

# Rock 'n' roll nightmare

A man who was on the road with some of the world's biggest rock bands spills some juicy secrets in a new book, writes Noel Mengel

I WAS, and remains, a nightmare. Altamont. Just that single word suggests something dark and horrible, even to those who only have the sketchiest knowledge of what happened on that day. Just as Woodstock has grown in myth as a glorious example of the possibilities for youth culture and rock 'n' roll, Altamont is its opposite. The place — a lonely, disused speedway track in the hills south of San Francisco — where the optimistic spirit of the hippie movement of the 60s was snuffed out in a hellish spiral of bad drugs, bad vibes and violence.

Altamont often is referred to as the day the 60s died: December 6, 1969. In the middle of it all was Sam Cutler who, as tour manager of The Rolling Stones, was horrified to find an event the band had agreed to take part in — but were never organisers of — spiralling out of control.

Violence and bad trips had been escalating as the day progressed. By the time the Stones took the stage, Cutler was desperately worried, not just for the safety of the fans but for his band. But there was no choice for the Stones. Cutler reasoned. They had to play if they wanted to get out of there alive.

From the first notes of the set, the malevolent atmosphere only grew darker. Peace and love? Sam Cutler watched as a man in the crowd, Meredith Hunter, pulled a gun and was set upon by the bikers who had been invited to the event to keep an eye on the equipment beside the stage. Hunter was stabbed to death.

For 40 years, the Stones have been blamed — as has their tour manager — for what happened at Altamont. Now Cutler, who lives in Brisbane, wants to set the record straight about what really happened with his book, *You Can't Always Get What You Want*, one of those rare rock 'n' roll reads that goes inside the inner sanctum of two major rock bands. Cutler doesn't have a high opinion of most of the books he's read about the Stones. He says most of them are tripe.

What's fascinating about Cutler's book is the way it contrasts working with two of the biggest touring rock 'n' roll bands of them all, since after Altamont Cutler stayed on in San Francisco as one of the co-managers of The Grateful Dead. On one side, the very English way of working of the Stones. On the other, the ultimate American hippie outfit facing the capitalist reality that they were so far in debt it could mean the end of the band.

Altamont like most historical events, turns out to be much more complicated than the myth which has grown around it. Cutler had been immersed in the London rock 'n' roll scene of the '60s where his friendship with Nick Mason, drummer in Pink Floyd, led to working as tour manager for the likes of Brit blues legend Alexis Korner, and then in organising free festivals in Hyde Park. That's how Cutler came to work with The Stones at their legendary July 5, 1969 concert, three days after the death of Brian Jones. Soon, he found himself on the road with the band in the US.

The tour was a huge success, the largest grossing rock 'n' roll tour to that time.

But, Cutler explains, the band faced constant criticism, accused of trip-off ticket prices, as part of a counter-culture argument at the time that bands shouldn't even charge for playing music.

In response, the band agreed to play at a final free concert in San Francisco, alongside local area heroes such as Santana, Jefferson Airplane and The Grateful Dead.

But the organisers who had set up the event disappeared as the mood turned sour and violent. The Grateful Dead didn't show, leaving the Stones dropped in a storm of controversy after the concert.

Cutler rolls his own over coffee on the Brisbane spring morning, a more comfortable meeting than in the days after Altamont when he fronted a meeting with Hells Angels in San Francisco about what happened. At 65, Cutler's first book is hitting the shelves and he already has several more planned.

"Because of my upbringing and background I've never believed life is easy," Cutler says. "Sometimes shit really does happen and whether you like it or not you have to deal with it. I've never been someone who goes, 'Why me?' Why not you?"

"Dealing with Altamont, all of that could have been cut off at the pass if The Rolling Stones had done what I thought they should have, which was to stay on in California, call a press conference and say what happened. I didn't kill anyone. I came here to play music, you Americans f---ed it up because the people who were responsible for organising it melted into the night. With hindsight, I think The Rolling Stones would agree they could have handled it better."

Altamont is just one event in a career that has brought Cutler close to members of The Band, Pink Floyd and The Grateful Dead, to Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, as well as the strange cast of figures who



SETTING the record straight... Sam Cutler, his book cover and with The Rolling Stones, below.

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attach themselves to great fame and money, or at least managed to do so when rock 'n' roll touring was on a less professional basis than what it has become today. Cutler remained friends with Charlie Watts, who invited him backstage before the Stones' 2003 Brisbane show.

"The Rolling Stones are trapped with being The Rolling Stones, what can they do that's new?" Cutler says.

"They've played Copacabana Beach in Brazil to 2 million people. What's left? The first rock 'n' roll tour of China? That's been done. What are they going to do, play in space?"

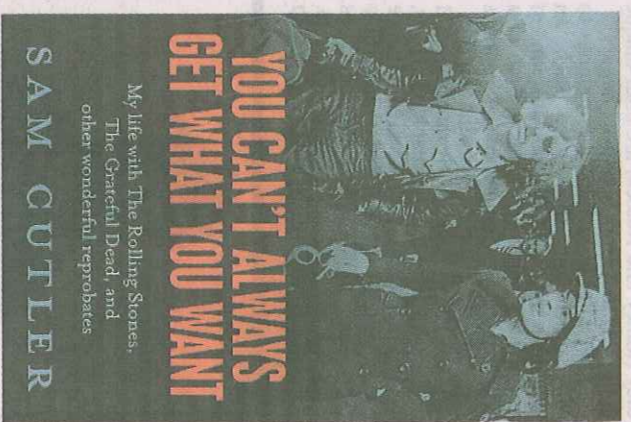
"But the great thing I love about the Stones is this. However professional you might think it is, when they get on stage, I know they struggle to get it together, to get the groove right, the feel right. "It could all fall over. That's what's so great about it, you get that sense of vulnerability when The Rolling Stones play, that edgy thing. Are they going to make it. Is Keith going to live through the set, die mid-chord or what?"

Then there are the secret codes which bands use to communicate, or not.

"Keith Richards and Bill Wyman didn't talk for 10 years because Bill thought Keith didn't like him. And Keith thought Bill didn't like him. So English, man. Didn't go. You got a problem with me?, American-style. The English are the Japanese of Europe, you know what I mean?"

The contrast with The Grateful Dead couldn't be more sharp, yet they also had their own internal tensions — musical and personal.

"With the Dead, sometimes it could be the most incredible nights. I did a show with them where they played for 9½ hours. Played for three, four hours, 20 minute break, came back and played some more. Other nights they played for four hours



and it was considered a disaster."

Another disaster facing the band was a mountain of debt.

"Everyone from the '60s had to work out — how are we going to live? "Everyone was going, we're going to grow our own vegetables and carrots, but it wasn't working. Even the freaks and hippies got to a certain point where they realised they have to grow up, be responsible just like our mums and dads told us."

"There are bills to pay and if we don't pay, it's all going to go pear-shaped."

*You Can't Always Get What You Want* by Sam Cutler (William Heinemann, \$34.95). Noel Mengel talks with Cutler at the State Library of Queensland, South Bank, October 15, 6.30pm.

