached beyond Bethel Woods. Leading up to the 50th anniversary, he has been asked for his photographs and interviewed for books. He Skyped with group of students from France who wanted his input for a commemorative event. He gave a talk at his hometown library. He also has a website where he shares his Woodstock experience and puts the activism of the era in context with what preceded it — and what has followed it. One day, a guest called him

a "Woodstock Whisperer."

And here we are.

"This was supposed to be a 45-minute tour," Shelley says more than an hour after he marveled at where those 50 years have gone. "So if anyone asks, it was 45 minutes."

No one ever asks about that, but plenty of people seem willing to help Shelley get away with his lie. Some hang around for another 15 minutes to see photos on his iPad, to take a closer look at his festival tickets or to ask the Woodstock Whisperer more questions about the festival.

"I've started to realize how truly interested these people are in the '60s," he says. "I always thank people for visiting the center and asking questions. Because up until I started doing this, nobody was interested in the story. I didn't even think I had one. But it turned out I did. It's a story that fits into a bigger one. And whatever part of that I can be, that's good." □