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A time of butterflies and bombers

We saw butterflies turning into bombers. And we weren't dreaming. At the time when the Woodstock festival became an instant media legend in mid-August 1969, melodic yearning for peace was up against the cold steel of American war machinery.

The music and other creative energies that drew 400,000 people to an upstate New York farm that weekend rejected the Vietnam War and the assumptions fueling it. Thirty-five years later, the Jimi Hendrix rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner could still serve as an apt soundtrack for U.S. foreign policy, with bombs bursting in air over urban neighborhoods across much of Iraq.

A Woodstock reunion, scheduled for Aug. 20-22 in the town of Bethel, N.Y., comes while the gap between the nation's commander-in-chief and huge numbers of its citizens is enormous.

Among those on the bill for the 35th anniversary event is the Country Joe Band. Its four musicians were original members of Country Joe and the Fish. No doubt the band's upcoming Woodstock performance will include "Cakewalk to Baghdad," a caustic tune based on boasts – from such right-wing media darlings as Richard Perle and Ken Adelman – that the U.S. military's quest for victory in Iraq would be a "cakewalk."

"Now moms and dads don't worry 'bout / Your soldier boys and girls," the song goes. "We're just sending them cakewalkin' / Around the world / When the coffins come home and the flag unfurls / Cheer for Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Perle."

Of course this song has echoes from the excruciatingly grim humor of the Country Joe and the Fish classic "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die," which resonated not only with antiwar activists but also with many U.S. soldiers in Vietnam a third of a century ago.

The new song, written by Country Joe Band bass player Bruce Barthol, became a CD just days ago. It foreshadows yet more military adventures that are gleams in some policy-makers' eyes: "Next we're gonna cakewalk into Teheran, / Gonna cakewalk to Damascus and Pyong-yin-yang / When we strut on in, / Everybody's gonna cheer /

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They'll be wavin' old glory, / We'll have kegs of beer, just like that..."

Media consumers may like to think that U.S. news outlets have become oh-so-sophisticated in recent decades and are now quite willing to report on tough criticisms of American jingoism. But I'm still waiting for a single major U.S. media outlet to do a decent job of reporting on the relaunched Country Joe Band, currently touring as a superb musical ensemble. Naturally, the band isn't on a corporate label, and you won't find "Cakewalk to Baghdad" at the mall superstore. But the music and lyrics can be heard and read at www.countryjoe.com.

As it happened, a new upsurge of massive violence was engulfing many Iraqi cities on Aug. 10 while the planning board in the town of Bethel issued a permit for the Woodstock reunion to go forward. It will be a much smaller event than the famous first gathering, but the closing stanza of the "Cakewalk" song will be no less resonant when Country Joe McDonald, David Bennett Cohen, Gary "Chicken" Hirsh and Bruce Barthol perform it: "Do you think we'll see those Bush boys patrollin' the streets / Like our soldiers got to do in Basra and Tikrit? / We gonna see Richard Perle cakewalkin' 'round / The streets and alleys of Baghdad town?"

Few of the musicians who played at the first Woodstock will be there this time around. But many will be present in spirit – among them, Richie Havens, who is still touring after all these years. At a recent Havens concert, I was uplifted by his spiritual energy and humanistic commitment. Along the way, he performed the song that Joni Mitchell wrote long ago about Woodstock, the one that tells of a dream about bombers in the sky turning into butterflies.

Norman Solomon is co-author, with Reese Erlich, of "Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You," now available as a free download at coldtype.net.

His columns and other writings can be found at www.normansolomon.com.