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Remembering the Atlanta International Pop Festival

Posted By [Courtney Haden](#) On July 2, 2009 @ 9:45 am In [Column](#), [Music](#) | [2 Comments](#)

Before there was Woodstock, there was Atlanta Pop. Forty years ago this weekend, an unimaginable multitude descended upon the Peach State for a weekend of peace and music that essentially marked the birth of a new South.

After extraordinary tumult in 1968, one might have expected a tempering of the national mood. However, 1969 started with more of the same. Peace talks between America and North Vietnam began in January, even as President Nixon approved bombing Cambodia. Militant students made moves at Duke, Harvard, Columbia and other universities throughout the spring. In music, Bob Dylan retreated to the country with *Nashville Skyline* while The Who unleashed the rock opera *Tommy*.



[1]Cultural fallout from

1967's Summer of Love in San Francisco still drifted across the country, and so-called "hippie districts" had taken root in major metropolises. Birmingham had not made the cut, but in Atlanta, something was definitely happening Midtown, particularly around 14th Street.

Cheap rents and available space drew devotees of the counterculture to live and open shops in the area around Piedmont Park, which would become famous for free music events and frequent hassles by the Atlanta police. There were head shops, music venues and even a haberdashery with the self-consciously hip name Kicks and Lids.

The epicenter of the scene was, to many, a two-story domicile on 14th Street nicknamed The Birdhouse, home of [The Great Speckled Bird](#) [2], the first great alternative newspaper in the region, unapologetically leftist in its politics and quite divorced from the Associated Press Style Book.

In the pages of *The Bird* that spring I first spotted an ad for a wondrous concert planned for the July 4th weekend. Though gatherings emulating 1967's groundbreaking Monterey Pop Festival had been mounted in a few other cities, the [Atlanta International Pop Festival](#) ^[3] promised "more Blues/Psychedelic/Soul/Jazz/Rock greats than ever assembled before anywhere."

The instigator was a smooth operator named Alex Cooley. Just turning the untrustworthy age of 30 in 1969, the Atlanta native had attended and been fascinated by the Miami Pop Festival in 1968. Cooley realized he could put on the same kind of show in Georgia with broader ramifications.

"It was the height of the Vietnam War and Lester Maddox was Governor," he said later. "I wanted to do something that would make people where I lived understand that we could change."

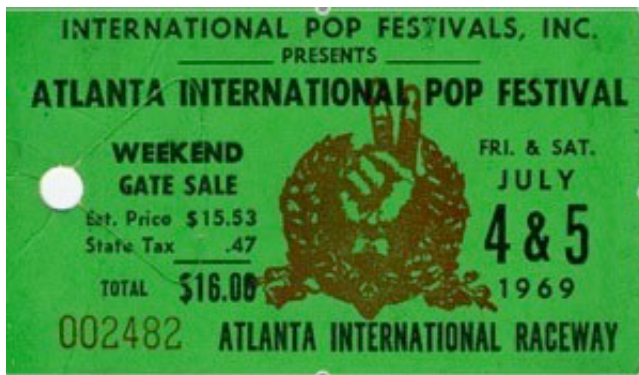
With 17 other investors staking his enterprise, Cooley located a site near Hampton, outside Atlanta, with room to accommodate an immense crowd, then started assembling a roster of performers that would draw that crowd.

The bill was wildly eclectic, from mainstream jazz with Dave Brubeck to first generation rock with Chuck Berry; from sweet soul by the Staple Singers and Booker T to the blues of Canned Heat and Paul Butterfield; from the folk of Ian and Sylvia to the cataclysm of Led Zeppelin. As an intrepid band of explorers from Alabama arrived at the outskirts of Hampton prior to the show amid a stupendous traffic jam, it was clear that word-of-mouth had drawn the crowd Cooley sought.

Independence Day dawned hot and cloudless. Cooley had chosen no sylvan glade like Max Yasgur's farm, but a flat, arid piece of property ordinarily operated as the Griffith Motor Speedway. Though the racetrack offered excellent sight lines to the stage, it afforded little shade from a merciless Georgia sun. As thousands poured through the gate and the temperature climbed toward 100 degrees, the crowd overwhelmed the promoters' logistical preparations. According to Marley Brant's rock festival history, [Join Together](#) ^[4], "It was said there was no ice to be had in the four-county area surrounding the festival site for three days." Henry County fire trucks sprayed the throng with water to help cool things down.

Whatever discomfort one felt was mitigated by the music. Theoretically un-hip performers like Johnny Rivers and Tommy James played some of the best sets. Janis Joplin delivered a fine performance, but many thought Sweetwater, the relatively unknown group that followed her set, actually topped her.

Many performers making their Deep South debut were amazed by their reception. In her memoir, [Lollipop Lounge](#) ^[5], Genya Ravan of Ten Wheel Drive, remembered, "Everyone was colorful, everyone was high... as I was singing, I watched this massive audience from the stage and it gave me a rush I've never felt before or after."



^[6]It was a diverse audience, too. Though tie-dyed longhairs and ethereal chicks in mini-skirts were represented, the Atlanta Pop crowd included a lot of military personnel from bases nearby, as well as average kids from around the region curious to experience an alternative lifestyle they'd only read about.

With as many as 140,000 people crammed into an almost literal melting pot for the weekend, chaos

could have erupted. Instead, civility did. "It was a good thing there were so many hippies," festivalgoer Mike Flores recalled, "because we all shared what we had." The sense of communal purpose was nicely put by Jon Pareles of *The New York Times* in another context: "This has always seemed to me a non-negative claim to fame — gosh, people acted decently? they didn't revert to cannibalism in three days? — but amid the political, generational and racial tensions of 1969 it was treated as a major achievement, one that helped redeem the image of a scruffy younger generation."

As the throng left the racetrack Sunday, sunburnt and satisfied, they returned to their respective homes having seen something new in the Old South and passing the word along. As attendee Hugh Fenlon told *Georgia Trend* magazine, "I'm not sure what made a bigger impression on me, the music or the social scene."

In just one weekend 40 years ago, Atlanta joined the national counterculture, putting a region known for its backward attitudes face forward again. The hippie ethos vanished shortly thereafter, but the sense of cultural possibility in the South born at the Atlanta Pop Festival remains palpable to this day, not just a good vibe, but a great one.

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[2] *The Great Speckled Bird*:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The%20Great%20Speckled%20Bird%20%28newspaper%29>

[3] Atlanta International Pop Festival:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlanta%20International%20Pop%20Festival%20%281969%29>

[4] *Join Together*: <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0879309261>

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