
AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID CLAYTON-THOMAS

David Clayton-Thomas is the Canadian-raised former lead singer of the band Blood, Sweat and Tears. Clayton-Thomas fronted the band during its most successful period in the late sixties and seventies. In 1969 the band's eponymous second album made them the first group to be nominated for ten Grammy awards, including Best Album (besting The Beatles' *Abbey Road*) and Best Song for the Clayton-Thomas-penned "Spinning Wheel." Blood, Sweat and Tears were among the high profile performers asked to play the Woodstock Summer Festival in 1969. NeoAmericanist's Mark Fillipowich caught up with Clayton-Thomas at a Centre for American Studies lecture, "The American Music Scene in the 1960s and 1970s" on September 22, 2009 at the University of Western Ontario.

NeoAmericanist: A lot of outdoor festivals, even back in 1969, were not such a big deal; both Led Zeppelin and the Doors turned down opportunities to play Woodstock because it didn't seem like anything new. Why does Woodstock stand out as *the* outdoor music festival? What made it different from similar events?

DCT: The timing of it. It was 1969, it was virtually the death of the Vietnam War. And the sheer numbers, six hundred thousand people—that's a lot of folks—I don't know any other concert [that had that many]. We [Blood, Sweat and Tears] had a hundred thousand [people] in Atlanta at a big festival that year but just in terms of sheer numbers. Also, coming right on the heels of Kent State; Kent State was an enormous shock on the American metabolism.

Imagine yourself today, imagine if the national guard opened fire on a college campus in Canada or the United States, you know. It shocked the hell out of people. And then just a couple of months later came Woodstock. So it was all related to that event [at Kent State].

NeoAmericanist: There have been attempts at recreating the festival through concerts, through compilation albums, etc., but every attempt has petered out. Why have attempts to recreate Woodstock failed?

DCT: Because something like that is an iconic thing in history. You're not going to recreate it just to make some money, and that's what it's all been about ... this fortieth anniversary thing...I turned down twenty offers to do Woodstock revivals all over North America. And I turned [the offers] down for one very, very good reason: it'll never happen again.

Any attempt to make [Woodstock] happen again is shameless exploitation. And I won't be a part of that.

NeoAmericanist: Have there been any performances or events that have come close to being what Woodstock was? Perhaps something like LiveAid in 1985?

DCT: I was going to say LiveAid. But no, and there won't be. I think the major reason was that, financially as a business venture, Woodstock was a catastrophe. The promoters were locked in litigation for years

and years, decades maybe afterwards. They realized that year in 1969 that concerts of half a million plus people were unmanageable.

God forbid something had gone wrong at Woodstock and you had five hundred thousand pissed off people. And it could have gone off, somebody could have thrown a match into the gasoline and it could have exploded. If the National Guard had not been able to get helicopters to LaGuardia Airport and bring in the acts: if Crosby, Stills and Nash; Blood, Sweat and Tears; Jimi [Hendrix]; Janis [Joplin] hadn't showed up that place would have erupted. It would have not been three days of love and peace it would have been a bloodbath.

And it teetered on the brink for three days of being just that. And it was just unmanageable. I don't think you'll ever see anything like that again. It's kind of like "why won't anybody ever sell fifty million records again?" well, they're not making records anymore. They're not going make 1969 anymore.

NeoAmericanist: One of the reasons why Woodstock was such a success was because it was free, although accidentally.

DCT: It wasn't intended to be.

NeoAmericanist: Well, it was broken into. But now with downloadable music and recording companies emphasizing profits from performances rather than records, what would it take for a group of high profile acts to play together without cost the way that they did in Woodstock?

DCT: It would have to be for a cause. There's been a few things...with Bono and a few people like that...that have pulled things like [Woodstock] off. But there has to be a cause that is bigger than the ticket price, that is bigger than the music, really. The cost and the agony of the Vietnam War made our little musical careers pretty insignificant in comparison. So that's probably why it won't happen again. And it only will happen again if there is an overriding threat; perhaps it's global warming and climate change. Perhaps that will reach the precipice, the brink, of crisis; and perhaps that will bring out a mass gathering like Woodstock again. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.

NeoAmericanist: Woodstock marked a number of monumental moments in rock and rock history for a lot of artists. What did it mean for Blood, Sweat and Tears, being a part of the iconic moment of Woodstock in rock and roll history?

DCT: Probably very little. When [the band] pulled into Woodstock we had the number one album in the world, we had three singles in the top ten at the same time and ten Grammy nominations—that had never happened in history before—so we were well on our way.

What was really significant about Woodstock to Blood, Sweat and Tears was that it was a hometown gig. We'd been on the road all summer; we'd been in Atlanta, New Orleans, California, London, England, we'd been all over the world. For us it was coming home: we lived there. Many of us lived in Rockland County, Orange County, most of the guys lived in Manhattan and so we had our families our uncles and aunts and fans and neighbours and friends there. For us it was coming home. Two bands were [at Woodstock] that were really home: it was us and The Band....

So we were really home. Everyone else was from England, California, Texas, whatever. But for us, we were home; it was our hometown crowd. If you listen to the music of Blood, Sweat and Tears it's very New York.

NeoAmericanist: What do you mean by 'New York'?

DCT: Bass and jazz. Broadway brass horns. It's New York City music. You can hear the taxi cabs and the horns and the clanging of the streetcars and everything in the music. It ain't country music, okay. It's big city music.

NeoAmericanist: So, playing with a more big band sound?

DCT: Totally big band...it was like a miniature Duke Ellington band; that's the way it was set up. It was quintessentially a New York City band. The music was New York City, the audience was New York. Although people came [to Woodstock] from all over the country, in the half million people I would say eighty percent of them were New Yorkers. And we were their darlings, we were the hometown band. So that's what it meant to Blood, Sweat and Tears.

NeoAmericanist: Incidentally, there seems to be a lot of that big band, big city sound in a lot of modern independent music in Toronto.

DCT: New York and Toronto have always been interlinked; there's always been a real bond. When I moved to New York City I went right to Greenwich Village. Why? Because I moved from Yorkville Village in Toronto and Yorkville was a mini Greenwich Village. It was the same culture.

The big jazz artists played a circuit that always included Toronto, the R&B artists from Chicago, from Detroit, the Motown artists, the Chicago blues artists [all] played in Toronto on Yonge Street. So there's always been a tremendous interchange between the northern States—I would say basically Chicago, Detroit, New York, Boston (all hockey cities by the way)—culture has always had a huge interchange with Toronto.

I already knew people...all over Greenwich Village because I met them in clubs in from Yorkville when they played up in Toronto, I met them on the strip on Yonge Street. So, yeah, Toronto and New York have always been very simpatico musically.

NeoAmericanist: At the time of Woodstock, with frustration with the Vietnam War at its zenith and resistance to Nixon's unpopular conservative administration became more outspoken, a lot of Woodstock performers had a strong countercultural "aura" about them. How important was it for the artists that played Woodstock to keep up that anti-establishment image?

DCT: Very good question. At that time very important because the country was consumed with this "anti-establishment, down with the government" candor...but there was a certain hypocrisy to it also; half the people that were at Woodstock ended up as stock brokers on Wall Street or ended up as Republicans.

Because cultures change, fads change, music changes. So, in some ways, it's been written, that...

it's a good thing that Janis [Joplin] and Jimi [Hendrix] died when they did because they'd have been sad figures today...they would not have been able to adapt to the changing world, they were so committed to the counter-culture "thing".

I personally never was and our band was so deeply jazz rooted that we had a very long history and a very long tradition in our music and that was the most important thing to us...and so there was almost a kind of "establishment", a historical content to [our] music as opposed to, you know, Hendrix where nobody had ever heard anything like it before or ever or since.

Also I think as New Yorkers we were a little more pragmatic and a little more out on the cutting edge of things. But that's a very good question. If you listen to the lyrics of [Blood, Sweat and Tears song] "Spinning Wheel" it deals basically with that. That what goes up must come down, it's all going to come 'round. Today's radical is tomorrow's politician. Today's terrorist is tomorrow's president. The guys who founded the state of Israel were terrorists who went to become great heads of state, iconic heads of states.

That's what the song deals with; it's about blind commitment to a cause without considering that history is cyclical. Spinning Wheel: it's all gonna come 'round. "Did you find a directing sign on the straight and narrow highway?" No, you didn't. It's all going to change, folks. And probably it was easy to write that song because [culture] was changing at that point.

When the Vietnam War was over, what reason did they have to be counterculture anymore? There was no cause anymore, it evaporated. And they moved uptown to Club Forty-Seven [Studio 54] and started shoving cocaine up their noses. With the cause gone, the guts were ripped out. The center was ripped out of the movement.

NeoAmericanist: The last thing I wanted to touch on was music today. Do you think that what is being produced now is music as an art rather than a business as artists are gaining more freedom from record companies?

DCT: I think the potential for [music] becoming more exciting is there. Right now we're watching the death throes of the old industry. I think the liberation and the returning of the power, if you will for want of a better word, to the artist is a great signal. We're in a very soft period right now; there's nothing really exciting going on right now.

You're watching kind of the end of the country music rage, which was going on in the Bush era—which is not really country music at all anymore, it's kind of a glossy pop. You're watching the monotonous, melody-less rap which is now starting to grate on people, it's just getting fucking monotonous; come on, get two notes into that song, you know, stop using that same cheesy, bloody drum machine for everything. So [rap] is kind of burning itself out.

I've seen several areas like this. This reminds me of the "Ozzie and Harriet" 1950s, the Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower fifties, where everything was very soft. It was Patty Page...really sappy music. Nothing offensive, nothing relevant and then 'bam' Elvis Presley, Little Richard, Fats Domino. Rock and roll knocked it right on its ass. We're about to get knocked on our ass. I don't when it's going to be, I don't know what it's going to be, but it's going to be.

Something is going to happen because music right now is very soft, there's a tremendous amount of talent out there with a tremendous amount of power and access to the marketplace. Somebody's going to jump all over it. I'm surprised somebody hasn't already.