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## Beached Struggles Hang On to Good Vibes

Thousands journey to the Alabama shoreline for three days of music in a mind-bending paradise, where the emotions and conflicts that come with rock and simply being human emerge fully from their shell to dance, sing and reconcile.

By [Michael Stone](#) [Email the author](#) May 27, 2012

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*Editor's Note: West Cobb Patch Editor Michael Stone ventured to Gulf Shores, Alabama last weekend to witness and explore what the Hangout Fest buzz is all about. Joining him was photographer Brittney Cantrell, who took the accompanying pictures.*

When Jack White takes the stage and keeps sleepless onlookers conscious with what sounds like dark pop rock and feels like a choreographed heart attack. When four men under the acronym RHCP play their abundance of Top 40s with the same passion as if they're awaiting their breakout single. When Dave Matthews wraps up the happenings with mellow melodies, cooling listeners down and shoving jack back in the box until next year. When for three days, rock gods, goddesses and demigods give expectant youngsters and experienced oldsters something to groove to, you know you're at a celebration of music and life. This particular bash, on the beach of Gulf Shores, Alabama, goes by the name Hangout Fest.

Words or official figures can do no justice for the endless seas of ravishing people, which reach farther than the stage lights high above the Flaming Lips can shine. They drift about in chuckling clusters, some united through a high school or college, some through work, some simply by age.

Undoubtedly, most everyone came for nothing more than a good time. To escape school or a nine-to-five world. To dress in the conformities of the music-festival culture: tutus, bandanas, neon-colored sunglasses and glittery angel wings. To freely bob their heads to the recognizable tunes of iPods and radio. To ingest and inhale whatever crosses their paths, making the best of friends that in a matter of hours will have figured out the world, only to have it slip back to regularly scheduled programming by daybreak.

Their central objective is simple: absorb all things liberating.

Some might look at such a coming-together and hope for a more meaningful purpose. Perhaps a war protest. Maybe a push for a cancer cure. Perchance a rally for the environment. These activists might ask: "What happened to Woodstock-like festivals, where the freethinkers and revolutionaries of a flower-empowered generation came together to demand societal change?"

Though there are no Woodstock '69 performers at Hangout—gaining popularity in the Sixties, Steve Winwood would have been the only possibility—certainly there is an original Woodstock-goer or five here. Those decades-long rockers would slap such pessimism with a newflash from the past: "We didn't venture to a dairy farm in New York to change the world—everyone there already knew how things were and how things could be. We

were there to party to the fullest, rock the hardest, and throw our youth to the wind in hopes that it drifted to every landmark, country and heap of hippies and hellions before age became a roadblock for life."

In essence, what shouldn't be overlooked is the overlying, advertised purpose of jamborees like Woodstock, Hangout, Bonnaroo, Coachella, Lollapalooza and Voodoo—the music. The throngs there are listening. They're listening and singing along to Michael Franti as he reminds us that an ecological and warless utopia is possible if certain attitudes—intolerance, pugnaciousness, materialistic greed—weren't aloud to dilute positive energies and cohesion. They're listening to all the artists, who just by performing remind us all that in a results-driven world, creativity and expression will always find a way into commercial success.

It's all comparable to a Bob Marley feeling: the realization you can't force others to reroute their attitudes toward progressivism and love, but by being an example, you can instill in people's minds the ethos of the subculture.

Some latch onto the example and don't let go for months. Hangout is somewhat of a summer kickoff for these traveling transients, who go from festival to festival any way they can. And once they get there, they get in any way they can: schmoozing, climbing over unguarded fences, actually paying with the money made at the serving job they quit to go on the journey.

They don't question whether big-name bands like the Red Hot Chili Peppers are weary of repeating the songs that were originally written with heart and soul but have turned into radio-play commodities. They grasp that music deities no longer have a financial reason for playing, nor are they trying to reach the top of stardom hill. Such tribulations were conquered long ago, and now all that remains is a true love for the rhythms and rhymes. It's as if for rock bands, those who overcome the middle ground—the time between college house parties and festival headlining—but refuse to stop satisfying fans' ears are the only ones who deserve immortality.

"Take a look, it's on display for you. Come down, no not today."

Taking a look isn't the hard part; the real struggle is the interpretation of it all—the lyrics, the stage gimmicks, the mass exodus of crowds, and a small beach town being flipped upside down by an invasion of seekers of self-indulgence.

But thanks to the civility of Hangout-ers, a troop that tops about 35,000 daily, you're free to peacefully explore such struggles as you let yourself fade into mad solos, challenging time signatures, and music that is, quite frankly, unparalleled (hence why Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros are playing their psychedelic folk on a towering stage before thousands instead of in a small dark tavern).

Just like with snowflakes, there is no exact replica of a person's combination of internal conflicts. But when you carry all of them to the retreat known as a music festival, the artists on stage and your comrades in the trenches will help navigate you through, whether or not you or they realize it. Their minds too are wading in a swamp, trying to find the single beam of light shining through the trees that will take them to their respective versions of heaven. For some, rock 'n' roll may be the swamp that represents the struggle; for others, it may be the light that pulls you free; but for most, it's a combination of both. And at festivals like Hangout, Mr. Winwood is there to guide you on a raft big enough for you and all your friends. As you all float along in the swamp, together you sing:

"Dear Mr. Fantasy play us a tune,  
Something to make us all happy,  
Do anything, take us out of this gloom  
Sing a song, play guitar, make it snappy."

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