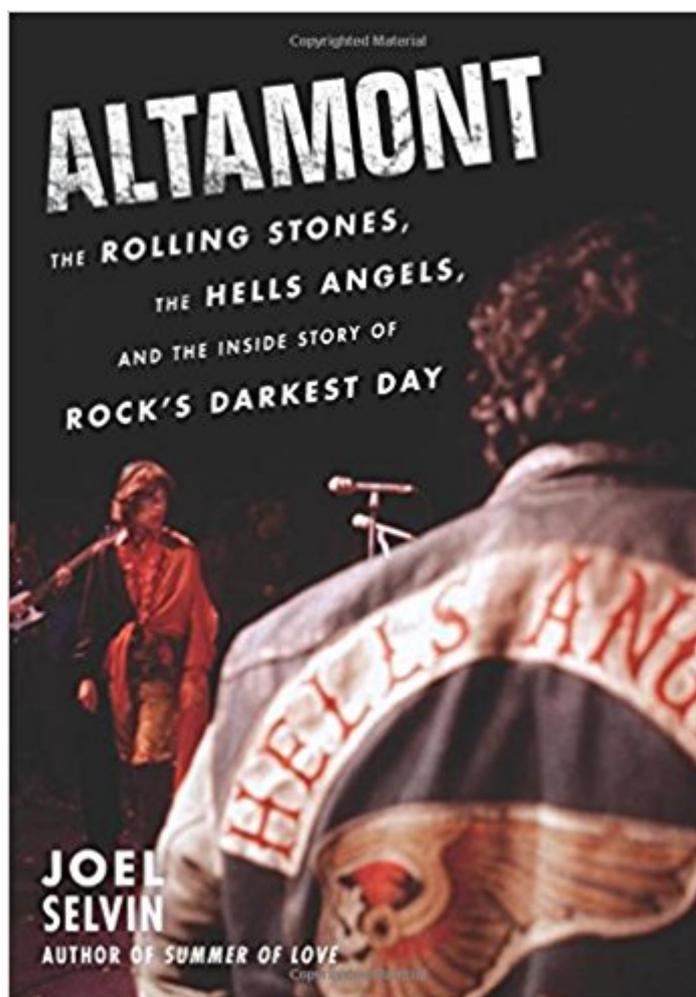


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Altamont: The Rolling Stones, The Hells Angels, And The Inside Story Of Rock's Darkest Day



Synopsis

In this breathtaking cultural history filled with exclusive, never-before-revealed details, celebrated rock journalist Joel Selvin tells the definitive story of the Rolling Stones' infamous Altamont concert in San Francisco, the disastrous historic event that marked the end of the idealistic 1960s. In the annals of rock history, the Altamont Speedway Free Festival on December 6, 1969, has long been seen as the distorted twin of Woodstock "the day that shattered the Sixties' promise of peace and love when a concertgoer was killed by a member of the Hells Angels, the notorious biker club acting as security. While most people know of the events from the film Gimme Shelter, the whole story has remained buried in varied accounts, rumor, and myth "until now. Altamont explores rock's darkest day, a fiasco that began well before the climactic death of Meredith Hunter and continued beyond that infamous December night. Joel Selvin probes every aspect of the show "from the Stones' hastily planned tour preceding the concert to the bad acid that swept through the audience to other deaths that also occurred that evening "to capture the full scope of the tragedy and its aftermath. He also provides an in-depth look at the Grateful Dead's role in the events leading to Altamont, examining the band's behind-the-scenes presence in both arranging the show and hiring the Hells Angels as security. The product of twenty years of exhaustive research and dozens of interviews with many key players, including medical staff, Hells Angels members, the stage crew, and the musicians who were there, and featuring sixteen pages of color photos, Altamont is the ultimate account of the final event in rock's formative and most turbulent decade.

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Customer Reviews

I first saw "Gimme Shelter" in 1982, when I was in high school; the mesmerizing and haunting documentary intrigued me because it clearly left many questions unanswered. The past 30+ years, I have desperately and fruitlessly searched for the missing pieces of the Altamont puzzle (even meeting a supposed Altamont attendee at a 2005 Stones concert didn't help). Thankfully, Joel Selvin decided to fill in the blanks with his book ALTAMONT. I have never been so excited anticipating the release of a book and Selvin certainly delivered the goods. Contrary to the sunny, optimistic hope delivered by the Woodstock Festival four months earlier, the Altamont Festival ("Woodstock West") was dark, scary and dangerous. Simply viewing the films that document both events is all that's needed to understand the stark contrast. While the peaceful glory of Woodstock deservedly gets an abundance of attention (because it was a miracle that will never be replicated), Altamont seems to be steeped in mystery, darkness and misperception. A concert with 300,000 attendees that involved the planet's hottest band, the Hell's Angels, infinite drugs/alcohol and no cops is memorable because a film of it happens to capture a killing. Unfortunately, the film isn't enough to give viewers answers to all the how and why questions it generates. The Stones don't talk about it, most are afraid to ask the Hells Angels about it and the Grateful Dead have sheepishly avoided any connection to it at all. Selvin meticulously puts the Altamont puzzle together in its entirety. He not only finds the missing pieces, he provides context to what we see (and don't see) in the film, clarifies misperceptions/myths and for the first time in almost 50 years, he has provided an all-encompassing account of the event.

I had read a little about the notorious Altamont concert of 1969. Years ago, Guitar World, I believe, had a special issue profiling 1969 as rock's single greatest year and there was an article on Altamont that gave a good overview. When I saw this book, I hoped it would provide a more in-depth portrait and I was not disappointed. Joel Selvin has written a book that has the classic themes of works about disasters. There are the fatal factors that come together alongside profiles of the people who will become part of the tragedy. It starts with Grateful Dead manager Rock Scully trying to sell the Rolling Stones on the idea of being the surprise guests at a free concert in San Francisco. Mick Jagger is shown as a man jealous of Woodstock and hoping for a similar triumph for the Stones. There was a mysterious fellow named Jon Jaymes who gained influence over the band during their American tour. Dick Carter, the owner of Altamont Speedway, offered his financially troubled site when San Francisco and one other location fell through. He thought a rock show would be good publicity; he had no idea what he was getting into. Because of the site

changes, preparation for the concert had to be done in less than two days. Roads became clogged. Bad LSD was circulating through the crowd and minimal medical facilities made matters worse. The Hells Angels were put in charge of stage security. As Selvin notes, a number of them were prospects who wanted to prove themselves worthy of full membership and were overly aggressive. One young man, Meredith Hunter, would die at the hands of an Angel when he pulled a gun. Hunter almost left his gun behind in his vehicle; it's quite a "what if" moment.

The tale of the disastrous, bloody 1969 free concert at the Altamont Speedway in the San Francisco Bay area, a show that climaxed with the stagefront stabbing of a concertgoer by a Hells Angel acting as security at the event, is one that most rock fans probably assume they know very well. After all, anyone who cares about the event, the murder, the music, or the Sixties has no doubt seen "Gimme Shelter," the famous documentary by the Maysles Brothers and Charlotte Zwerin, in which the stabbing death of 18-year-old Meredith Hunter is shown in full frame. But there is so much more to what happened that just what these filmmakers were able to cover in a 90-minute film. And it wasn't as if the bad vibes, fury, and violence that seized the people at Altamont was conjured from thin air by Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, et al. when the Rolling Stones took the stage for the final performance of the day. The seeds were planted by haphazard, too-quick planning; by runaway ego that pitted the Stones against a film distributor regarding the documentary that was meant to climax at Altamont; by a too-many-cooks organizational hierarchy that seemed to lead to no firm sure hand at the controls; by the tainted drugs that had begun to impurify the psychedelic experience; and indeed, by ideological warfare within the counterculture itself. As Joel Selvin's new book on the Altamont tragedy makes clear, if this concert was indeed, as many have said, "The Death of the Sixties," then this was really an act of murder-suicide. Selvin's book is scrupulously researched.

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