

# LIFE'S STILL GROOVY FOR VIBES HOST WAVY GRAVY

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Larger-than-life characters don't start out that way and '60s icon Wavy Gravy is no exception. He wore many hats — and fake noses — before becoming a star of the counterculture at Woodstock in the summer of 1969.

And here we are, nearly four decades later, and Wavy Gravy still embodies the spirit of that time, spending his days bringing love and humor to those who need it most.

Whether it's teaching kids at his Camp Winnarainbow — on the site of The Hog Farm, the famous collective he spearheaded in northern California in the '60s — or helping to improve eyesight in Third-World countries, Wavy Gravy has walked it like he talked it when it comes to helping others.

Camp Winnarainbow, a circus and performing arts camp he runs with wife Jahanara, takes up most of his time these days, but he has made room on his schedule for the Gathering of the Vibes, which starts Thursday at Seaside Park in Bridgeport.

"I love Gathering of the Vibes," Wavy Gravy said in a recent phone interview from the camp's Laytonville, Calif., office. "Because of the children's camp, I can only do a couple shows in the summer and I do Gathering of the Vibes because they allow me to do my thing, which is basically dissolving the line between the stage and the audience."

"What I do I set up an altar in front of the stage where people could put their sacred mojo stuff and I keep candles and incense burning at all times. And between bands, I open up the microphone for people to share a song or a poem or an announcement."

This will be his fourth Vibes, but he didn't appear at the festival in either of its previous two stops in Bridgeport in 1999 and 2000.

For the man born Hugh Romney in East Greenbush, N.Y., 71 years ago, this year's Vibes will be a homecoming of sorts, as he spent his teen years in Connecticut, graduating from Hall High School in West Hartford in 1954.

He would go on to Boston University, where he studied jazz and poetry, two art forms that would eventually lead to New York and nis calling in life.

"I had read in *Time* magazine that they had done this poetry with jazz in San Francisco and I



Wavy Gravy when he was announcer during the Woodstock music festival in August 1969. Wavy Gravy today, below, runs a camp for kids and works to improve eyesight in developing nations.

thought, 'I could write a poem. I know some musicians. Let's do it,'" he said.

"Then I began to read my poetry in the coffeehouses of Greenwich Village, ending up at the Cadillac of coffeehouses, a place called The Gaslight, where I became the poetry director and then the entertainment director.

"I also talked the owner into hiring folk musicians to go between the poets and that's how I got to know people like Bob Dylan. . . . We ended up sharing a room over The Gaslight and [the Dylan song] 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall' was written on my typewriter."

Though he lived in New York, he did keep a connection with the Hartford area.

"I studied sculpture with Wolfgang Behl at the Wadsworth Atheneum and began to do jazz and poetry at the Golden Lion in Hartford, a restaurant/watering hole near the train station," he recalled. "It was a cool scene. We would come in from New York and do these shows. Every Monday, people would line up enormously and we got to keep the cover charge."

"They didn't even know what a cover charge was before we got there," he added with a laugh.

Reading poems every night was starting to get "tedious," Wavy Gravy said, so he decided a change was necessary.

"I began to extrapolate my daily adventures before reading poems because it was nice to talk about what happened that day," he said. "One day, this guy came into the club and saw me do that and he said, 'Hey, skip the poetry,' and he put me in a suit and started mailing me around the country."



"The next thing I know, I had become a stand-up satirist and I'm opening for Peter, Paul & Mary, Ian & Sylvia, John Coltrane and Thelonus Monk."

Wavy Gravy would eventually move west and end up taking over the property of a farmer who fell ill. In exchange for tending to the land and the pigs, he and his friends had a place to live and, just like that, The Hog Farm collective was born.

With the money the group earned from appearing as extras in Otto Preminger's forgotten stab at comedy, "Skidoo," buses were purchased and soon the "Hog Farm and Friends in Open Celebration" traveling show hit the road.

"As a result of that, we were scooped up by [executive producer] Michael Lang to do the Woodstock festival," Wavy Gravy said. "Because the guy who built the stage was familiar with my work as a poet and as a stand-up, I was given the mic and I got to do the announcements at Woodstock."

"Although I had recorded an album and had a small career as a stand-up comedian, this catapulted me to a whole other level."

"I've actually survived all three Woodstocks," he said with a chuckle. "The first one made me famous, the second two got me paid."

Wavy Gravy also got paid when Ben & Jerry's named an ice cream after him, money he used to bring underprivileged kids from the Bay Area and from an Indian reservation in South Dakota to Camp Winnarainbow.

Helping people on the reservations also is part of the charitable

work he does with Seva, a Berkeley, Calif., organization.

"The charity that I've linked my life to is Seva," Wavy Gravy said. "We work on curing preventable blindness in third-world countries. Eighty percent of the people in the world that are blind don't need to be blind. For about \$30, they can get cataract surgery in an eye camp in the Third World, which is fantastic."

Seva, he said, also works on community-building projects and agriculture and sanitation pro-

grams and to control diabetes on reservations through improved nutrition.

"They've actually named a stud buffalo after me on the Winnebago reservation, so I'm not just a pretty face and a former ice cream anymore," Wavy Gravy said.

"But there's also one named Mike Bison, so that turned off the charm for me a little bit. He'll probably take off my buffalo's ear."

More information: [www.connpost.com/vibes](http://www.connpost.com/vibes)