

The New York Times

How Cold War Politics Destroyed One of the Most Popular Bands in America

A new documentary chronicles the strange, intrigue-filled saga of Blood, Sweat & Tears and its disastrous Eastern Bloc tour in 1970.



A scene from “What the Hell Happened to Blood, Sweat & Tears?,” a documentary about the band’s 1970 odyssey. Laura Soloff/Abramorama

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March 31, 2023, 11:28 a.m. ET

The New York Times

Last year, Rolling Stone compiled a list of “The 50 Worst Decisions in Music History.” Near the top, alongside very high-profile errors in judgment like Decca Records’ rejection of the Beatles, there was a much less familiar episode: the time Blood, Sweat & Tears embarked on an Eastern European concert tour, underwritten by the State Department while the Vietnam War was raging. The reputation of the U.S. government was in tatters for young people, meaning the band looked, as the magazine put it, like “propaganda pawns — which is, more or less, what they were.”

Now the band members are telling their side of this bizarre story in the new documentary “[What the Hell Happened to Blood, Sweat & Tears?](#)” While everyone involved agrees with [Rolling Stone](#)’s conclusion — that the band’s career never recovered from that 1970 tour — the saga turns out to be more complicated than was previously known.

“This isn’t a music doc, it’s a political thriller,” the director John Scheinfeld said in a telephone interview. “It’s about a group of guys who unknowingly walked into this rat’s nest, and how political forces impacted a group of individuals.”

It is largely forgotten just how big Blood, Sweat & Tears was in its day. “Child Is Father to the Man,” the band’s 1968 debut, drew critical notice for its blend of big-band horns with rock and soul structure and style, but struggled commercially. After the group recruited the stentorian Toronto vocalist David Clayton-Thomas, its self-titled second album exploded, generating three Top 5 singles: “Spinning Wheel,” “And When I Die” and “You’ve Made Me So Very Happy.”

The band performed at Woodstock (though, like many of the bigger groups on the bill, its management refused participation in the movie that made the festival a legend), and “Blood, Sweat & Tears” won the [album of the year Grammy](#) over the Beatles’ “Abbey Road” and “Johnny Cash at San Quentin.”

But in 1969, Blood, Sweat & Tears had to cancel a concert in Maryland when Clayton-Thomas was detained by Canadian immigration authorities; the United States had blocked his re-entry. No explanation was given, but the band assumed it was politically motivated.

“I thought that because he’s Canadian, and we were — not collectively, but individually — speaking against the war,” the drummer Bobby Colomby said by phone, “some ultra-white congressmen probably said, ‘Who the hell does this Canadian guy think he is?’”

The band’s manager, Larry Goldblatt, met with officials to resolve his singer’s visa status, and what happened next remains unclear — whether he or the State Department came up with the idea of having Blood, Sweat & Tears tour Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia as a way to promote democracy in Soviet-aligned countries that were potentially exploring closer ties to the West.

“To use the language we use today, a quid pro quo was agreed upon,” Scheinfeld said. “If the band does this tour, the State Department will make David’s immigration problems go away. The band gets to keep their lead singer, and the State Department has the hottest band going working to advance their interests in Eastern Europe, so it’s kind of a win-win.”

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A planned movie of the tour fell apart as did a proposed TV special. The footage, smuggled out of the Eastern Bloc, was found in a vault. Abramorama

Clayton-Thomas noted that such cultural exchange tours had been happening for decades, so the band didn't think it was a big deal. "Most of the guys were jazz musicians, and they were used to the idea that [Louis Armstrong would go to Moscow](#), and they'd send the Bolshoi Ballet to Lincoln Center," he said by phone. Only the guitarist Steve Katz voted against the trip.

It was agreed that the tour would be filmed for a possible documentary, organized by the executive producer Mal Klein. Blood, Sweat & Tears played seven concerts between June 17 and July 7, 1970, and when they first arrived in Yugoslavia, they were surprised by what they saw.

"The kids were wearing ripped jeans and they had cafes and rock 'n' roll and street fairs," Clayton-Thomas said. "We thought, 'Wow, they've been lying to us — this ain't so bad.' Then we went to Romania, and you could hear the Iron Curtain slam shut behind you."

Dan Klein, Mal Klein's then 14-year-old son, tagged along and described the whole thing as feeling "like a James Bond movie." He said the officials in Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania made no effort to disguise the bugs they placed in hotel rooms, and he recounted being observed during meals.

"There was a man sitting at the table reading a newspaper and drinking a cup of coffee," Klein said by phone, "and after a while, he got up and left, and another person sat down at the same table and picked up the same newspaper and continued drinking the same cup of coffee."

But things turned from comedy to tragedy at the Bucharest concerts, where audience members got too rowdy and were beaten by security guards. The second night, the band members were instructed to dial things down, and when they didn't, the guards set dogs loose on the crowd.

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“My father, in his naïveté, thought that if he got the camera people to film the policemen and the dogs attacking the spectators that it would make them stop,” Klein said. “But that was just stupid; that just made them angrier.” The crew had to smuggle its footage out of Romania, using blank reels of film as a decoy for officials to confiscate.

Back in the United States, the musicians came under fire for aiding the government, accused of being a “fascist rock band” by both the underground press and mainstream journalists. The trouble immediately became evident at a hastily arranged, hostile Los Angeles news conference.

“We came back saying, ‘Yeah, Nixon is awful, Vietnam is the worst thing in the world, but communism? You don’t want that here,’” Colomby said. “But back then, for the extreme left, that wasn’t acceptable to say.”

Henry Kissinger even sent Richard M. Nixon a memo about the tour, and the president scrawled a note at the bottom inquiring how “youth leaders might get the message.” On July 25, the band played a sold-out show at Madison Square Garden. Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies staged a protest, throwing horse manure onstage.

The damage was simply too great. “Blood, Sweat & Tears 3,” which was actually released during the Eastern European tour, went to No. 1, but the group never had another hit single, and album sales plummeted. The strains of the tour and the backlash exacerbated tensions between band members, and by the end of 1971, four of the nine musicians — including Clayton-Thomas — had left the group.



In its heyday, the band was among the biggest in the country, beating out the Beatles and Johnny Cash for the Grammy for album of the year. Abramorama

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As for the planned documentary, there was no formal directive, but Scheinfeld suspects that the footage, especially of the Romanian riots, was deemed too negative to help American efforts to thaw the Cold War. The feature film morphed into a proposed TV special, but that also seemed to go nowhere. What started as a win-win wound up being a disaster for all sides.

And that was the end of the story, until Scheinfeld — whose film subjects have included John Lennon and Harry Nilsson — was introduced to Colomby, who had seen “[Chasing Trane](#),” the director’s 2017 John Coltrane documentary. They got to talking, Scheinfeld learned about the 1970 tour debacle, and he set out on a coast-to-coast mission, combing through storage vaults and government facilities to locate the lost material.

Scheinfeld determined that while 65 hours of film had been shot, both the production company and the postproduction house had gone out of business in 1971. After months of fruitless searching, an email showed up from a vault that Scheinfeld had already checked: Someone had found a reference to Blood, Sweat & Tears in a file, which turned out to be a pristine, 53-minute print of the abandoned television edit. That footage became the spine of “What the Hell Happened to Blood, Sweat & Tears?”

For Colomby, revisiting this pivotal chapter revealed much that he didn’t know, but he offered no apologies and no regrets for making the deal and taking the trip.

“We were the most innocent musicians you ever met in your life,” he said. “We just wanted to play well and do something that would affect music in a positive way. So if you ask, ‘Would you do this again?’ In a heartbeat. It was fascinating. It was eye-opening in every sense of the word.”