

# The Rolling Stones Disaster At Altamont: Let It Bleed

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Robert Hiatt, a medical resident at the Public Health Hospital in San Francisco, was the first doctor to reach 18-year-old Meredith Hunter after the fatal wounds. He was behind the stage and responded to Jagger's call from the stage for a doctor. When Hiatt got to the scene, people were trying to get Hunter up on the stage, apparently in the hope that [the Stones](#) would stop playing and help could get through quicker.

"I carried him myself back to the first aid area," Hiatt said. "He was limp in my hands and unconscious. He was still breathing then, though quite shallowly, and he had a very weak pulse. It was obvious he wasn't going to make it, but if anything could be done, he would have to get to a hospital quickly.

"He had very serious wounds. He had a wound in the lower back which could have gone into the lungs, a wound in the back near the spine which could have severed a major vessel, and a fairly large wound in the left temple. You couldn't tell how deep the wounds were, but each was about three-fourths of an inch long, so they would have been fairly deep.

"It was just obvious he wasn't going to make it. There was no equipment there to treat him. He needed to be operated on immediately, to have a couple large vessels repaired. Treatment immediately would have been intravenous fluids, none of which were available."

Dr. Richard Baldwin, the general practitioner from Point Reyes who supervised and coordinated the various medical units, agreed: "He got a bad injury in that they got him in the back and it went in between the ribs and the side of the spine, and there's nothing but big arteries in there, the aorta, the main artery in the body, and a couple kidney arteries. And if you hit one of those you're dead. You're dead in less than a minute and there's nothing anyone can do. In other words, if you're standing in front of the hospital, or even if he was stabbed in an operating room, there's nothing they could have done to save him. That's one of those injuries that's just irreparable."

Roland W. Pahl, senior coroner's investigator for Alameda County, said Hunter's official cause of death was "shock and hemorrhage due to multiple wounds in the back, a wound on the left side of the forehead, and another on the right side of the neck."

Pahl said that as far as he knew, Hunter was taken from the scene on a stretcher to the racetrack offices area. Fearing further mutilation to the body, sheriff's deputies then apparently transported him to another location on the grounds in their van. He was brought by deputies to the coroner's office at 10:50 that night, and an autopsy was performed Sunday.

"I don't know if doctors treated him at any time at the site," Pahl added, "But I do know he was never in a hospital. They pronounced him dead at the site; if anyone had thought he was alive, they'd have helped him." Pahl, however, didn't know who "they" were.

Three others had died (two in a hit-and-run accident, another by drowning), and countless more were injured and wounded during the course of this daylong "free" concert. It was such a bad trip that it was almost perfect. All it lacked was mass rioting and the murder of one or more *musicians*. These things *could* have happened, with just a little more (bad) luck. It was as if Altamont's organizers had worked out a blueprint for disaster. Like:

- 1) Promise a free concert by a popular rock group which rarely appears in this country. Announce the site only four days in advance.
- 2) Change the location 20 hours before the concert.

- 3) The new concert site should be as close as possible to a giant freeway.
- 4) Make sure the grounds are barren, treeless, desolate.
- 5) Don't warn neighboring landowners that hundreds of thousands of people are expected. Be unaware of their out-front hostility toward long hair and rock music.
- 6) Provide one-sixtieth the required toilet facilities to insure that people will use nearby fields, the sides of cars, etc.
- 7) The stage should be located in an area likely to be completely surrounded by people and their vehicles.
- 8) Build the stage low enough to be easily hurdled. Don't secure a clear area between stage and audience.
- 9) Provide an unreliable barely audible low fidelity sound system.
- 10) Ask the Hell's Angels to act as "security" guards.

All these things happened, and worse. Altamont was the product of diabolical egotism, hype, ineptitude, money manipulation, and, at base, a fundamental lack of concern for humanity.

"Jagger was very, very shattered," according to an associate who was with the Stones post-Altamont. "I cannot overemphasize how depressed and down he was with the way it turned out. They'd like to just be able to blink and make it go away. When they knew about the murder — it shook them."

Jagger had been so eager to do the gig that when he learned, in Muscle Shoals, that his San Francisco advance people were having trouble coming up with a site, he kept saying: "Well, man, we'll play in the streets if we have to." He was almost prepared to pick a street corner in downtown Market Street in San Francisco and play there.

But then, after Altamont had been set up and all the people were there, and the violence had begun, and Angels were menacing everybody in sight, the reports started coming in to the Huntington Hotel, and the Stones did *not* want to complete the gig. Well, they couldn't do that . . . So they thought about going straight out there, playing immediately, and closing the concert down as quick as possible. In the end, they decided to play it according to the original plan.

But they knew early in the day that it was grim and getting grimmer.

Mick Taylor, the newest Rolling Stone, was still aghast at what had happened when contacted in London shortly after his return home from Altamont.

"I was really scared," he said. "I was frightened for all of us, particularly for Mick because he had to be very careful what he said all the time, very careful. He had to pick and choose his words. When you read about a thing this size — like 300,000 people, four people born, four people killed — you don't think of it as a violent thing. But that's all I saw: violence all the time. I've always heard about the incredible violence in America, but I'd never actually seen it. They're so used to it over there, it's a commonplace thing. They find it easier to accept. I've just never seen anything like that before.

"It was just completely barbaric, like there was so much violence there it completely took the enjoyment out of it for me . . . it was impossible . . . to enjoy the music, or anything, because most of the violence was going on right in front of the stage, right in front of our eyes, and like I've never seen anything like it before. I just couldn't believe it.

"About five minutes after we arrived, just after we got out of the helicopter, I was with Mick and there were a couple of security guards with us, and a guy broke through and punched Mick in the face. That put me off a bit, but even after that had happened I didn't expect all those other things.

"It got so bad at one point that we just had to stop playing, we had to keep stopping in the middle of numbers. Mick did his best to cool the people out. He was doing everything in his power to cool them out. We were speechless for a little while afterwards . . . We didn't enjoy it.

"I think at one point we might have walked off stage, but that would have been a disaster. We just had to carry on and play the best we could. We played longer than we would have done because we had to keep stopping all the time. We still did a complete show. We must have been on stage for about an hour-and-a-half. It seemed like ages.

"The Hell's Angels had a lot to do with it. The people that were working with us getting the concert together thought it would be a good idea to have them as a security force. But I got the impression that because they were a security force they were using it as an excuse. They're just very, very violent people.

"I think we expected probably something like the Hell's Angels that were our security force at Hyde Park, but of course they're not the real Hell's Angels, they're completely phony. These guys in California are the real thing — they're very violent.

"I had expected a nice sort of peaceful concert. I didn't expect anything like that in San Francisco because they are so used to having nice things there. That's where free concerts started, and I thought a society like San Francisco could have done much better.

"We were on the road when it was being organized, we weren't involved at all. We would have liked to have been. Perhaps the only thing we needed security for was the Hell's Angels.

"I really don't know what caused it but it just depressed me because it could have been so beautiful that day."

According to [Keith Richards](#), it *did* go pretty well. On his arrival in London, he told a United Press reporter that Altamont "was basically well-handled, but lots of people were tired and a few tempers got frayed."

It is impossible to speak of the music that went down without placing it in the context of the violence, the fear and the anxiety, which, during the course of the day, peaked to higher and higher points of refinement and climax.

As [Santana](#) was setting up, a chick toward the front of the stage was telling her old man: "It's weird. They consulted the astrologers before setting the dates for Woodstock, but they couldn't have consulted an astrologer about today. Anyone can see that with the moon in Scorpio, today's an *awful* day to do this concert. There's a strong possibility of violence and chaos and any astrologer could have told them so. Oh well, maybe the Stones know something I don't know."

The violence was not long to follow. (It had already begun earlier, of course, but to have it going on while the bands were playing was a new twist.) Between the first song and the second, one young-looking fellow tried to pass nearby to get on stage. He was wearing a blue and yellow sports shirt, jeans and had long straight blond hair over his ears. As he tried to get by some Hell's Angels he was kicked in the face by an Angel's booted feet and pulverized with punches and lay spread out on the ground unable to move or be moved, there were so many people jammed up to the stage.

A lot of photographers kept right on taking their photos through the worst of it, right up close, without getting hassled. So did the movie crews, but then they had Angels for bodyguards.

Not every photographer was so lucky, though. John Young, 24, who moved in with his Leica to capture some of the bashing, wound up with 13 stitches in his head. The Angels were beating a couple of naked people to the ground during Santana's set. In moments, the nudies were up again, and Young started taking pictures, when the Angels resumed bashing them.

An Angel spotted him — out of some ten or twelve photogs immediately surrounding him — and demanded: "I want

your film or you get hit." Young kept shooting, and the Angel leapt at him, smashing the camera into Young's face. Down he went. When several Angels began pounding him, Young rolled into a protective ball. "It felt like they were hitting me with a hammer and a broken bottle," Young said later. Observers said it was pool cues.

The Angels, many of them, were carrying — and applying to a lot of non-Angel heads — loaded pool cues, sawed-off (usually) to a length somewhat longer than a billy club. About the length, in fact, of the cattle prods that we've all seen in photographs of redneck brutality against black people in the South.

Eventually they got around to removing the film from his camera. Drenched in blood — hair, face, neck, shirt back and front — Young ran 50 yards into the crowd, then sort of collapsed until the Red Cross took him to their tent, where they cleaned him up, administered novocaine, and stitched him up.

"I'd never seen a Hell's Angel before," explained Young, who's from a small town in Maine, "and I didn't really know they could *do* that." After the patchwork, he was able to watch the rest of the concert. He took no more photos.

Santana began their next song, but were interrupted by the Angels' running across stage to the right to beat someone up. Santana finished their set amidst very uptight vibes around the stage.

The next group up was the [Airplane](#) and by the time they came on it was standing room only for about seventy-five yards from the stage but everyone slowly sat down when the people seventy-six yards from the stage yelled.

Sam Cutler announced that a woman had given birth and clean sheets and diapers were needed and within minutes the stage was besieged with them. Then Cutler introduced the Jefferson Airplane and they began their set with "We Can Be Together" and ended the set with "Volunteers of America." In between there was a disturbance with some Hell's Angels and members of the audience and Marty Balin was knocked out by a punch from one of the Angels when he tried to intercede in the disturbance. Paul Kantner began to make a speech about the event and was challenged by a Hell's Angel who grabbed a microphone and the people began to boo. Another Hell's Angel came up to Kantner and a fight almost broke out between them but was cooled down before any punches were thrown on stage and they went into a song. When it ended, Grace Slick was rapping softly into the microphone about what was going down with the Hell's Angels and everyone else. It was almost too much to take in. An Instant Re-Play would have been useful, the action was so thick and heavy. Consider the symbolism alone:

With all the grandeur of Bert Parks inviting last year's Miss America to step forward, the Airplane had asked, "Will the Hell's Angels please take the stage."

During the second half of "Somebody to Love," Marty Balin lay unconscious, having gotten himself blasted by an Angel. The rest of the band played on. Balin's absence, in musical terms, scarcely mattered. The sound was so bad you couldn't tell the difference.

It was at just about this point that the Angels' position became clear. They were in charge of the stage. They had taken it that morning. It was *theirs*, musicians or no musicians. What the fuck, wasn't nobody tough enough to *take* it from them, was there? The Stones? Not likely. It had become, to a disturbing degree, a Hell's Angels Festival.

Nothing profound happened musically during the [Flying Burrito Brothers](#) set. It seldom does. But somehow the simple verities of their countrified electric music soothed the warriors. There were no fights. As luck would have it, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards chose to emerge from the backstage trailer where they'd been holed up to have a look at the stage and the audience during this period of calm. They strolled about, wound up onstage, smiling, for a bit. Then back to the trailer, where, in true superstar fashion, Jagger was signing autographs (on album jackets, and even draft cards). Whenever they ventured any distance from the smallish white trailer, it was behind three or four burly Angels.

The scene back there was dense with groupies (most dazzling: Miss Mercy behind her raccoon-ring eye makeup), and celebrities (a toss-up between Tim Leary, who went forth, gamely flashing smiles and peace signs in the

direction of violence; and manager/promoter/entrepreneur Steve Paul, gloomy in his blue bathrobe, muttering dire presentiments), not to mention writers and photographers.

Out front, the battle was rejoined during Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's desultory performance (the rest of the band had played only after David Crosby had urged them to in the strongest terms). The Angels, at one point, amassed a fairly spectacular charge, pool cues flailing whoever got in their way. At the end of their set, several stretchers were sent into the audience and bodies were passed overhead and across the stage to the Red Cross area. Those who were carried out and those who departed under their own steam were quickly replaced, as it became obvious that the next set was going to be the Stones.

Despite balloons and pennants and a few other picturesque touches (like the big polyethylene walk-in bubble/dome some co-freaks had set up), the physical atmosphere at Altamont was singularly ominous and depressing. The more people arrived, the more clear it was that this was nowhere in particular; just a patch of land, covered with bleached-out long grass and sticker burrs. Nothing had been done to make it the least bit festive. And the later it got, the worse the air became — filled with a rancid combination of fog, dust, smoke and glare. A squinty grey light made everything hard to look at.

The 300,000 anonymous bodies huddled together on the little dirt hills were indeed an instant city — a decaying urban slum complete with its own air pollution. By the time the Stones finally came on, dozens of garbage fires had been set all over the place. Flickering silhouettes of people trying to find warmth around the blazing trash reminded one of the medieval paintings of tortured souls in the Dance of Death. The stench of the smoke from tens of thousands of potato chip packages and half-eaten sandwiches brought vomiting to many. It was in this atmosphere that Mick sang his song about how groovy it is to be Satan. Never has it been sung in a more appropriate setting.

The hill on the concert side of the west fence was packed almost as tight with people as center stage area. People tended to fade into one another after awhile — unless there was something especially strange or loud about them that made you remember they were real and not just part of a huge movie set.

There was the young mother in blue blouse with Peter Pan collar and pleated skirt, looking like she'd just stepped out of a Hayward model home, who pushed ahead of her husband. In one hand she carried a baby only a few months old. She'd nudge the person ahead of her with the baby, smile and look wide-eyed at them as they turned to see who was pushing — and then she'd push right through.

Just a few feet from the fence and about 100 yards from the stage was a freak cat about 25, wearing wire-rimmed glasses, trim black goatee, T-shirt and jeans. With him was a big cat, blond, with mustache.

"Good thing these people ain't on reds and wine," Goatee guffawed at about 4:45 when Cutler came to the stage and announced:

"The Rolling Stones won't come out till everyone gets off the stage."

"If they'd been on reds and wine, you bet he wouldn't been sayin' it like that."

Then about a dozen Angels, mostly officers, some carrying double, ploughed through the crowd on their bikes. An admirer in the crowd offered a shaggy Angel a swig from his wine bottle. The Angel, sporting clean new colors, stopped, dismounted, grabbed the gallon in both hands and put it to his lips for just a moment, handed it back and putted on off — a lotta show for a little sip of wine.

"We come down on our bikes," said Sonny Barger later, "because we were told we were supposed to park in front of the stage, and so like when we started coming down through the crowd everybody was outta sight got up and moved and we come down in low gear and didn't try to run into anybody or do any of that kind of thing. Everybody got up really nice, some people offered us drinks on the way down and like . . . we must have come into approximate contact with at least a thousand people and outta them thousand people we had trouble with one



person . . . one broad jumped up and said something that pertained to a four letter word and then Angels and one of Angels stopped his bike and he had his old lady on the back and he said, 'Are you gonna let them talk about Angels like that?' and she jumped off the bike and slapped the other broad that said that that was in the crowd and got back on the bike and we proceeded down with no problem. We pulled up in front of the stage and parked where we were told we were supposed to park."

The flaw in this story, according to Sam Cutler and Rock Scully, is no one told the Angels to put their bikes down in front of the stage.

It got cold. Then it got colder. Time passed. More time. The Stones were waiting, like they always wait. Tuning up, they said. But really, there was something else going on, and it tied in with the whole superstar sensibility in which the Stones increasingly enwrap themselves. They were waiting for it to get really dark out, so the banks of spotlights would set them off to the most dramatic effect possible.

Suddenly, the lights glowed on, a cold-fire red gleaming on the Stones, as they wedged between the Angels onstage to their places. Jagger's demonic orange and black satin cape/robe gleamed wickedly. Into "Jumpin' Jack Flash," rather haltingly. To open up a little dancing room for himself, Jagger had to ask the Angels to step back a few paces. There must have been a hundred people — who knows? maybe 200 — on that stage, and Jagger was performing in a small pocket at center stage, like it or not.

"Carol" was a little better, but stiff.

"Sympathy for the Devil." They stopped in the middle. A skirmish had broken out at stage left. This was the knifing/stomping of Meredith Hunter, perhaps 25 feet from where Jagger pranced and sang, then stopped. To one observer 20 feet to Jagger's rear, the glint of the long knives was clearly visible. So, if the Stones were looking, they saw it too. The same observer spoke with several others who were onstage (as did *Rolling Stone*), and none, except for the onstage Angels, claim to have seen a gun.

One Angel later told it this way to KSAN-FM: This black guy had come toward the stage and been pushed off by Angels. "He flipped over and he's got this revolver — it looked like a cannon. It was pointed right at me. I hit the deck and this gun was pointed right at Jagger." And then, according to this account, "everybody was on him and that was the last I seen of him . . . When it was all over, man, Jagger looks at me and says, 'why?' I says: 'I dunno, man, that's just the way people are.'"

Whether Jagger had time for this game of eye contact is dubious. He was busy telling the audience — "brothers and sisters, come on now! That means everybody just cool out! We can cool out, everybody! Everybody be cool, now. Come on."

Turning toward side of stage: "How are we doing over there? Everybody all right? Can we still collect ourselves? I don't know what happened, I couldn't see, I hope you're all right. Are you all right? Okay, let's just give ourselves another half a minute before we get our breath back. Everyone just cool down. Is there anyone there who's hurt? Okay, I think we're cool, we can groove. We always have something very funny happen when we start that number."

"Sympathy" started again, but not too convincingly. Somebody tried to climb onstage. Angels tossed him back.

Jagger: "Why are we fighting? Why are we fighting? We don't want to fight at all. Who wants to fight, who is it? Every other scene has been cool. We gotta stop right now. You know, if we can't there's no point . . ."

The fight scene got worse. Long silence at the mike. Dense uncertainty crowded the night chill. Amazingly, Jagger seemed to lose control of his audience. A rare moment.

Keith Richards stepped forward: "Either those cats cool it, man, or we don't play . . ."

Pause. More nastiness in the audience immediately in front of the stage. Of 300,000 people, only a few thousand can see the trouble.

Jagger, with something like a sob: "If he doesn't stop it, man . . ."

Richards: "Keep it cool! Hey, if you don't cool it, you ain't gonna hear no music!"

The going had ended by now, and Jagger took the mike again to say, "We need a doctor here, now! Look, can you let the doctor get through, please. We're trying to get to someone who's hurt."

People who were trying to help Meredith Hunter were raising bloody hands to show Mick how bad it was.

A doctor got through, the man was carried off, eventually.

Next a blues, an instrumental to ease the tension. When it's over, Jagger says: "That's to cool out with."

Then, "Stray Cat Blues."

"Love in Vain." Jagger again urges the crowd to sit down. They do, as he watches. "Now, boys and girls, are you sitting comfortably? When we get to the end and we all want to go absolutely crazy and jump on each other, well, then we'll stand up again. I mean, we can't seem to keep together standing up."

"Under My Thumb." A bad fight this time: a body sails across the stage. "We're splitting; we're splitting if those cats don't stop," Jagger shouts! "I want them out of the way! I don't like doing it to them . . ." The onstage crowd in to surround him. An extremely menacing moment.

Jagger follows the long onstage silence with: "Please relax and sit down. If you move back and sit down, we *can* continue and we *will* continue. We need a doctor as soon as possible, please."

Stones road manager Sam Cutler, who has MC'd all day long, takes the mike to try to clear the stage. "First of all, everyone is going to get to the side of the stage who's on it now, aside from the Stones. Please, everyone. We need a doctor and ambulance, right away. Just sit down and keep calm and relax. We can get it together."

"Midnight Rambler," comes next, and, oooh, it is funky; but too late. The damage has been done. It's later and later by the minute. Many are leaving.

Jagger takes a hit of Jack Daniels bourbon and makes a toast of it. "One more drink to you all."

"Live With Me," is driving, vibrant.

It's just amazing. There could be no worse circumstance for making music, and the Stones are playing their asses off. Jagger is incredible. They all look like they'd rather be *anyplace* else. But it's getting better and better. Driving, powerhouse waves of rhythm roll on and on. Jagger is opening up. At first, when he really was trying to cool everybody out, his performance was the epitome of cool: restrained, distanced, but still — even with fear welling in his throat — deeply *inside* each song, laying it on us.

It ends with "Street Fighting Man," a great performance of it, an unfortunate selection, considering what kind of day it's been.

It has been an awful day. One of the worst in memory. The tendency was to blame it on the Angels, and, fundamentally, on the Stones, since they had paid the Angels to come and act as security. Sam Cutler, acting on behalf of the band, had paid the Hell's Angels \$500 worth of beer to come and act as a security force.

When San Francisco rock station KSAN-FM did a four-hour news special on the festival Sunday evening, just a little over 24 hours after Altamont had ended, Sam Cutler was asked what he thought in retrospect about using the

Angels.

Who knows, maybe for them the festival will have been worth it.