

# Back to the land:



Director/Cinematographer Chuck Levey (center) with fellow shooters David Sperling (left) and Peter Mullett (right).

PHOTO: STEVE GARFINKEL

## Woodstock cinematographer returns for a filmic look back

**W**oodstock: Three Days of Peace and Music has been called the greatest documentary film ever made. According to Warner Bros., it is the highest-grossing documentary of all time. Winner of the 1971 Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary, *Woodstock* brought spectacle and a grand scale to the documentary form. As a concert film, the collection of talent remains unequaled. And as historical chronicle, it quickly became emblematic of an era and a generation of Americans. In a review of the recent release of the director's cut of the film, critic Roger Ebert said, "What other generation has so completely captured its youth on film, for better and worse, than the Woodstock Nation?"

Almost 30 years later, a smaller group of filmmakers set out to document a commemorative concert on the same site called *A Day in the Garden*, named for a line in the Joni Mitchell song *Woodstock*.

**"There were a total of 12 cameras, with six or seven guys shooting at any given time"**

One filmmaker, Chuck Levey, was involved in both productions, giving him a unique perspective on the evolution of filmmaking technology in the intervening years.

### 1969

Michael Wadleigh and his Paradigm Films partner John Binder had been exploring various high-impact film techniques while making civil rights films and diverse clips for Merv Griffin television specials. Early on, they were mixing rock and roll with the political, intercutting Ray Charles and James Brown with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. They knew they had something special on their hands. Many of the elements that would set *Woodstock* apart as a visual experience — multiple images on the screen, high quality audio, and freely moving, handheld cameras — were discovered and refined on these projects. According to Wadleigh, these earlier films were one key to his

winning the *Woodstock* job. The other was his willingness to put up his life savings.

The filmmakers decided on 16mm blown up to 70mm. 35mm had been rejected as too expensive and bulky. Eclair NPR 16mm cameras, the state-of-the-art 16mm camera in 1969, gave them the portability to capture the spontaneity and energy of the event. "That portability would really impact content," says Wadleigh. "The eventual dimensions of the film were obviously important to us, but in selecting 16mm, we chose the instrument that was appropriate to catch what was happening."

The blowup would set *Woodstock* apart. "The other concert documentaries and music films out at that time had been flops financially," Wadleigh recalls, pointing out *Monterey Pop*, *Don't Look Back* and several Beatles films. "We had this idea that a big, World's Fair-style enveloping experience was the proper approach. We wanted the audience to



PHOTO: MICHAEL CASALIA

feel like they were taken there.”

A custom-built Technicolor lens would provide single-generation, liquid gate blowups, with opticals done simultaneously. The lens was simply aimed at various parts of the 65mm frame to produce the trademark multiple images now so familiar to anyone who has seen the film. Careful editing was facilitated by the use of the first Kem editing machines in the United States and eight Graflex projectors, equipped with zoom lenses, which could be synced by plugging them into one junction box. Wadleigh and co-editor Thelma Schoonmaker, who would go on to become Martin Scorsese's permanent editor, planned the opticals and laid out grids for the entire film, and then oversaw the lab work at Technicolor.

The 70mm projection prints afforded six channel stereo sound, as opposed to the more common optical soundtracks that limited previous concert films. The result was a stunning theatrical experience that had people dancing in the aisles at theaters across the country. “We knew we wanted the six track sound from the beginning,” says Wadleigh. “That was a huge advantage. You could just blow people out of the theater.”

Cameraman Chuck Levey, who had studied painting at Rhode Island

▲ Award-winning cinematographer David Sperling.

“... the film would grow to include other subjects: the evolution of filmmaking technology as exemplified by the two productions”

\*Eastman Ektachrome Commercial 7255 (EI25) process ECO-1 was introduced in 1958. It was replaced in 1970 by Ektachrome Commercial 7252 which in turn was discontinued in 1986.

School of Design, knew Wadleigh and had worked with him on several projects, including an Aretha Franklin concert filmed in Providence, Rhode Island. A self-described, 28-year-old hippie at the time, Levey was making a living in filmmaking “outside of the mainstream”, and he was already holding tickets when he got the call to help document the massive festival. Little did he know that 30 years later he would return to the site to direct and help photograph a sequel of sorts.

The production itself was a Herculean undertaking. Eventually 120 miles (633,600 feet or 193,122 meters) of footage were exposed. “It was certainly much more of a struggle back then, to shoot on the run like that,” Levey recalls.

“There were a total of 12 cameras, with six or seven guys shooting at any given time. We had AC-powered Eclair NPR cameras, plugged into 60 cycle AC. A 60 cycle tone was on one of the eight tracks of the music recording.

“To help in lining up picture and sound in post, I tried to get a shot of my watch at the head of each roll shot on stage. Needless to say, it rarely happened. As each camera roll went on the camera, the assistant wrote the time of day and the performer, as well as the cameraman's name, roll number, etc., on the tape that was wrapped around the magazine (and eventually the film can).”

The plan was simple. Wadleigh had assigned the cameramen only rough zones in which to shoot. “That was his only direction,” says Levey. “‘Ride it out. Let it rip.’”

When the rains came and the performances were temporarily halted, Levey ventured out in the mass of humanity with his camera, now with a battery-powered motor. The motors in the cameras were interchangeable, with a synch generator built in and a synch cable connected to a Nagra. This footage of the revelers would be crucial to the success of the film as an historical document. “Being on the stage was a lot of fun,” he recalls. “But as a documentary cameraman, I was most comfortable ‘out there.’”

Most of the time, Levey and the other cinematographers loaded their cameras with Ektachrome Commercial 7255\* film, rated at an EI of 25 in tungsten light. “During the day I had an 85 filter on most of the time,” Levey continues. “That left me with an ASA of 16. We were often pushing the film a stop already [at night] and, remember, this was destined for blowup to 70mm. But it was a pretty fine grain film, and even though it was blown up, with the multiple images on screen, one image is rarely filling the whole frame.”

Wadleigh agrees. “Without question, without Kodak, there wouldn't be a Woodstock movie,” he says. “That ECO stock was the beginning, middle and end of it. If we hadn't had that image on that material, we could never have done the 70mm blowup. Kodak was very honest with us at the time, and they were so helpful in working through the problems and selecting the proper print stock. They and Technicolor were invaluable.”

## 1998

When Kodak's Steve Garfinkel heard about a 1998 reprise of *Three Days of Peace and Music*, a new music festival on the old site in upstate New York to be called *A Day in the Garden*, he decided it was important. The concert was to be performed by newer pop acts as well as several original Woodstock performers, including Pete Townshend and Alvin Lee. Garfinkel contacted Peter Abel, President of Abel CineTech, a friend and fellow documentary aficionado. By coincidence, Garfinkel had recently met Levey. A trip to the festival site ensued, along with another coincidence: upon their arrival at Yasgur's Farm they encountered the new festival's organizers, who informed them that no arrangements had been made for the filming of the fast-approaching event.

Time went by, and the project began to snowball. Eventually the film would grow to include other subjects: the evolution of filmmaking technology as exemplified by the two productions, interview footage with participants and local characters, and the impact of the event and the generation it came to symbolize.

Levey would act as director/cameraman. More talent was drawn to the project, including line producer Richard Dooley, production coordinator Mary Cesar, and her assistant, Amy Baker. Award-winning cinematographer David Sperling and

Baltimore-based filmmaker Peter Mullett joined up, along with sound recordist J.T. Tagaki. Garfinkel acted as producer and fourth cinematographer. Vicki Kasala would be still photographer, with additional stills being shot by the legendary Elliott Landy, the official Woodstock photographer in 1969, and Chester Whitlock, a freelance concert-shooter. Peter Abel and Abel CineTech would bring more than a million dollars worth of equipment to the production.

According to Levey, there were similarities in the approaches to filming Woodstock and *A Day in the Garden*. But the newly-assembled crew worked with the benefit of 30 years of advances in production and postproduction technology.

"The difference between the reversal stocks that we had back in 1969 and the Vision films that we have today is more like a revolution," says Levey. "The latitude, sharpness, fine grain, blacks that are black that you can still see into. We used both Vision 200T and Vision 250D, and I doubt that anyone could tell them apart."

Some 75,000 feet (22,860 meters) were shot that week, with laboratory developing and selected roll printing done at Colorlab of Rockville, Maryland. Postproduction telecine and editing was done at SMA Video, in New York City.

"In 1969, we shot the performance material using AC power in order to stay in sync. It was clumsy. There were cables. The motors were heavy

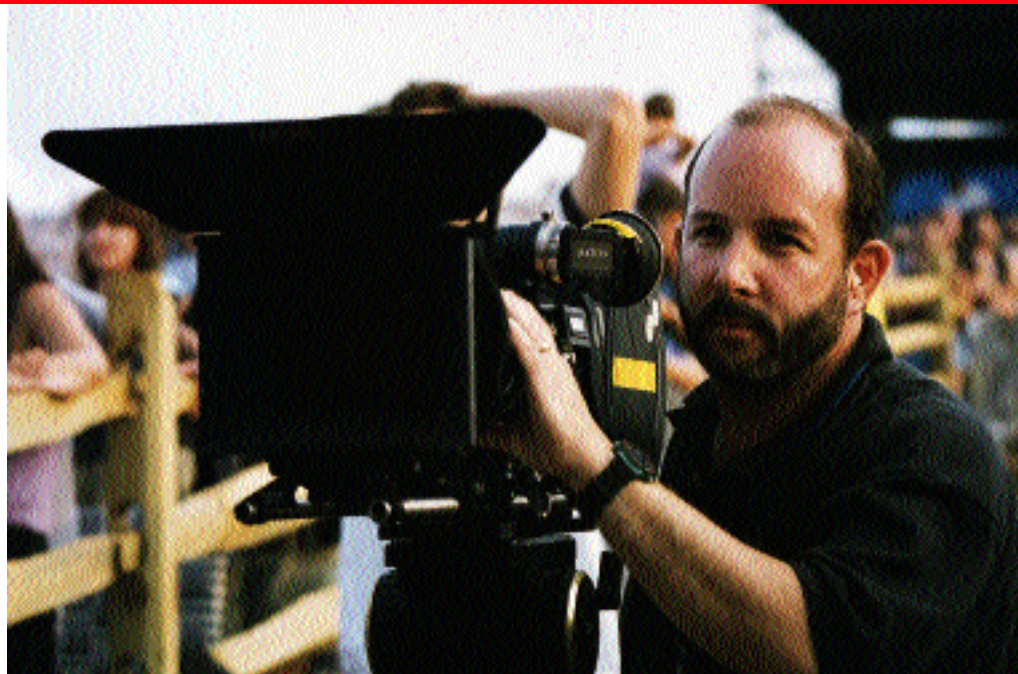


PHOTO: HOWAN VINDLEY

▲ *Steve Garfinkel films legendary rocker Pete Townshend.*

and became very hot. In the rain we kept getting shocked. And don't forget our primitive 'get a shot of your wristwatch' attempts at time code.

"In 1998, with AatonCode, we could just turn on the camera and shoot," says Levey. "Syncing is automatic with the Aaton InDaw system. And the 800-foot (244 meter) magazines are much more convenient. You didn't have to think about running out of film. If you think of a song being five minutes long, you can get four of them on an 800-foot-roll. They are a few pounds heavier but they are balanced so well with the camera that the extra weight doesn't matter."

Each camera was synchronized by way of an Aaton "Origin C" master clock. The same code was fed to the 48-track sound truck, stereo DAT recorder and the "smart-slates". The Aaton cameras "burn-in" man and machine-readable code along the perforation edge of the film, making syncing virtually automatic.

The final link in the film sound system is Aaton's InDaw computer. The InDaw allowed the filmmakers to automatically post-sync audio instantly. Using a Jaz drive, Garfinkel fed the 21 hours of recorded concert material from DAT to Jaz cartridges, which are high-capacity removable hard drives. This rendered all the audio random-access instantly available.

With a laugh, Levey compares the new syncing technologies to those of the original film. "We were glad when it came to the footage of The Who, because Pete Townshend's trademark windmill guitar technique made syncing that passage a little easier," he recalls.

## Epilogue

Over the years Levey has garnered nine Emmy nominations and four Emmy Awards. He has remained loyal to the documentary form and to film. "I never fell in love with video like I did film," he says. "Film is a completely different medium. I've shot plenty of videotape, and I feel that film is still the better way. Clearly, in the long run, it lasts longer. If *Woodstock* had been shot on video — which was impossible at the time — we wouldn't have it today. When things go widescreen, what form is the videotape going to take? On the other hand, with film, it doesn't really matter. You'll have the quality images no matter what.

"Technological advancements have made the cinematographer's job a lot easier since the old days," he says. "The job got done in 1969, but with much more difficulty. Having done it both ways, I'll take easier."

## Production team

### A Day in the Garden

Producer/	Steve Garfinkel
Cinematographer	Richard Dooley
Line Producer	Mary Cesar
Production Coordinator	Mary Cesar
Production Coordinator	Amy Baker
Assistant	Chuck Levey
Director/Cameraman	David Sperling,
Cinematographers	Peter Mullett
	J.T. Tagaki
Sound Recordist	Vicki Kasala,
Still Photographers	Elliott Landy,
	Chester Whitlock



PHOTO: STEVE GARFINKEL

Two generations of "Woodstockers."

Each camera was synchronized by way of an Aaton 'Origin C' master clock. The same code was fed to the 48-track sound truck, stereo DAT recorder and the 'smart-slates'