

Bob Dylan and Ray Foulk at a pre-festival press conference in 1969

# Stealing Dylan

**Sylvia Vetta** talks to Ray Foulk about the soon-to-be-published memoir describing his involvement in the 1969 Isle of Wight Festival, an event which put singer-songwriter Bob Dylan back in the limelight after years of self-imposed musical exile

**B**ack in the late 1960s, Oxford resident Ray Foulk, along with his brothers Ronnie and Bill, was responsible for transforming the Isle of Wight into a mecca for music fans.

Ray's older brother, Ronnie came up with the original idea of mounting a music festival on the island. The brothers formed a company, Fiery Creations, and together they organised the first festival in 1968. Ray was not long out of a five-year apprenticeship at the Isle of Wight's newspaper when his life was turned upside down by the success of the event.

The third and final of Ray's festivals (held on August 26-31, 1970 at Afton Down) is still said to be the largest gathering of people ever seen on the planet. More than 600,000 music fans turned up to listen to the music.

But it was the 1969 festival which is possibly the most fascinating – as it was the event that Ray and his brothers persuaded Bob Dylan to return from self-imposed musical exile play at. It is the subject of Ray's soon to be published book *Stealing Dylan from Woodstock*.

Dylan withdrew from public performance after a motor cycle accident in 1966. But The Foulk brothers knew that if they could persuade him to appear at the 1969 festival, the eyes of the world would be on the Isle

of Wight. But they were not the only festival bidding for Dylan.

In 1969 there were plans to hold a big event near the town of Woodstock in upstate New York – simply because it was the home of the singer-songwriter. They did everything they could to encourage Dylan to appear.

Back on the Isle of Wight, Ray and his brothers had other ideas.

The task of carrying out the plan to 'steal' Dylan was allocated to Ray.

He said, "At the time I was fearless, and still I sometimes have a tendency to overreach. But we were in luck. It was surreal to hear his manager Al Grossman say, down the phone, that Dylan wanted to meet me in New York."

But Ray's memoir shows how it was not quite as simple as that.

To get as far as that telephone call, Ray had to persuade Dylan's manager that the brothers could raise the equivalent in today's money of £725,000 – a staggering amount of money for the young promoters.

They got the news that Dylan had accepted the offer to play at the festival on July 16.

Ray was expected to go to New York to finalise the deal. This would be his first trip outside the UK. He had four days to organise a passport and a visa.

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# EXODUS FROM GREATEST POP SHOW ON EARTH



## Dylan's pilgrims

# Bob Dylan is



# Melody Maker DYLAN UPSETS FANS IN U.S.

The day the poet of protest came back  
From DAVID NATHAN  
ISLE OF WIGHT, Sunday

# 150,000 FANS EXPECTED Now it's the Isle of Pop

WOODSIDE BAY, Isle of Wight, Saturday. THE great trek south—to the Isle of Wight—gathered momentum today. More than 50,000 Bob Dylan fans...

# Melody Maker DYLAN HERE IN AUGUST



Blind Faith LP cover banned in States  
TEENAGE NUDE CAUSES GUTCRY FROM DEALERS

# BOB DYLAN: The pop saviour



Over three years of... Bob Dylan, the American... The pop saviour... Dylan is small and frail, like a large-red nocturnal animal...

# POP—is it a new religion?

BOB DYLAN, who spoke more words at Heathrow and Kennedy Airports on his way home than he did during his whole stay here, says he doesn't want to come to Britain again. His reason? "They would buy much of airports stay there. Stagers are front page news..."

BOB DYLAN  
Dylan tempted by travel film

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While he queued at the Passport Office and the US Embassy, Ray's brothers set about getting documents to verify they could raise the necessary money.

Ray recalls: "With the time change, we arrived in Grossman's office in time for lunch with the assembled party—immediately repairing to a Chinese restaurant downstairs. All seemed exceedingly high-powered, but as for my immediate situation, I had never even been to a Chinese restaurant before."

It turned out that Dylan was eager to escape Woodstock – and the promise of a voyage on the recently launched Cunard liner the *QE2* and a visit to Tennyson's house tempted him.

But as the Dylan and his wife Sara boarded the vessel on August 15 their three-year-old son Jesse sustained a blow to the head from a cabin door. Dylan abandoned the *QE2* and travelled to the UK by air a few days later.

"All the money and power couldn't get him and lots had tried. I think we succeeded because we were young and amateur," said Ray.

The visit to Tennyson's house did not materialise either, even though it had been converted into a hotel. It was owned by holiday camp founder Fred Pontin and like many on the Isle of Wight at the time, he was horrified by the prospect of young people invading the island – and was not keen to receive Dylan. Fortunately the singer was content with a visit to Osborne House, the island retreat built by Prince Albert for Queen Victoria.

*"All the money and power couldn't get him and lots had tried. I think we succeeded because we were young and amateur"*

George Harrison joined the Dylans at Forelands Farmhouse in Bembridge where the Foulks had arranged for the singer to stay.

The Band and the rest of Bob's team stayed at a hotel nearer to the chosen site for the festival. The site and accommodation were successful apart from the hotel booked for Richie Havens, another American singer songwriter booked to perform.

Ray writes: "Dave Parr drove Richie and his two musicians to their hotel at the end of the festival. Tom Paxton was staying at the same establishment, but Richie and his sidemen had yet to check in."

Their reception was entirely different. Richie and his band were black and were refused entry. The hotel operated a colour bar, something that was not unknown in the 1960s.

Ray's narrative helps you feel the tension arising from organising such a huge event not least making sure people came.

In the end 150,000 people came.

I asked Ray how he felt looking out over a sea of people knowing he was in charge?"

He replied: "An extraordinary sense of responsibility and vulnerability, realising we had set the machine in motion."

Ray describes his first sight of the crowd: "In front of me engulfing my whole field of vision and stretching like Neptune's kingdom



**John Lennon and Yoko Ono watch Dylan perform**



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to the horizon was the assembly rippling and swelling before me. Twenty acres of people!”

At the time journalist Polly Toynbee (who was born on the Islae of Wight) wrote: “The organisers Ron and Ray Foulk, are young promoters. As they wander around backstage they look frightened at what they created. But the efficiency of this huge operation is staggering. The tents, the catering, the tickets: everything runs smoothly.”

Confident and occasionally arrogant performers looked out over the sea of people completely overwhelmed. Singer Marsha Hunt said: “It was impossible to concentrate on one face or to see the audience in full because the expanse of bodies was too vast.”

The festival reflected the burning issues of the period. Tom Paxton sang a new song *Crazy John*. The John in question was Lennon who was in the audience with Yoko Ono. The song alludes to Lennon’s rough treatment at the hands of the media after campaigning for peace in Vietnam.

*Crazy John, you tell them what they don't want to know.*

*They never can hear you, John they have no desire.*

*They're beginning to fear you, John, and the hates getting higher.*

*When the people get lost, they start building a cross.*

This festival was to mark a change in Dylan’s music. He was anxious to shed the aura of sainthood of protest.

In this well-written book, an added pleasure is the 150 pictures— 100 of which have never been published before.

It was the discovery of these photographs that galvanised Ray to write his account of his festival organising days.

He said: “Our festival photographer, a close family friend called Peter Bull, got a job in Australia after the 1970 festival. Forty years later he arrived back on our shores with reels of undeveloped film of the event. He made them available to us.”

Ray also approached Stephen Goldblatt, a friend of Ray’s brother Bill at the Royal College of Art, these days better known as the director of photography on *Batman*, and many other Hollywood feature films. In 1970 Stephen had been given exclusive access backstage at the festival.

“We tracked him down in LA and he gave us access to his pictures too.” said Ray.

With all this material, press cuttings, and his memories, Ray set about writing his memoir of the festivals with the help of his daughter, Caroline.

In the process, he recognised that the 1969 and the 1970 events were very different. Hence volume one is *Stealing Dylan from Woodstock*. Volume two will be called *The Last Great Event* and will be published in November. The full story of Ray’s coup and the amazing pictures make it a must have read for anyone interested in music.

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• Ray and Caroline’s book will be published on 4 June by Medina (£22.95).

