



Bill Graham Exhibit at NMAJH Worth a Trip

By Neil Bardhan | on October 5, 2016 | 0 Comment

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Bill Graham and the Rock & Roll Revolution has come to the National Museum of American Jewish History on Independence Mall as the latest of the museum's special exhibitions.

The exhibit, originally at the [Skirball Cultural Center](#) in Los Angeles, honors the life, work, and legacy of Bill Graham, an enormously influential and prolific music promoter. Graham started in San Francisco in the '60s with acts like The Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix. He worked right up until his tragic death in 1991. What the museum has on their fifth floor space is a “cacophonous installation that reflects the inspiration,” as one organizer described it recently. “We wanted to fill the building in the rock and roll spirit.” To that end, multiple areas of the museum feature Graham-related items. For instance, the concourse on the lowest level has an array of Graham’s legendary [New Year’s Eve costumes](#) and the psychedelic [Joshua Light Show](#). Artists and designers may particularly enjoy the concert posters showcased on that level.

Bill Graham moved to San Francisco in the mid-1960s, right as the music that defined that time and place started to heat up. This was a stroke of luck on Graham’s part and it let him interface with the artists who helped shape so much of music for the rest of the Twentieth Century, some of whom are even still active. The “Bill Graham Rocks” exhibition shows off Graham’s personal work as well as the musicians related to his career.

One tip about visiting: Hit up the QR code at the start for access to an audio tour. I thought I could hop on mid-visit, and I couldn’t. NMJAH rarely has original voices available for their exhibits, but this time you can hear snippets of Graham himself throughout.



“Bill Graham Rocks” features many kinds of objects from Graham’s life. A Holocaust refugee, he came to the United States as a child. His citizenship and military documents are on display, as is his “dancehall keeper” permit when he first opened a performance venue. You’ll see breathtaking photos, psychedelic posters, and historic instruments, like a guitar Jimi Hendrix smashed. Listening stations abound so you can stream a number of acts, including Jefferson Airplane and the Allman Brothers Band. The exhibit is organized chronologically, with each decade highlighted. Within a decade, individual panels represent a particular band, venue, or event. Bill Graham and his company Bill Graham Presents were behind not just epic Grateful Dead tours, but massive events such as [the closing of Winterland Ballroom](#) and The Band’s [The Last Waltz](#). One such event with local relevance was Live Aid, held in Philly in July 1985. Graham often drew attention to humanitarian causes through his artists’ performances.

One thing I found surprising, given the number of original items on display, was that the Bill Graham Presents office was largely destroyed in a 1985 firebombing by Neo-Nazis. Some remains from that office, such as a partially melted telephone. In general, little of the exhibit relates to Graham’s Jewish background except for this incident and aspects of his arrival in the United States to escape the Nazis. As a whole, the exhibit does a terrific job of showing that he was working constantly and creating his own opportunities to promote bands. He was even [JFDIing](#) while on location in Vietnam for the filming of *Apocalypse Now*. Graham’s personal history led him to achieve greatness and respect.

And if you’re visiting “Bill Graham” exhibit, consider expanding your visit to the rest of the NMAJH, too. Start on the fourth floor, then work your way down, to explore the 25,000 square feet of collection and hundreds of years of history. Each floor starts with a helpful map. The curators have arranged infographics, artifacts, illustrations, and a captivating range of elements that show the many experiences and stories of Jews in America.

Bill Graham and the Rock & Roll Revolution

101 South Independence Mall East

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Author Description



Neil used to study psycholinguistics, but now wears a lot of hats around Philadelphia, including working in science communication and tweeting about improv comedy. He really likes sandwiches and has a frighteningly long GoodReads to-read shelf.

