

# JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

## Larry Magid, Legendary Concert Promoter, Celebrated at Jewish Museum

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Larry Magid at RFK Stadium in Washington, D.C., in 1976.

It was an emotional night at the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH), when an appreciative standing-room-only crowd packed the auditorium to pay tribute to one of the city's legends.

After a reception, a boomer-heavy crowd took their seats to listen to a conversation between Peter Crimmins — arts and culture reporter for WHYY — and guest of honor Larry Magid, a Jewish Philadelphian who revolutionized the live music business as a music promoter and cofounder of Electric Factory Concerts.

Magid's appearance was part of the museum's Dreamers and Doers series and dovetailed with the current exhibit on concert promoter Bill Graham.

Museum CEO and Gwen Goodman Director Ivy L. Barsky introduced Crimmins and Magid, saying the latter transformed the city with his "passion, drive and a philanthropic heart. Like the museum itself, deeply rooted in Philadelphia and the geography of this place, [Magid] has a great national footprint and identity and has contributed great things to the world from this perch on Independence Mall."



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Crimmins didn't have to ask too many questions to get the voluble Magid to reminisce, from his Jewish boyhood in West Philadelphia to the two Tony Awards he received as producer of Billy Crystal's Broadway show, *700 Sundays*.

In the years in between, Magid fostered the careers of music legends too numerous to name, as well as shaped the city's landscape by opening Electric Factory and bringing his expertise to the Spectrum, TLA, Tower Theater and Bijou Cafe. In 1985 he worked with Bill Graham and Bob Geldof to create Live Aid, and shepherded 2005's Live 8 concerts as well.

Magid developed his passion as a young boy, going to shows at age 11 and enjoying Wednesday-night dances in the basement of his synagogue.

"Kids from the neighborhood, 150 or so, would go to the synagogue," Magid recalled. "It was a way for the synagogue to communicate with the younger people, and it was great."

He also went with friends to see R&B acts at the Uptown, hung out at the Latin Casino nightclub and even once appeared on *American Bandstand*, which filmed around the corner from his high school.

As he spoke with Crimmins, Magid frequently got emotional when remembering the way that music shaped his life, such as the day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

"That night I was seeing a girl in the Feltonville section and we were at the house, and I said, 'I can't stay here.'"

The two thought about seeing a movie but everything was closed.

"Then I saw an ad in the paper for the Uptown. I said, 'Let's go to the Uptown' — it was open. I think the Temptations were there with seven or eight other acts. She said no. I said, 'I can't sit here.' I went and saw the show, I was the only white person there. I had a great time. Of course, you come out, and JFK is still dead. ... That just took away the pain for a little while."

But Magid got most choked up when talking about the battle to save Electric Factory's first incarnation in a former tire factory at 22nd and Arch streets.

The club opened when Magid was 26, and had just moved back to Philadelphia from New York, where he'd spent a few years working at a large talent agency.

"[In New York] I was working with Jimi Hendrix, Cream, working with a lot of acts that hadn't broken but you could see the pattern, and I always had this feeling that it could be very successful in Philadelphia," said Magid, whose New York agency also handled huge acts like the Beatles and Bob Dylan.

Magid and three brothers — Allen, Herby and Jerry Spivak — joined with fellow promoter Shelley Kaplan and opened the venue in February 1968. It was only open for 30 months, but its short tenure was revolutionary. Acts that played there included Jimi Hendrix; Miles Davis; Pink Floyd; Jeff Beck; the Allman Brothers; Frank Zappa; Janis Joplin; Jefferson Airplane; Van Morrison; James Taylor; Buddy Rich; and so many more.

The bookings often got creative: one time, Cannonball Adderly shared a bill with the Grateful Dead; another time, an orchestra performed while City Council members Jack Kelly and Thacher Longstreth narrated. Tickets were cheap: Entrance to the Who's first American performance of *Tommy* cost \$4.

Part of the club's early success owed to Magid's first marketing brainstorm: "22nd Street went north and it was the only entrance from Center City to the expressway," he remembered. "I said, 'you know what? Let's keep the doors closed so the cars driving by will see these people waiting in line.' ... There would be a lot of people for a big show like Joplin or Hendrix and people would drive up and say, 'What's going on?'"

The club's high profile drew more than just customers; it also brought the opprobrium of then-Police Chief Frank Rizzo, who fought to shut it down.

“Somebody came to our office and said, ‘You gotta go to the front door, you have a visitor,’” Magid recalled. “I walk out and there is Frank Rizzo — this guy was a mountain, bigger than life, immense. He’s standing there with a couple of police. He says, ‘You own this place?’ I say, ‘Hold on. I’ll get [the owners].’ I was scared.”

Rizzo scared the Spivaks too, despite the fact that their father was a bootlegger and they were all “rough-and-tumble guys,” as Magid put it. Rizzo told the brothers: “I’m going to turn this back into a tire factory.” The next week Rizzo came back with then-Mayor Tate and said they’d have to close.

The David vs. Goliath court case that ensued found Electric Factory’s young counterculture owners joining forces with two constitutional lawyers — one of whom, Richard Atkins, was in the NMAJH audience. Remembering the way the community rallied around him, Magid’s eyes filled with tears and he had to take a breath before continuing.

“An amazing thing happened. There were a lot of people who testified for us, on our behalf — city councilmen, business owners, neighbors.”

Magid explained that the battle was about more than just music.

“We became the rallying point not only for Philadelphia but for other people around the country that you could stand up to City Hall as long as you were right,” he said.

In subsequent years, Magid grew so successful, he was one of just a handful of music promoters in the country.

“It seems like there was one guy in each city who was *the* rock guy,” Peter Crimmins pointed out. “Philly had you, and you sort of owned rock and roll in the city to a large degree.”

Crimmins and Magid also spoke about Bill Graham, one of the primary inspirations for the evening’s talk.

“Bill was not a music guy,” said Magid of his close friend, as he recalled working with Graham on Live Aid in 1985. “Bill wanted to do it in New York or Washington, but somehow I convinced him to do it in Philadelphia.”

Live Aid was to be broadcast on TV, which meant a lot of cooperation with network producers.

“Bill and the TV guys did not get along at all. But if you knew Bill, not many people got along with Bill. He had a temper.”

For weeks Graham fought the TV producers for event control, until concert organizer Bob Geldof called Magid and told him they were firing Graham and putting him in charge. Instead, Magid played peacekeeper and Graham was given a role during the concert that would not interfere with TV production.

Magid said his vast career — which included doing tours with Billy Crystal, Robin Williams and Richard Pryor, “the three funniest people I’ve seen in my life” — was mostly the result of things falling into place. “Things just worked out for me very organically.”

Now, of all the early rock promoters, “I’m the only person who’s still active,” Magid said. “I told my wife I was going to retire several years ago and she said, ‘Don’t plan on coming home for lunch.’ So I just keep working.”

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