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# Woodstock's Forgotten Man

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By JIM FUSILLI

Unless you attended Woodstock, it's unlikely you heard Bert Sommer's set, the best of the festival's first day. None of his 10 songs was included in the official Woodstock albums or in the various versions of Michael Wadleigh's documentary "Woodstock." So forgotten was Mr. Sommer's appearance that his name was omitted from the original plaque placed on the festival site in Bethel, N.Y., to commemorate the event of Aug. 15-17, 1969.

Mr. Sommer is the lost bard of Woodstock. There's bitter irony in that: With his frizzy shock of dark hair, blue eyes, wide smile and dimpled chin, he seemed an embodiment of the ideal hippie youth. The producers of "Hair" thought so. When he joined the cast, they featured his image on the program. Some of Mr. Sommer's gentle lyrics composed prior to Woodstock anticipated what many say is its enduring spirit. "And I've seen where I'd like to be \ It's a place where your mind is free," he sang in "Hold the Light."

At the festival, his rendition of Paul Simon's "America" earned a standing ovation. "It was the perfect song—"We've all gone to look for America," said Mr. Sommer's friend Victor Kahn, who witnessed the set. "Everybody was absolutely, positively sure Bert was going to make it."

### Tune In

Listen to a clip of Bert Sommer's performance at Woodstock:

A self-taught musician raised on Long Island, N.Y., as a teen Mr. Sommer joined the Left Banke following their hit "Walk Away Renee" and wrote songs for the Vagrants, led by guitarist Leslie West. His debut solo album,

"The Road to Travel," was released by Capitol Records, where he was championed by Artie Kornfeld, a vice president at the label.

"Bert seemed to be born knowing how to write," Mr. Kornfeld said. "His music blew me away. I liked his style and his sincerity."

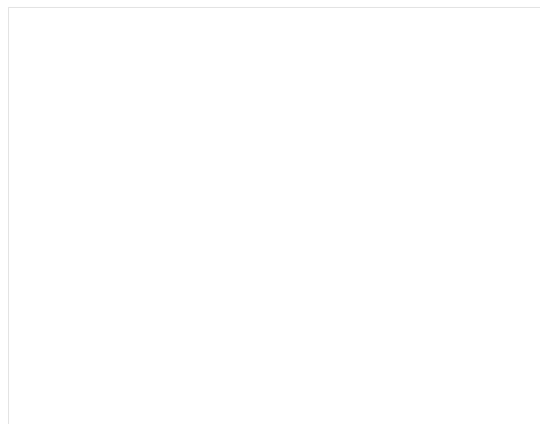
Mr. Kornfeld left Capitol after he and new partner Michael Lang decided to put on a rock festival near Woodstock, N.Y. "I told Bert about it as soon as the idea came up," he said. "Anywhere I was going, he was going."

Mr. Sommer placed an ad in the Village Voice to recruit a band for the Woodstock gig. Ira Stone, who played guitar and keyboards, and bassist Charlie Bilello were hired and the three musicians drove north from New York City for their first show together.

"When it came time to go to the festival, we got stuck in traffic," Mr. Stone recalled. Waiting in a field with Tim Hardin, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and others, Mr. Sommer, then 20 years old, and his band were retrieved by helicopter and transported to the site.

"We came over the hill," Mr. Stone said, "and it was unbelievable. From the air, it looked like a sea of colors."

Following performances by Richie Havens and Sweetwater, the trio went on shortly before sunset. With Mr. Sommer seated cross-legged on the stage wearing a placid expression and a green



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headband, they opened with "Jennifer," the first of six songs they played from his debut disc. "And When It's Over," a tune he'd written for the Vagrants, followed. A rousing yet tender "Jeanette" preceded "America." They closed with "Smile," a new composition. "Smile and the world smiles with you," Mr. Sommer sang. "Smile, all the love is your hands. Smile, 'cause we all need one another . . ."

As Mr. Sommer left the stage to warm applause, the announcer acknowledged him to the crowd. "The rather magnificent Mr. Bert Sommers," he intoned, thus misstating his name as he had when he introduced him some 40 minutes earlier.

Mr. Kahn, then a noted graphic artist to the music industry, found Mr. Sommer in the throng backstage. "He was curious if he'd done well," he said. "You know, Bert was a little bit insecure."

In the days that followed, Mr. Kornfeld and Mr. Lang sold their rights to the festival to their partners in Woodstock Ventures who, in turn, sold the film rights to Warner Bros.—thus cutting off Mr. Kornfeld's influence over whether Mr. Sommer might appear in the planned documentary. When Warner Bros. released "Woodstock" in March 1970, Mr. Sommer wasn't in it. When a Warner's subsidiary issued the three-album set two months later, he wasn't included. Mr. Kornfeld said he was told Mr. Sommer was left off the album because he was signed to Capitol, a competitor.

"It would have been instant stardom for him," said Mr. Kornfeld.

"He was devastated," said Mr. Kahn. "Here was the most famous event in the world and he's not getting any credit for it."

Stung, Mr. Sommer pressed on. His second album, "Inside Bert Sommer," was released. It included his modest hit, "We're All Playing in the Same Band," a song he wrote at Woodstock. He and the band did five nights at the Bitter End in Greenwich Village. They opened for Poco at Carnegie Hall and for Delaney & Bonnie and the Allman Brothers Band at the Capitol Theater in Passaic, N.J.

But while other relative unknowns were enjoying the benefits of having played the festival, thanks to the film or albums—Mr. Havens, Melanie, Santana and Ten Years After, among them—Mr. Sommer faded from the national music scene, his creativity hampered in part by drugs, his kind of folk pop becoming passé. He recorded another album with Mr. Kornfeld and continued his acting career, appearing in 1976 in the children's TV program, "The Krofft Supershow," as a character in a fictional band Kaptain Kool and the Kongs. He cut his final album a year later.

Mr. Sommer settled in Albany, N.Y., where he played in local bands, his voice still strong, according to Mr. Kahn. Health failing, he died in June 1990, 12 days after a final performance in Troy, N.Y., about a two-and-a-half-hour drive north of Bethel. A year earlier, a special edition of Life magazine commemorating the 20th anniversary of the festival included a cropped photo of Mr. Stone and his wife Maxine. As if deemed irrelevant, Mr. Sommer was cut out of the picture.

Mr. Kahn, who still calls Mr. Sommer "his best friend," created a tribute Web site, [www.bertsommer.com](http://www.bertsommer.com). Mr. Sommer's performance of "Jennifer" at the festival is included in D.A. Pennebaker's documentary "Woodstock Diary 1969: Friday Saturday Sunday," available as an import. Three tunes from Mr. Sommer's Woodstock set appear on the six-CD, 77-song package "Woodstock—40 Years On: Back to Yasgur's Farm" (Rhino), which will be available Aug. 18.

When compiling the Rhino set, Andy Zax and Brian Kehew listened to all the music recorded at Woodstock. Mr. Sommer's set, Mr. Zax said, "bowed us over. We were both convinced we were hearing something extraordinary. This is somebody people really need to pay attention to." Mr. Zax is determined to ensure the release of Mr. Sommer's entire Woodstock performance and said an independent label is interested in securing distribution rights.

"Bert didn't get the breaks," Mr. Kahn said. "He knew he was good, but he was sure there was some kind of curse. He was a sensitive guy. I guess it ate at him, but he didn't talk about how he got screwed. He had an enjoyable life."

—Mr. Fusilli is the Journal's rock and pop music critic. Email him at [jfusilli@wsj.com](mailto:jfusilli@wsj.com) or follow him on [Twitter@wsjrock](https://twitter.com/wsjrock)

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