

Taking Woodstock is heavy on quirks, light on music

filmreview

Taking Woodstock

Directed by Ang Lee
Starring Demitri Martin, Emile Hirsch, Imelda Staunton, and Liev Schreiber
Opens Friday August 28

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Opinion Editor

For a film supposedly about one of the greatest music festivals of all time, it's a conceit of *Taking Woodstock* that we never see any bands actually perform. Aside from a quartet of Sunday-school boys rocking out to Manfred Mann's "Doo Wah Diddy," the closest we ever get to an actual well-known band is a blaze of lights, seemingly miles away, individuals lost and unrecognizable amid the glare and crowds.

No, Ang Lee's film starts out about normal people, shot from the oft-befuddled perspective of our everyman hero, Eliot Teichberg (newcomer Demitri Martin), the youthful president of the Bethel Chamber of Commerce, representing the town of White Lake. He spends his days filing bureaucracy and his nights desperately trying to keep his crazy Jewish parents' failing motel from going under. This isn't made any easier by the admittedly played-out antics of said crazy Jewish parents (Henry Goodman and Imelda Staunton, both falling perfectly into type), nor is it eased by the fact that no one in their right mind would ever visit the town of White Lake.

So naturally, Eliot jumps at the chance to sign a contract with some far-off company called "Woodstock Ventures" to book some famous acts for the town's normally-tame summer music festival. A few businessmen shake hands, a few hundred acres of cow pasture are procured, things spiral out of control, and suddenly Eliot finds himself at the center of the famed festival.

It might be because of the cameo by Eugene Levy as a chocolate-milk-loving farmer, but the



first half of the movie has a very *Waiting For Guffman* aesthetic, where the wacky locals and hippies need to band together to hold the festival. No eccentric stone is left unturned in the characterizations. Aired oddities include: man in suit falling into swamp, troupe of oft-nude "actors" living in Eliot's barn, and Liev Schreiber stealing every scene he can as an ex-marine drag queen named Vilma who somehow becomes the Teichbergs' security chief. The eccentrics start to get tired after a little while, since the only drama is wondering whether these walking quirk factories be able to hold the festival. Will they? Will they? (Spoiler alert: They will.)

And thankfully Lee gets his act together by the time Woodstock actually starts, and the rest of the film gently unfolds into a love letter to the whole of hippie culture. The sequences of Eliot wandering through the crowds are no less packed with quirks and side-stories, but here they become a kind of mosaic wash, beautifully filling the background

with a general vibe of free-spirited optimism.

Martin does his best to navigate the quirks he's assigned, but Eliot's character details — his talent for terrible abstract paintings, or his blink-and-you'll-miss-it coming out of the closet — come off as things Lee feels obligated to include to obtain his "based-on-actual-events" sticker. The movie almost holds together as a biopic, but works so much better as an ode to the times; to that regard, it's an admirable, light end-of-summer comedy.

A memorable appearance by Paul Dano and Kelli Garner as a hippie couple (complete with mandatory Volkswagen van and subsequent acid trip) sums up the movie pretty neatly. They mention how they got close to the music, but couldn't see anything more than Eliot ever would. "Like ants making thunder," they hazily describe it. Well, exactly. *Taking Woodstock* wants to be about the little people, but it's the lights and sounds that end up resonating much more strongly.



COMPILED BY AARON LEVIN

THE TOP 5 LOCAL BANDS TO WATCH THIS FALL

1. THE WICKED AWESOMES!

Burnt puke-garage and psychedelic mizrahi-surf. The red lights of your mind will burst with wrecked synth-lines and skirt-chasing guitar riffery.

2. GOBBLE GOBBLE

Named after that ridiculous restaurant along the highway, this eight-bit fluorescent electro-pop explosion has been packing dance floors and destroying more minds than the Oil City Roadhouse.

3. THE FAMINES

Stripped naked, raw two-piece missionary garage-punk. Leave the lights on and your body will melt. They have the design and packaging game on lock.

4. SANS AIDS

One-man-bands are the new two-piece garage-punks. This sludgy, lo-fi loser-fest has been packing basements for the last four months. Amazing stuff!

5. OUTDOOR MINERS

Their soon to be released 7" on Pop Echo Records contains a hit so powerful that your mom will be blasting it from her SUV convertible. I know. It doesn't make sense.

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