

## Blu-Ray Review: 'Taking Woodstock' Has Plentiful Atmosphere, Little Depth

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on December 16, 2009 - 12:05pm

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CHICAGO – Ang Lee's take on the landmark music festival isn't a film so much as a filmed idea. It aims to capture the atmosphere of the concert without ever showing the actual music. Of course, the real show was the crowd itself.

There's one lovely shot in "Taking Woodstock" where its protagonist, high on acid, gazes at the countless hordes gathered around the distant main stage. Suddenly, the crowd starts to move like ripples in the water, as they become united by their shared vibes. The image may sound pretentious on paper, but it has a poetry and wonderment that's largely missing from the rest of the picture.



Blu-Ray Rating: **2.5/5.0**

There are few writer-director teams in film history that have tackled as many diverse genres as James Schamus and Ang Lee. Their collaborations include "The Ice Storm," "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," and "Lust, Caution," though "Taking Woodstock" may be their biggest misfire since "Hulk." It adapts a memoir by Elliot Tiber, a man who claims he had a crucial role in bringing the infamous concert to Bethel, New York. He's played in the film by Demetri Martin, a wonderful stand-up comic who's completely out of his element onscreen. Much of the film devolves into farcical phoniness, as Elliot manages his parents' run-down motel while serving as president of the Bethel Chamber of Commerce. Elliot's role calls for a brooding Dustin Hoffman-type, but Martin has an amiable detachment reminiscent of Mike Nelson on "MST3K." His performance is a blank slate, surrounded by an ensemble of scenery-chewing caricatures.



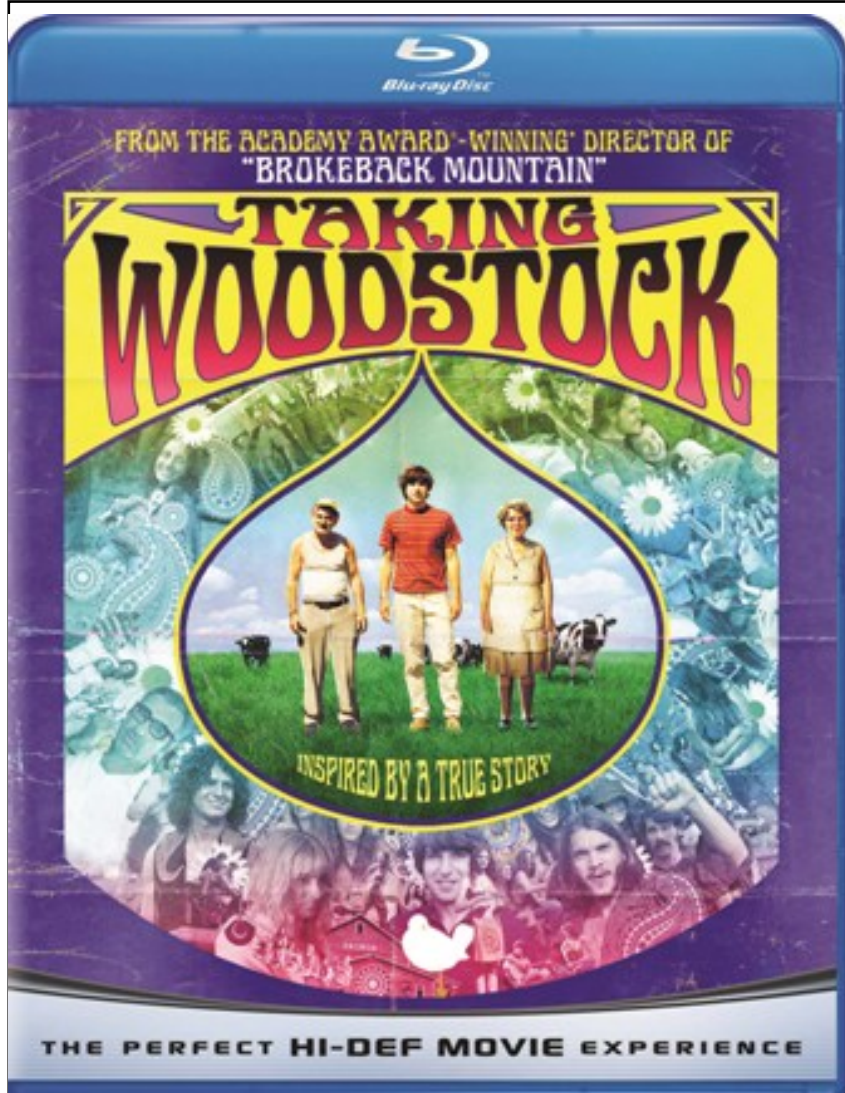
Demetri Martin could use some acting lessons from Liev Schreiber in Ang Lee's Taking Woodstock.

*Photo credit: Universal Home Entertainment*

Every character is painted with the broadest possible strokes. The magnificent Imelda Staunton badly overacts as Elliot's monstrously controlling mother, Emile Hirsch hoots and hollers as a disturbed war vet, and Jonathan Groff smiles endlessly as concert promoter Michael



Lang (who Elliot allegedly directed to Yasgur's farm, the eventual site of Woodstock). There's also an experimental theatre troupe, the Earthlight Players (led by Jack Black lookalike Dan Fogler), who reside in Elliot's barn and harbor an incessant compulsion to tear their clothes off. And there's an assortment of townspeople angered by the approaching hippie storm. And local mobsters who are chased off by Elliot's dad, brandishing a baseball bat. And a cross-dressing ex-Marine who Elliot hires for protection. And...



Taking Woodstock was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on December 15th, 2009.

Photo credit: Universal Home Entertainment

It's as if Lee was trying to merge an intimate coming-of-age tale with an Altmanesque microcosm of an entire era (similar to "Nashville"). Several sequences are shot with split screens identical to those in the classic 1970 documentary "Woodstock," which provide overviews of Lee's carefully choreographed extras. The problem is that Schamus's script reduces everyone to local color. Though Elliot's life as a closeted gay man was a large part of his memoir, the film barely acknowledges it (save for one key kiss). With his depth diluted, and his role filled by a blatantly miscast actor, Elliot comes across as a bore. When he tells a hippie that his life is "trivial compared to what you guys are going through," the audience can't help agreeing with him.

"Taking Woodstock" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.85:1 aspect ratio), and accompanied by English, French and Spanish audio tracks. The special features are slim and mostly forgettable: 11 minutes of deleted scenes, a brief making-of doc, and a painfully lame "Blu-ray exclusive", in the form of a 3-minute featurette about the Earthlight Players (it doesn't even offer clips of the real troupe). However, the commentary from Lee and Schamus is unexpectedly satisfying and revealing. Lee discusses the inherent difficulties of directing a comedian, balancing a small-scale drama with an overwhelming historical backdrop, and dramatizing the peaceful nature of Woodstock. When Shamus says that happiness "can't be controlled, but must be allowed," Lee replies, "It's hard to make a movie about that. What do you say to the actors? Be happy?"

*'Taking Woodstock' is released by Universal Home Entertainment and stars Demetri Martin, Henry Goodman, Imelda Staunton, Jonathan Groff, Dan Fogler, Emile Hirsch, Liev Schreiber and Eugene Levy. It was written by James Schamus and directed by Ang Lee. It was released on December 15th, 2009. It is rated R.*



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