

Helter Shelter



[Keith E. Lee](#)

[Dec 4, 2014](#) · 6 min read

It isn't a horror film, but the Maysles brothers' documentary of the Rolling Stones 1969 tour of the United States culminating in the ill-fated free concert at the Altamont Speedway that took place on December 6th, 1969 is probably the scariest movie I've ever seen.

In 1969 it had been three years since the Stones had toured America. The arrests of Mick Jagger and Keith Richards on drug charges had curtailed the band's touring, and Brian Jones' two drug convictions made his obtaining a visa to tour America difficult. The band fired Brian Jones a month before he died in his pool in July of that year, so they could tour America again with new guitarist Mick Taylor. They had a lot to prove and expectations were high.

In the years since the Stones' last visit to the states a burgeoning counter-culture had flourished; and with ever expanding drug use, protests against the Vietnam war and white radicals aligning with black militants, rock music was a cultural force that was considered dangerous by the authorities. It was also the first time the band had launched a tour on such a massive scale. The band

hired the Ampeg company to design large amplifiers with enough wattage so they could be heard in stadiums and sports arenas.

Criticism of high ticket prices exerted pressure on the band to give a free concert, but it was difficult to find a place to hold it.

Altamont Speedway near San Francisco was offered 24 hours before the concert was scheduled to start. Due to the inevitability of drug busts, the Stones didn't want cops at the free show and Grateful Dead manager, Rock Scully, suggested hiring the Hells Angels as event security for \$500 worth of beer. The Stones trusted that that would be a good idea because they had used the London Hells Angels as security for their free concert at Hyde Park earlier that year.

During this period the Rolling Stones were flirting with sinister imagery; *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, "Sympathy for the Devil", "Midnight Rambler", as if almost courting diabolical elements. And a sense of darkness and palpable dread pervades *Gimme Shelter* as it moves along. The infamous lawyer, Melvin Belli, who'd represented Jack Ruby during his trial for murdering Lee Harvey Oswald, is seen in the film negotiating for the concert venue. At the time Belli was receiving calls and letters from the Zodiac killer. A few days before the concert the image of Charles Manson first appeared in the media. And there is a direct link between Manson and the Stones in the person of Phil Kaufman who had assisted the band while they were in L.A. preparing for the tour. Kaufman had done prison time with

Charlie Manson, and in 1970 released the album *Lie* to help raise money for the Family's legal defense.

The footage of Altamont captures bad acid trips and inebriated Hells Angels wailing on people with fists, chains and pool cues. The Angels even tangle with the bands, one knocking out Marty Balin of Jefferson Airplane. The Grateful Dead refused to go on because of the violence. As it turned out there was an Angels officers' meeting in Oakland that afternoon so the ones who came early and did much of the unprovoked beating were neophytes or prospects. It was only later that the senior officers showed up, but by then things had already spiraled out of control.

The band is dwarfed by the crowd milling around on stage. And with Jagger in his orange and black winged-top standing on purple star burst carpet among the bikers, the scene resembles staging for a Kenneth Anger movie. Lost in the chaos the band plays on as Hells Angels continually beat back the advancing crowd. Jagger's voice takes a pleading tone as he scolds them like a schoolmarm, "Brothers and sisters, come on now! That means everybody just cool out! Why are we fighting?" At this point with the stage full of Stones, Angels, and stoned kids, a dog casually saunters into the action.

Jagger appears deflated as he hangs onto the mic stand. This isn't the protagonist in "Sympathy for the Devil" threatening to "lay your soul to waste", and by "Under My Thumb" he's "prayed it's

just all right”. But it’s not alright as a man is killed just yards from the stage. Stabbed and stomped to death by Hells Angels.

The film shows Meredith Hunter pull what appears to be a long-barreled .22 caliber revolver from his jacket and point it in the direction of the stage. Accounts vary for the reason why he pulled the gun: some say he wanted to kill Mick Jagger, others that he had been beaten by the Angels and intended to use the weapon in self defense. Hunter’s girlfriend reported he was enraged, irrational and “so high he could barely walk”. Rock Scully stated “I saw what he was looking at, that he was crazy, he was on drugs, and that he had murderous intent. There was no doubt in my mind that he intended to do terrible harm to Mick or somebody in the Rolling Stones, or somebody on that stage.” If so, the Hells Angels may have saved Mick Jagger’s life. At the time of his murder Meredith Hunter was known to the Oakland police as a drug dealing member of a street gang called the East Bay Executioners. Members of the Executioners were required to carry a weapon at all times. Hunter’s autopsy confirmed he had methamphetamine in his bloodstream and track marks on his arm at the time of his death.

Gimme Shelter could be considered something like a snuff film. The band members are numb as the producers show them footage of a man being stabbed just a few yards in front of the stage as the band played. After the concert Jagger stated, “If Jesus had been there, He would have been crucified.”

In the aftermath musicians who were there placed the blame directly on the Stones, with David Crosby stating, “They’re on a grotesque ego trip. I think they’re out of touch with the people to whom they’re trying to speak. I think they are on negative trips intensely, especially the two leaders.” The footage of the stabbing of Meredith Hunter was subpoenaed for the trial of the Hells Angel who killed him. The killing was ruled self defense and Angel Alan Passaro was acquitted.

According to the Stones’ tour manager, Sam Cutler, the bad vibes, freak outs and violence were not happenstance, nor was it the result of poor planning by the organizers. After the success of Woodstock a few months prior, the U.S. government became seriously concerned about the increasing radicalization of America’s youth in conjunction with large music festivals. The F.B.I. was gathering intelligence on these concerts and trying to figure out a way to counteract the influence of the New Left. Cutler contends that agents from the F.B.I.’s San Francisco office were seen in attendance at Altamont, and that they, possibly in conjunction with other agencies, purposely dosed the crowd with thousands of hits of acid, of not only an extremely high dosage (over 1,500 micrograms) but likely contaminated with adulterants, thus practically guaranteeing a bad trip for anyone imbibing. The resultant violence and bad press was a discredit to the counter-culture.

The repercussions of this notorious film continue. In 2008, a former F.B.I. agent claimed some Hells Angels had conspired to murder Mick Jagger in retribution for the Rolling Stones' lack of support following the concert at Altamont, and for the negative portrayal of the Angels in *Gimme Shelter*. The conspirators reportedly used a boat to approach a residence where Jagger was staying on [Long Island](#), New York; the plot failing when the boat was nearly sunk by a storm.