
Book Review: *Half a Million Strong: Crowds and Power from Woodstock to Coachella*

Gina Arnold. *Half a Million Strong: Crowds and Power from Woodstock to Coachella*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018. 201 pp.

The outdoor music festival sector has expanded rapidly since the turn of the millennium, both in Europe, where such events have been a constant part of the summer leisure experience since the 1960s, and in the United States, where the sector underwent a period of decline from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s. The academic literature on music festivals has also grown markedly since the early 2000s, with book-length studies, edited collections and journal articles focusing on the history and socio-political importance of festivals (particularly in the United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia), or exploring a range of event management and leisure studies perspectives. Surprisingly, perhaps, the U.S. outdoor festival sector as a whole has been the subject of far less discussion, though individual events, such as the Woodstock Festival of 1969 or Burning Man in Nevada have seen many publications. A comprehensive discussion of the development and meaning of outdoor festivals in the U.S. has yet to be attempted. This makes the publication of Gina Arnold's *Half a Million Strong* a welcome addition to the literature, even if it may fall short on comprehensiveness. Arnold covers storied live events, such as Bob Dylan's 1965 Newport set, the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival, Woodstock 1969, Live Aid, Lollapalooza, and Coachella. She also examines lesser-known events such as Wattstax 1972 (one of the few U.S. festivals to be largely organized, performed and attended by African Americans), the US Festival 1982-83 (organized and funded by Macintosh co-founder Steve Wozniak), and San Francisco's Hardly Strictly Bluegrass (funded by an endowment from the venture capitalist Warren Hellman).

The events that Arnold examines are presented as relatively short vignettes that serve to support her overall theoretical points, while an alternative reading of these events, or of a different selection of events, would have inevitably produced a different outcome. Nonetheless, Arnold's choices allow for an examination of topics that have rarely been considered in the existing festival literature. These include the normalizing of U.S. events (and most likely those in the U.K. and Europe) as male, white spaces and, in the U.S., the role of festivals in bolstering narratives of the American West as idyllic nature and a symbol of freedom—at least freedom for white males (166). Her discussions of race and gender underpin not just the ways that festivals have been culturally positioned in

this way through media representations (magazine articles, films and so on), but how they affect contemporary festival culture by excluding those who are non-white, or normalizing sexist attitudes towards female festivalgoers and performers. Her emphasis on the imagined American West's influence on festival culture is important, as it shows how the meaning of festivals in particular countries can become circumscribed not simply by the actions of organizers and audiences but by their environment, and the pre-existing meanings associated with particular landscapes. Arnold's focus on race is also welcome, as it has often been noted that outdoor rock festivals in the U.S. and Europe are dominated by white audiences (both historically and in the contemporary era), but there has been little attempt to understand why this might be the case. In the American context, she identifies structural economic and cultural issues for city-based African American communities, such as a lack of car ownership (84), a fear of rural areas rooted in histories of prejudice (85), and the valorization of drug use. Drugs are often synonymous with rock, pop and dance music festivals, as "an almost necessary mechanism of psychological and physical liberation" (85), yet, as Arnold notes, "it is no secret that minorities in America incur the legal penalties imposed for drug use far more frequently and treated with far more severity by the law than are white people" (ibid). Her analysis of the success of Wattstax 1972—"the Black Woodstock" (88)—is particularly effective at drawing out these points and showing how an African American audience can be found if the conditions are right—in this case, a single-day event held at the Memorial Coliseum in Los Angeles. I would have liked to have seen more consideration of other race-related issues, like the tensions that arise from festival organizers exploiting indigenous land or attendees appropriating Native forms of dress.

Arnold describes festivals as places where "people feel a sense of community with strangers and where they are able to briefly retrieve what industrial society has taken away: that is, a sense of interpersonal intimacy that's been lost to the internet" (3). Yet this potential benefit of festivals is consistently questioned in the book, since festivals are not simply social occasions but commercial enterprises that offer "only a very well-rendered illusion" of communal unity (7). For Arnold, "each and every rock festival promises salvation, but that's all it is, a promise made to be broken, again and again" (ibid). She concludes by stating that rock festivals are politically ineffective despite their mythologies. Such events "have trained largely white crowds to gather peacefully, but they have trained them in ways that allow them to believe they are effecting change merely by gathering to listen to music" (175). I am drawn to her conceptualization of festival culture as a site of contradiction. Arnold argues that festivals allow attendees to celebrate idyllic nature but recreate urban conditions of waste and overcrowding (36). Festivals are promoted through varying notions of freedom and tolerance, yet the mediation of female bodies further encodes them as male spaces. Arnold traces this to festivals' marketing and media coverage since the late 1960s, when images of female nudity symbolized hippie culture's back-to-nature ethos (108–9) and later morphed into the trope of topless women straddling male concert-goers' shoulders (111). Arnold also links women's objectification to the rise of sexual assault at festivals (120–1). While she observes the creation of alternative female-friendly events in chapter six, she does not offer solutions to address

this problem or recognize the creation of “safe space” campaigns in the U.S. and around the world to raise awareness and promote behavioral change.

Arnold’s professional background as a music journalist informs her writing style. *Half a Million Strong* is eminently readable, though Arnold often makes passing references to academic theories instead of digging deeply into their implications. The title of the book refers to crowds, and there is a fairly sustained focus on the audience throughout the book. But this does not translate into an audience-centric methodology. Indeed, we hear relatively little from festival audiences themselves, since Arnold’s primary research method (though not explicitly stated) appears to be personal observation. The book’s lack of audience analysis is something of a weakness, creating the impression that crowds are being analyzed from the outside in, hence foreclosing a wider range of perspectives. Furthermore, the later chapters (particularly those on rave culture and the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass festival) shift away from the audience to focus on the relationship between technology and capitalism. It would have been interesting to hear more from contemporary festival participants about their experiences and beliefs in order to fully support and develop the various perspectives and ideas that Arnold raises in the book. Nevertheless, *Half a Million Strong* offers a really useful, if necessarily partial, examination of the development of the U.S. outdoor music festival market, with a particular focus on rock music events and their issues. Large-scale rock festivals may, as Arnold states, be a somewhat “old-fashioned entertainment” suffused with nostalgia (168), but they continue to be staged alongside smaller, boutique events that have the potential to change the rhetoric of festival culture in the future. Whether that potential will be realized remains to be seen.

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