

Classic Posters - Promoter Bill Graham

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By Michael Erlewine

Bill Graham has a reputation as a pretty rough character, and a well-deserved one as I can well remember from the one shouting match I had with him, when my band opened for Cream at the Fillmore Auditorium in the Summer of Love, 1967. I didn't like his manner then and it has taken me some years to come to understand that, aside from his brusque style, he has made an enormous contribution to rock and roll in general and to the San Francisco (and poster) scene, in particular.

It helped me to understand where he was coming from, where he came from, so let's start with that.

Born Jan 8, 1931 in Berlin as Wolfgang Grajonca, of Russian-Jewish parents, his father died shortly after his birth and his mother was forced to place both his sister and himself in an orphanage. The two siblings were in France as part of a student-exchange program when the Germans invaded, and Graham and his sister were part of a group of 65 Jewish children and one Red Cross worker who fled across the Pyrenees to Spain. Bill Graham was one of the eleven children who survived the march, many others dropping off along the way or dying in the process. His sister never made it.

After arriving in America, Bill Graham was raised in a foster home in the Bronx. He assumed the name "Graham" and became an

American citizen in 1949. He was attending City College in New York, when he was drafted in 1956 into the army during the Korean War, earning both a Bronze star and a Purple Heart. It was after this that he relocated to San Francisco and became a businessman.

As mentioned, Graham was drafted, forcing him to leave school. From the start of his arm experience, he had several run-ins with authorities, a major one during boot camp and another while serving in combat. In the troop ship over, Graham worked in the kitchen, making extra money at night selling pilfered sandwiches to hungry soldiers. His fascination with gambling was also tweaked on that trip.

He mad himself unpopular with his superiors by pointing out that he was serving in the army and was not himself yet a citizen. What he was after was to help his sisters immigrate to America. He came very close to having a court marshal and finally got early leave and then release from duty with the death of his stop-mother, and then his step-father.

The Catskills and On to the West Coast

Next came a period of time working in the Catskills at some of the largest Jewish resorts, in the kitchen, first as a busboy and prep person, and later as a waiter. According to reports, he was in his element and a hot commodity. He ran a gambling house on the side at one of the main resorts.

After relocating to Los Angeles and then on to

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San Francisco, he mainly worked in various business capacities, working for Allis Chalmers (the tractor firm), where he met his wife Bonnie McLean. He wanted to act and work in the theater, but was mostly frustrated in these attempts.

He was making over \$21,000 with Allis Chalmers, but gave it up to take over management of the struggling San Francisco Mime Troupe, a street-theater group, for a fraction of that salary. Due to an archaic law that limited any group performing in a public park to two performances a year, Bill Graham engineered a public confrontation with authorities, making sure reporters and other important city leaders were present. This resulted in a number of arrests and a great amount of publicity.

It was Graham who engineered the series of three appeal parties for the mime troupe, that not only raised much-needed cash, but opened his eyes to the commercial possibilities of putting on similar events. That first event was this large party, packed to the brim, that raised some \$4200. All the hip crowd in San Francisco showed up and it was a huge success. He received hundreds of phone calls and letters after that event asking him to hold another party, and the heck with having to have a cause. They just wanted the party.

The second appeals party was held in the Fillmore Auditorium, and thanks to a plug from Bob Dylan, who was playing in Berkeley, it too was very well attended. It raised some \$6000

and even had a nascent kitchen that served matzo-ball soup and salad. This was December 10, 1965.

Another appeal scheduled for January 14, 1966, the first one to charge admission rather than request a donation. It was after the third benefit, that Graham knew that he wanted to do more events like these, and like many of his partygoers, the heck with having to raise money for a cause.

According to some mime-troupe members, Graham made a pitch to the troupe to market the emerging “hippie” culture through scheduled events, and most of the other members saw it as an attempt by Graham to exploit the emerging culture as a business. There ended up being a vote and they all voted against him, some 48 to 2, the two being himself and one other. Graham walked out and went on his own way from that point forward, but he now had a much clearer idea of what he wanted to accomplish.

The Trips Festival

The next major turning point came when Graham was invited, due to his organizational talent, to help organize the forthcoming 3-day Trips Festival that, while already scheduled, seemed to be languishing and not coming together quickly or well enough. The Trips Festival was advertised to that public as a non-drug event that would create the atmosphere and ambience of and LSD-inspired event, the public’s chance to get a taste of the emerging

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culture.

There has been a lot written about the Trips Festival and it makes for fascinating reading, if you know something about the players and have the time. Keep in mind that there were something like over 3000 people a night in attendance. To summarize all this, Bill Graham had been brought in to better organize what had been to that point more of a loosely organized event, mainly the work of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. Well, of course, the two approaches did not mesh and thus all the funny stories.

Most of them take the form of Graham trying to control what was, and had always been, not about control, like Ken Kesey dressed in a space suit and helmet letting dozens of bikers in the back door for free, much to Graham's horror. As Kesey explains, these were acid-test members, who had always been there and helped to create what the event was. They had no need or reason to pay. They were, for all practical purposes, part of the show.

Graham, of course, who was running around with his cardigan sweater and clipboard saw these freeloaders as lost revenue. The funniest story I read was that Kesey and other leaders did not even speak to Graham, who stood yelling at them not to let these people in. In fact, Kesey with his space suit, and large round bubble helmet with visor up, simply turned to Graham, looked in right in the eyes and with a nod of his head, flipped the visor down. He

then turned away from Graham and continued to let people in.

Graham, in turn, was not exactly sure who these people were. As the story goes, a few months later, one of these leaders, Ken Babbs, was at a Fillmore show, now firmly in Graham's control. Bill Graham spots and recognizes him and yells out "Trips Festival. Trips Festival," while banging his palm against his forehead. Ken Babbs responds in return, by banging his palm to his forehead, while crying "Asshole. Asshole." Of course, Babbs was ejected from the Fillmore, at once.

It was during and after the Trips Festival that Graham realized this is what he wanted to do, put on these great theatrical events. He began planning a series of three dance concerts, Feb. 4th, 5th, and 6th, 1967. Graham restructured and expanded the light show concept, filling all the surrounding walls with moving light. He set up areas before the stage to sit in, and plenty of dancing room. He had black lights, face painting, balloons on the floor blown about by hidden air blowers.

Big Bad Bill Graham

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of stories about how rude, harsh, conniving, etc. Graham could be, and most of them are no doubt true, having experienced his bedside manner myself.

Again, it helps to remember that Graham was a refugee and probably greatly influenced by the difficulties of his survival and entrance into this

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country. Graham's account of waiting for placement in a foster home as a young child, new to America, is heartbreaking. Week after week, couple after couple, he would be left standing there alone, after having been hopeful, having dressed up, and so on. He was crushed, time after time. Mix a little of this with his refugee background, and a few tales from his Catskills period, where he was no doubt an "Operator," in every sense of the word, and a New York-style operator at that. Now mix all of this into the West Coast scene and then put him up beside his main competitor, Chet Helms, and you have contrast.

Chet Helms, perhaps the most seminal force in the whole emerging dancehall scene, while not a flower child himself (he was older than that), but a leader of the movement, with all of the counter-culture values, liberal ethics, and hippie sense of outrage and honor on one side. Against this you place Bill Graham, who not only screamed and yelled at people on a daily basis, spewing expletives, but also was not above doing whatever it took, short of breaking an agreement, to make his projects succeed. That is the comparison, and from a hippie point of view, there is no comparison. Helms is the saint, Graham the sinner.

Let's finish up with a couple of the 'bad' things Graham did, at least from my point of view, and all of the different versions seem to converge as these being true. First, when the Family Dog crew went for a discussion with Graham about staging their two events on

different weekends, so each would have a solid attendance, they naively revealed to Graham that they planned to use the Fillmore Auditorium, and at the ridiculously low rate of \$45 a night. Graham went right out, found the landlord, and signed a lease to control that venue for some number of years. Perhaps not illegal, but we might all agree that this was not hippie-ethics in action. His response, when being challenged about it, was something like: he gets up early in the morning, and Chet Helms does not, suggesting that he was a businessman, and Helms mostly a fuzzy-minded hippie.

To add insult to injury, when Chet Helms debuted the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, at great financial risk to himself, but with great success, Graham immediately sought out Butterfield's manager, Albert Grossman, and locked up all foreseeable dates for that band in San Francisco. Again, not illegal, but also showing no consideration or comradeship with Helms, who was supposed to be his partner in part of this. And so it goes. I won't even go into some of the stories about Graham and the poster artists, but they are similar. So what's good about the guy?

Bill Graham's Contribution

Well, aside from being a tireless worker and undefeatable businessman, the most important quality of Bill Graham was his absolute dedication to his customers, the endless stream of music lovers who flocked to his productions and still do to this day. Graham spared no

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effort or expense to provide a first-class experience for his audience. If you read what is written about him, a picture emerges of a man who dearly cared for and provided for his customers, much like a husband for a wife. The old adage of being married to the job seems to be perfect here.

Of course, it is superior business to look after the customer, but Graham seemingly carried this to ideal lengths, often doing much of the simple manual work himself, sweeping the floors, relocating props, whatever needed to be done. He was meticulous about every aspect of the experience, in particular the sound system. It would not be out of line to say, that the modern sound performance systems owe Graham a huge debt for moving this technology forward on the fast track.

And it was the total experience of the listener, the customer, that Graham was concerned about. It is repeated and very clear from the writing that he has done. Whatever Bill Graham did to offend others in matters of rudeness or whatever, he was perfect in his care for and concern to provide the very best musical experience and just plain 'experience' of any promoter that I am aware of. For this, we are all grateful.

Fillmore Auditorium to Fillmore West

A major event in the line of Fillmore shows was the move from the original Fillmore Auditorium to what came to be called the Fillmore West. This occurred after Martin Luther King's death.

The original Fillmore Auditorium was located in a largely Black neighborhood. After King was assassinated, there were an increasing number of events in that neighborhood, purse snatching, vocal threats, and muggings. This did not bode well for the Fillmore and attendance dropped. Graham had to do something, and fast.

The rumor was that the Carousel Ballroom was going to close. There was any number of entrepreneurs who would have liked to get their hands on it. After all, it was clear that Bill Graham was making real money at the Fillmore, and with the public nervous about going there, there was this opportunity in the air.

Graham, true to form, was proactive. Finding that the owner of the Carousel Ballroom was a very rich man, who live in Ireland, when attempts to reach the man, who was always busy, failed, Graham hopped on a plane and flew to Ireland to meet him. They met in the airport, had breakfast, followed by a lot of drinks, as they got to know one another. At the end of it all, businessman stood up and left, leaving Graham with an agreement for a three-year lease. The Carousel Ballroom soon became the Fillmore West.

LSD Experience

Another fascinating story is the endless attempts to dose Bill Graham with LSD. Graham, who drank and had smoked a little weed, was not at all interested in taking LSD.

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Talk about loss of control? He had seen enough examples and he took great lengths to stay away from the stuff. On the other side, any number of his fellow workers, in particular the Grateful Dead, thought that there was nothing Graham needed more than a LSD trip to soften him up, give him a glance at their reality, and to help him take a giant step in letting go a bit. And so there was a cat and mouse game that went on for years, where the workers would sneak LSD into every conceivable bit of food and drink, in the hopes that Graham would happen on to it.

And they got him at last, by placing tiny drops of an LSD-laced liquid on the top of unopened pop cans, that were already sweating with condensation. The cans looked sealed to Graham and he popped the top of one and, unknowingly, took the love potion.

The reports of Graham's acid trip are pretty funny. In essence, he soon found himself on stage with the Grateful Dead playing a gong,,, and then a cowbell. And he played for four hours straight! According to the dead, Graham saw during that trip more of what the music was really about, that it was more than just a bunch of stoned hippies. The Dead felt he saw their band and the music as inherently good and as Mickey Hart says "He likes good. Bill likes good, because he's seen enough horror."

The Fillmore West was the stopping off place for almost every major act of the period. Graham opened a second club, the Fillmore East in New York City in the spring of 1968.

While it was patterned after the Fillmore West, it had one major difference, that being fixed seating instead of the open dance floor of the San Francisco venues. It went on to be a very strong commercial success. The scene went on as described until the early 1970s.

The Closings

Bill Graham decided to close the Fillmore East in the spring of 1971, to the shock of almost everyone. It was making money, but there were other problems. The whole scene had changed. The acts that had once played the Fillmores were now playing Carnegie Hall and huge stadiums, and could not/would not restrict themselves to the fees and attendance levels of the smaller venues.

Although I have not seen it directly stated, from my reading of that time period, what really may have led Graham to close these places was the change in character of the bands and those who managed the bands. Before only Bill Graham was the business shark, others were the talent, which was being presented. By 1970-1971, everyone and anyone connected with talent, had a whole back of tricks and demands. They were out voodooing the voodoo man himself. I believe Graham found it distasteful and it is everlastingly to his credit that he brought to a close an era, that had been known for its purity, before it self-destructed. The bloom was off the rose and the age of innocence ended.

The Fillmore West closed soon after the

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Fillmore East and so ended one of the most wonderful music eras in this country's history. Graham went on to book an almost endless series of tours and concerts, just not in a fixed location. He continued to do many benefit concerts, much as he had done from the very beginning. He produced tours for Bob Dylan, The Band, George Harrison, and Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young, not to mention the Rolling Stones' 1981 world tour. He did the now famous "Last Waltz" concert in 1976, which became a Martin Scorsese film. As a manager, he handled Santana, the Neville Brothers, Eddie Money, Blues Traveler, and Joe Satriani. And so on.

He also pursued his love of theater and acting, appearing in cameo roles in movies like "The Cotton Club" and "Apocalypse now."

Bill Graham was killed in a helicopter crash October 25, 1991, on his return from visiting a concert by Huey Lewis and the News. The world of promoters has not seen his equal since.

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