

In August 1969, the massive, three-day Woodstock Music & Art Fair had proved that hundreds of thousands of young people could gather peacefully even in a seemingly chaotic environment rich with sex, drugs and rock and roll. Four months later, it would become clear that Woodstock owed its success not to the inherent peacefulness of the 1960s youth culture, but to the organizational acumen of the event's producers. That idea was proven in the violent, uncontrolled chaos of the disastrous Altamont Speedway Free Festival, held on this day in 1969 in the northern California hills 60 miles east of San Francisco.

Altamont was the brainchild of the Rolling Stones, who hoped to cap off their U.S. tour in late 1969 with a concert that would be the West Coast equivalent of Woodstock, in both scale and spirit. Unlike Woodstock, however, which was the result of months of careful planning by a team of well-funded organizers, Altamont was a largely improvised affair that did not even have a definite venue arranged just days before the event. It was only on Thursday, December 4, 1969, that organizers settled on the Altamont Speedway location for a free concert that was by then scheduled to include Santana; the Jefferson Airplane; Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young; and the Grateful Dead, all in support of the headlining Stones. The event would also include, infamously, several dozen members the Hells Angels motorcycle gang acting as informal security staff in exchange for \$500 worth of beer as a "gratuity."

It was dark by the time the concert's next-to-last act, the Grateful Dead, was scheduled to appear. But the Dead had left the venue entirely out of concern for their safety when they learned that Jefferson Airplane singer Marty Balin had been knocked unconscious by one of the Hells Angels in a melee during his band's performance. It was during the Rolling Stones' set, however, that a 21-year-old Hells Angel named Alan Passaro stabbed a gun-wielding 18-year-old named Meredith Hunter to death just 20 feet in front of the stage where Mick Jagger was performing "Under My Thumb." Unaware of what had just occurred, the Rolling Stones completed their set without further incident, bringing an end to a tumultuous day that also saw three accidental deaths and four live births. This event has always intrigued me and I have finally encased my vision of that moment of chaos in ceramic grout and diamond dust mounted on aluminum.