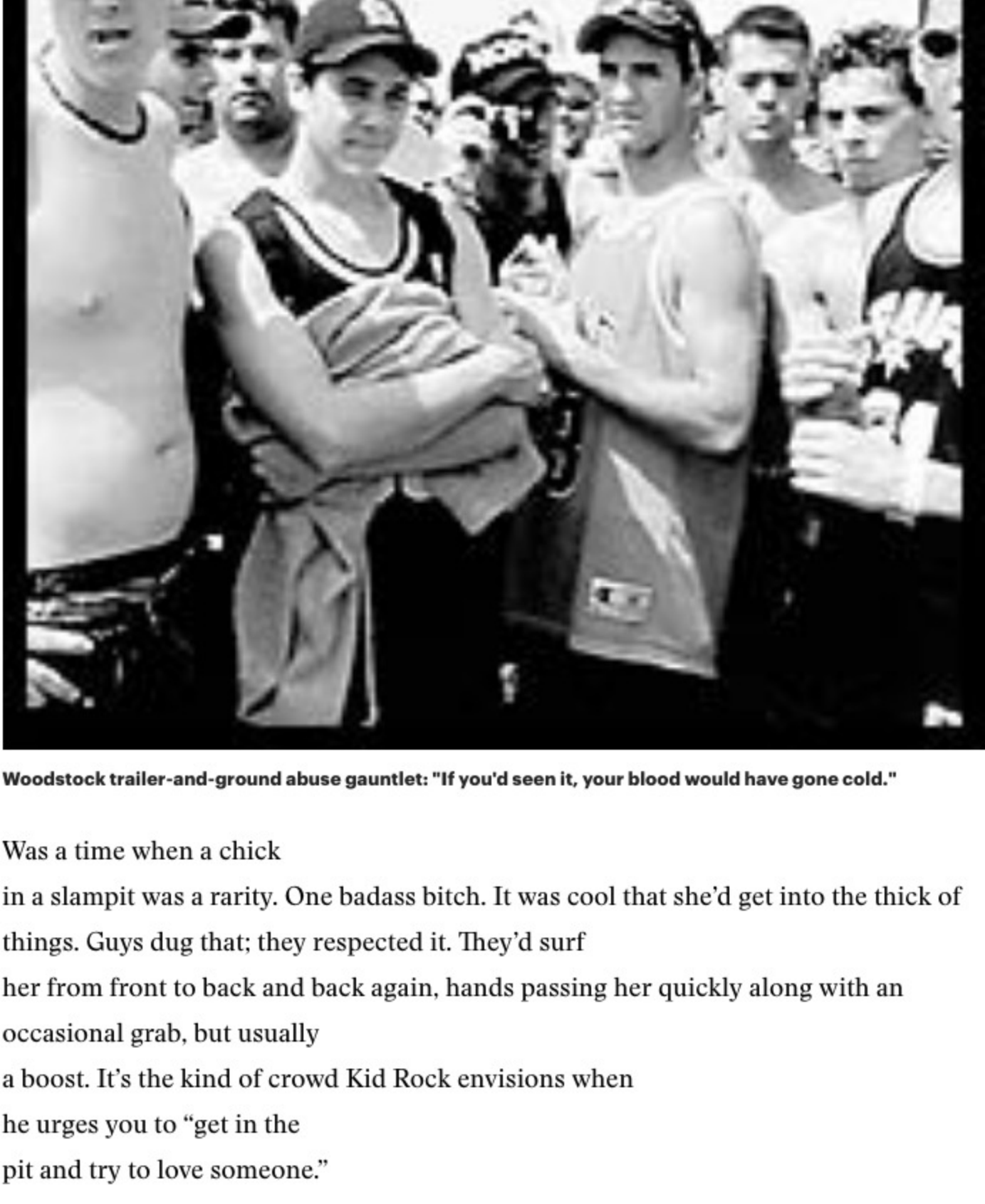


NEWS & POLITICS

# Politics of the Pit

by ROBIN ROTHMAN  
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Woodstock trailer-and-ground abuse gauntlet: "If you'd seen it, your blood would have gone cold."

Was a time when a chick in a slampt was a rarity. One badass bitch. It was cool that she'd get into the thick of things. Guys dug that; they respected it. They'd surf her from front to back and back again, hands passing her quickly along with an occasional grab, but usually a boost. It's the kind of crowd Kid Rock envisions when he urges you to "get in the pit and try to love someone."

But then there was Woodstock '99 (Boobstock, Tittystock, Rapestock), where moshing wasn't just a release of aggression or a reaction to the music, and the pit sure as hell wasn't any place to love someone. It was a breeding ground for a male-dominated mob mentality, where girls with women's bodies riding the crowd weren't equals who could hold their own, but fresh meat to be poked, prodded, and sometimes penetrated. Eight cases of rape and sexual assault, allegedly occurring both in and out of the pit, have been reported to the New York State Police; countless more haven't. Rome City Police indicted a 26-year-old state prison guard for assaulting a 15-year-old in the concert's final hours; however, the violation occurred not on concert grounds but in a nearby gas station, where the girl, a Woodstock attendee, had gone to use the restroom.

State police have made no arrests to date, the *Voice* confirmed last week, and one case has been dropped due to lack of adequate information. Despite optimism expressed by Lieutenant Jamie Mills of the State Police Public Information Office, the outcome doesn't seem promising.

"No perpetrator has been identified, and we have no suspects," says Senior Investigator Dennis Dougherty, who heads one of two departments handling the seven remaining cases. "We haven't received any tips from anyone. We encourage anyone with any information at all to contact us. We'll continue to work any lead until the cases can no longer be prosecuted." That would be a five-year statute of limitations, just long enough for the bastards to come back for more felonious fun at Woodstock 2004.

This isn't fair to the 24-year-old Pittsburgh woman who was assaulted in the pit during the Saturday (July 24) Limp Bizkit set, stripped of her clothes, pulled down from the crowd, raped, then surfed to security. And it's equally unfair to the 20-year-old Buffalo woman who was assaulted in the campgrounds, and whose father posted the following on the Woodstock.com message boards: "Everything was great at Woodstock until the early hours of Monday morning when my daughter got separated from her three girlfriends. A clean cut college looking guy with dirty blonde hair pulled my daughter into a tent and raped her. There were people around and (they) must have heard her screams and the struggle going on inside...." Though responding posts have provided little more than expressions of sympathy and declarations of outrage, the plea did prompt nine men and women to create the Web site and nonprofit organization Fans-Everywhere (fanseverywhere.org). Geared toward collecting information about the Woodstock assaults and raising money to assist in those cases, FansEverywhere is a "confidential platform for people to submit their tips," which the organization then turns over to the state police.

"I've received e-mail from girls 14 years old on up who said that they were fondled or that they had sex with somebody but didn't want to," cofounder and spokesperson Liz Polay says solemnly. "I have e-mails about girls who were surfing the crowd who had men sticking their hands inside them, their fingers inside them." She adds, "I've also gotten e-mails to the effect that 'These girls wanted it. What are you trying to do? These girls were drunk and on drugs, they deserved it.'" Because FansEverywhere continues to receive reports of violations at shows since Woodstock, the organization has since expanded its original scope. "One of our preventative measures," Polay says, "is to educate women and men about how wrong this is."

The National Organization for Women has focused attention on the promoters rather than on fans. Noting that a rapist is responsible for his actions, Galen Sherwin, president of the New York chapter, adds, "You can't look at a rape without looking at the context in which it occurs." NOW has sponsored several protests and petitions against the promoters, but is not (as rumor had it) participating in a lawsuit against them for neglecting to report known assaults to police during the festival. The promoters have released a statement denying the accusations. "I do think that there are grounds for a lawsuit," Sherwin says, "but it's a difficult allegation to prove."

The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network has also taken action. President Scott Berkowitz says they received at least five calls "within hours of the assaults happening." Some have direct relationships to the state police cases. Another kind of call came from promoter John Scher, asking what could be done. "He felt pretty bad about what went on," Berkowitz says. Ultimately, Scher, in conjunction with Hybrid/Epic Records, agreed that RAINN would receive 1 percent of proceeds from *Woodstock 99* CD and video releases; a blurb appears in the liner notes. Scher and Berkowitz also discussed working to include RAINN at future events.

Berkowitz hints that RAINN has approached at least a couple of Woodstock's more aggressive bands about having a presence at their shows; in an earlier interview with *Billboard*, he said he'd welcome a benefit concert by Limp Bizkit. "In raw self-interest, the moneyand attention that would come from it would allow RAINN to promote the hot line better, provide more counseling, print more brochures," he told the *Voice*. "But beyond that, I think it has a value in talking to their fans-for people like that to step up and say, 'Talk is one thing, but you can't step over this line. You can't go out and rape people.'"

Good luck getting Bizkit's Fred Durst to move beyond his third-grade "It's not my fault" phase long enough to do anything proactive, though. Check out MTV's Woodstock retrospective; it's staggering how quickly Durst shifted blame after exiting the stage. Then check out the self-indulgent Durst-directed video for the song "Re-arranged," a visual reiteration that the burning, looting, and violence were-as he said backstage-"not our fault." In a recent *Washington Post* article, Durst says he finds the rape "terrible...demonic...disgusting." He says, as a Southern man, he believes "men should always respect women." So he doesn't hate women-he's just dumb. Admitting that some women might be uncomfortable with the breast baring now common at Bizkit shows, he offers this sage advice: "Try to ignore the things in life that you don't like if at all possible."

But not all musicians can ignore the hostility toward women they've seen. The Offspring's Dexter Holland called attention to the problem before dark on Woodstock's first day: "I see a lot of girls passing overhead and they're getting really fuckin' groped. They ought to be able to do that without getting molested. So if you're a guy and you have a girl passing over you, do me a favor and give her a fuckin' break. And if you're a girl and you have a guy passing over you, do me a favor and grab him by the balls."

"I've found that if you say something with a little humor," he says, "it tends to go over better than if you just beat them over the head with it." Holland recalls "a girl coming over (the barricade), probably about 15 years old. You could see that she was trying to cover her breasts with her arms and fold them up. And you could tell that she was very uncomfortable, because there were about five hands on her arms that were trying to get to her breast.... It just bothered me to where I thought I should say something about it."

Closing the festival two nights later, a fully naked Flea (Red Hot Chili Peppers) made a similar point. "Just because a girl out there wants to feel free and take her shirt off doesn't mean a bunch of ya have to go grabbin' her tits and stuff.... Those tits are a girl's private property and they're a beautiful thing. So ya gotta respect them." Later at the MTV Video Music Awards, the Beastie Boys' Ad-Rock, who didn't perform at Woodstock, encouraged artists to get involved and work with promoters and security to ensure a more female-friendly atmosphere.

But finding solutions is difficult when, mired in a frenzy of finger-pointing or general apathy, you can't identify the real problem. Pick your favorite simple excuse-open sexuality, drug and alcohol intake, absentee security, inept planning, misogynist lyrics, irresponsible stage presence, expensive water, Clinton-Lewinsky, misalignment of the planets, poor parenting. Whatever the cause, all we do know is that some women suffered irreversible trauma. And that some women probably don't even realize they were violated. "How many knew the difference between having a bad time and a crime being committed?" Rob Sheffield wonders. In an article for *Rolling Stone*, Sheffield describes a crowd of men, on top of a trailer and on the ground, repeatedly grabbing girls as they walked by, forcing them to flash their breasts. "I was scared," he says now. "If you'd seen it, your blood would have gone cold. I was watching women be picked up and I was failing to understand why they weren't interested in going to security. I don't know why they saw themselves as not having a right to something better. They didn't pretend to like it. I don't know why they didn't see themselves as worth sticking up for. It was depressing."

Nobody asks, or deserves, to be sexually assaulted. But it's discouraging when a woman chooses to transfer responsibility for her own well-being to a group of strangers without assessing the danger of the environment and considering the consequences. Delusions of "it won't happen to me" are more dangerous now than even five or 10 years ago. Half-naked, overheatened, drunk, and drugged-up, too many women at Woodstock trusted similarly drunk and drugged-up, half-naked, violent idiots with their bodies. It's not fair that we have to think that way, but it's the reality we're working with. "I saw a lot of pit dilettantes who didn't know what they were getting into," Sheffield says. "It was their first time in a pit. It's where people go to kick ass and have their asses kicked. It's not something you dip your toe in and then pull your toe out." But some girls never intended to try the pit; they were physically forced in. Saying women need to know how to handle themselves isn't enough.

Ultimately, the rapist is to blame. Men can be educated that sexual assault in any form isn't acceptable, but these sick fucks are still going to show up at shows. So both genders need to be educated to intervene when they see something. According to *Spin*, Dave Schneider, a Crisis Intervention Unit volunteer, "watched in horror" the rape of one woman and violation of five others by the same group of men during Korn's set: "Since all of the women had made it to the arms of security, he assumed the crimes had been reported." Miles from the site and months after the fact, it's easy to be appalled. How could he do nothing to stop it? One woman who witnessed what she thought might have been a sexual assault asked that the *Voice* not use her name, because if her story did pertain to an open case she didn't want to testify.

Diffusion of responsibility is a psychological fact: The greater the number of people witnessing a crime, the less likely an individual is to act. There's something in all of us that finds it easier to turn away than risk endangering ourselves. Thousands of Woodstock attendees insist they experienced nothing like the sexual abuse they've read about, and in light of all the negative press, it's easy to forget that a majority had a fine time-a weekend of reckless abandon and open sexuality, no holds barred. But there are rules even in *war*, where we measure success by low body counts. "Remember that scene in *Platoon* where Charlie Sheen's yelling at the guys because they're trying to rape the girl?" Dexter Holland asks. "I love that scene because he doesn't care that they're fucked-up; he stands up to them and says, 'Look, she's a fucking human being.'" Is concertgoing a gender war now? Whose job is it to be Sheen? The whole thing's confusing, it's overwhelming, and it's sad.

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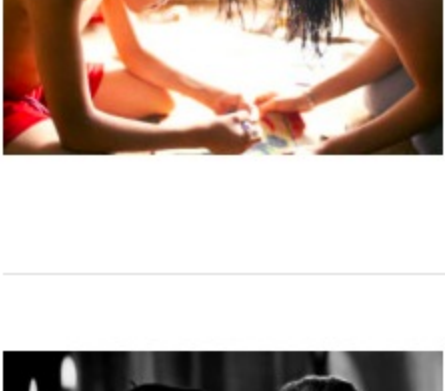
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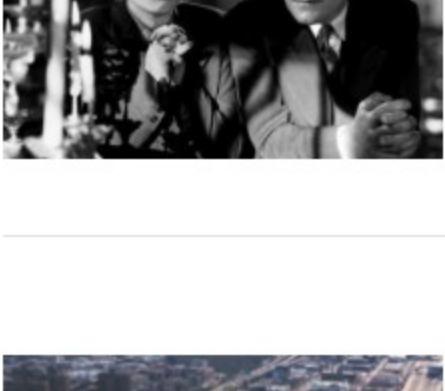
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