



/ books with MARY VERNON

End of the '60s

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT
By Sam Cutler
Random House \$34.95

THE 1960s ended not on 31 December 1969, but on Saturday, 6 December 1969 at Altamont, a speedway in California. There the Rolling Stones and assorted other bands played what had been intended as a free concert, a testament to peace, love and understanding and all that was supposedly good about the 1960s. Instead, the Altamont concert descended into an orgy of bad drugs and mindless violence, and, while the Rolling Stones watched on, the stabbing death at the hands of the Hells Angels of a young black man by the name of Meredith Hunter.

Sam Cutler, the author of *You Can't Always Get What You Want*, was, in 1969, the Rolling Stones' tour manager, and a firsthand witness to all that happened at Altamont. *You Can't Always Get What You Want* is his story of his time with the Stones and other bands, but not surprisingly the greater part of the book is devoted to Altamont and the lead up to that tragic event. Whilst the centrepiece of the book is clearly Altamont, Cutler provides a mostly informative and amusing look at the music scene of the late '60s and '70s, with two of the biggest bands in rock history – the Stones and the Grateful Dead whose fans delight in the sobriquet of 'Dead Heads' – hardly surprising, given the quality of the music to which they are addicted.

Of Altamont, Cutler perceptively and despairingly writes: "The peace and love my generation had so assiduously promulgated as the antidote to the violence and hypocrisy of straight society was a hollow miasma. This was not a community intent on caring for and loving one another. Before me was the ugly truth of what we had collectively wrought, manifested in greed, blood, drug overdoses, spilled guts and hatred."

Readers of a certain age will recall that the rock music scene of the late '60s and '70s was largely one of unbridled sex and drugs, to which the music itself often ran a distant third. Only the Stones would attempt such a tacky and politically incorrect lyric as 'black girls just want to get f.d all night, I just don't have that much jam'. Cutler was at the heart of this for a long time, as the 2008 photograph of him lays testament to.

The book contains a marvellous description of what is now known as the Winnipeg Express, the train from Toronto to Winnipeg in mid-1970

carrying a collection of some of the most well known and talented musicians of that time. Cutler describes in rapturous detail the two-day rail journey, involving, in Cutler's own words, copious amounts of booze and drugs and performing musicians including Bonnie and Delaney, the Grateful Dead, Rick Danko of The Band, Buddy Guy and Janis Joplin. If for nothing else, the book is worth its price for Cutler's description of what can only have been for any music lover a magic two days.

However, for fans of conspiracy theories – think JFK assassination, 9/11 – Cutler's take on what really happened at Altamont is in a class of its own. Cutler's theory is that the F'B'I, and in particular the cross-dressing head of the F'B'I, J Edgar Hoover, saw the whole business of music festivals as part of some radical left-wing agenda designed to subvert the healthier interests of the youth of the United States. Hoover, according to Cutler, saw Altamont, coming so soon after Woodstock, as an immediate threat and when the Feds couldn't stop the concert happening, they decided to use whatever means necessary to discredit the event. Accordingly, the Feds deliberately flooded Altamont with a specially manufactured acid tablet. The arrival at Altamont of these little yellow pills was intended by the Feds not to get people high but to 'f**k them up and discredit the counter culture'. The result was the violence which marred Altamont and led to the death of Meredith Hunter, and effectively brought to an end the counter culture.

As conspiracy theories go, this one sits high and alone on a grassy knoll.

Notwithstanding some shortcomings – there is only so much sex, drugs and rock 'n roll as can be digested in one sitting – *You Can't Always Get What You Want* is an enthusiastic journey through the music of the late '60s and '70s. Cutler, while not a musician himself, clearly loves music and musicians and his stories of his time as the Grateful Dead's tour manager are nothing if not entertaining.

After Altamont, the Stones effectively cut Cutler dead, leaving him in America to deal with the mess while the Stones fled to England. However, Cutler runs into the Stones once more at the Stones' 2003 Melbourne concert, where Keith Richards greets him with, "F..k me, Sam Cutler! Or should I say f.k you?"

In three words: Debauchery and music

—GREG HUMPHRIES

