

Taking Woodstock: A True Story of a Riot, a Concert, and a Life

Elliot Tiber

Tom Monte

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When in 1969 the promoters of the Woodstock Festival in Upstate New York lost their preferred site for a concert Elliot Tiber helped them relocate to Max Yasgur's cow pasture. The festival totally changed his life. Born in 1935 to immigrant Jews Tiber was an artist commuting between New York City and the depressed town of Bethel in the Catskills where his parents owned a rundown motel.

Much of the first half of this gleefully candid and often hilarious memoir chronicles Tiber's unhappy '50s boyhood and the discovery of his gay sexuality. Despite the cameo appearances of famous writers artists actors and musicians—Truman Capote Tennessee Williams Marlon Brando Richie Havens and his impossible maddening mother who never tires of relating how she escaped the Czar's soldiers through the snows of Minsk—Tiber is clearly the star of the book.

When the narrative closes in on the event itself the miracle of the promoters' money and influence transforms (and twists) the lives of the Tiber family in unimaginable ways: "Woodstock was like some kind of UFO that had landed and released armies of the sexually liberated in the very uptight town of Bethel. I had been suffocating in the closet for fourteen years. Now Mike Lang had thrown open the closet door and let me loose in a wild party of sex drugs and rock 'n' roll."

Taking Woodstock is the story of a middle-aged gay man challenging bigotry intolerance and the rural peace of Upstate New York residents for the legal rights to sing dance and make love not war. Tiber's success created a kind of bonfire on which the excesses of the era would burn for years but the music and the lyrics sparked a universal brotherhood of youth that occasionally still flairs up today often in unlikely places like the Velvet Revolution in Prague. Meanwhile the remote Catskill region economically and spiritually revived and Tiber found himself at one with himself his father the world. His mother bless her soul holds out against the sentimentality: "I hope you don't mention my name in your book' she said. '... I hated all those kids with their dirty sex and drugs—kids who should be home with their mothers. ... I am ashamed of you and Woodstock.'"

BOB BLAISDELL (August 8, 2007)

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