

NMAJH Exhibit Ties Bill Graham's Jewish Past and Music Genius Together

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David Graham

The list goes on and on.

Jefferson Airplane. The Grateful Dead. Bob Dylan. The Rolling Stones.

Bill Graham worked with them all.

Paul McCartney. Janis Joplin. The Doors. Jimi Hendrix.

They were part of his empire,

too.

You could go through the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland and, more often than not, it's likely he had something to do with each act's career.

David Bowie. Led Zeppelin. The Beach Boys. Santana. The Who. Fleetwood Mac. Hall and Oates. Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. Cream.

And you're just getting started appreciating the impact of the man who created the Fillmore West in San Francisco and Fillmore East in New York and was arguably the greatest promoter in rock history.

That's not news to music aficionados, who covet those iconic psychedelic posters — many of them designed by his first wife, Bonnie MacLean — listing the acts for that particular night. But what most of the world didn't know was that Graham was Jewish.

Graham never discussed religion with his sons, David and Alex, especially his upbringing. It was only later in life they'd learn their father, born Wolfgang Wolodia Grajonca in Berlin in 1931, who chose his new name literally out of a phone book, had a past he dearly wanted to escape.

That's just one thing you'll learn at *Bill Graham and the Rock & Roll Revolution*, which opens this weekend at the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH) and runs through Jan. 16. Originated at the Skirball Museum in Los Angeles in 2015, followed by a run in San Francisco Philadelphia is the third stop on the exhibit's tour, which will next hit Skokie, Ill. in 2017.

But for David Graham, Bill's oldest son, who's lived in Bucks County since his parents split up when he was a child, it's particularly meaningful.

"My life here was not with my father, so to have my dad's exhibition here is like my two worlds coming together," said the 47-year-old Graham, who was 22 when his father, companion Melissa Gold and the pilot were killed in an October 1991 helicopter crash in Marin County, Calif. "We're proud people will get to see and hear his story and realize someone so random had such a huge effect on the history of rock and roll.

“I don’t think people associate a refugee from Nazi Europe being the harbinger of what we understand to be the concert experience of today.”

The exhibit chronicles young Wolfgang’s time in Europe. He and a number of children were rescued by a Red Cross worker from occupied France, taken to Portugal, and then transported to the United States, arriving in 1942. He spent time in a Bronx orphanage, where families passed on this skinny kid with the German accent for nearly a year.

Even then, life was cruel to a boy who had no idea that four of his five sisters had also escaped Nazi clutches.

“Our dad never spoke to us about his upbringing,” said Graham, who went into the music industry himself for years and still serves as chairman of the Bill Graham Foundation. “Everything I know is from other people’s stories.

“Obviously, he identified as a Jew when he came to America and got the [crap] kicked out of him for having a German accent. Even though he was Jewish, he was bullied in the Jewish community.

“Between that and a general feeling of persecution, Dad separated himself from that mode. It was a defense mechanism on his part to move forward.”

After his acting aspirations in New York failed, music became Graham’s salvation. His son said Bill Graham’s initial reason for moving west was that he learned his sister, Esther, was living there.

Once he hit the scene, it didn’t take long before things started happening, beginning with a 1965 benefit concert for the San Francisco Mime Troupe, a political activist theater ensemble.

It became the turning point in his life. “He asked some of the local bands to perform,” said David Graham, who’ll participate along with his mother, Bonnie and brother, Alex on Sept. 18 in “Speakers that Rock” a symposium to mark the opening of the exhibit. “One of them was Jefferson Airplane.

“It was there that he saw the birth of this incredible music scene in San Francisco and a really fervent response to the music. At that time, there was a cadre of young, local bands — the Grateful Dead, Santana. Dad saw there was a need for a place for this kind of great artistic expression to gather.”

Thus was born the Fillmore. And with each concert came the posters, many of which fill the NMAJH exhibit hall.

Finally, there’s his Philadelphia impact — specifically Live Aid, the July 1985 benefit concert held simultaneously here at JFK Stadium and at London’s Wembley Stadium.

“I was at Live Aid,” said Graham, who’d spent many of his summers visiting his father in California and later went on some of the big tours. “I’d guess JFK [Stadium] had a large part to do with it because it was so big and because Dad had a working relationship with Larry Magid, who ran the Electric Factory. It was a nutty day.”

The exhibit also references Graham’s Jewishness.

There’s a picture taken by Graham Nash of Bill Graham wearing a Jewish star, along with the charred menorah rescued from his office. The office was firebombed after he took out a front-page ad in the San Francisco Chronicle protesting Ronald Reagan’s proposed visit to the cemetery in Bitburg, Germany, where S.S. soldiers were buried.

While Graham was not a practicing Jew and married women who weren’t Jewish, spiritually it was a different story.

The fact that he was buried in a Jewish cemetery, after such luminaries as the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane’s Grace Slick and Paul Kantner were among the 2,000 who turned out for his funeral in San Francisco, is more telling.

“I would not say he was a religious person,” Graham said, “but he was deeply spiritually connected to Judaism.

“He was responsible for building the first public menorah in San Francisco in Union Square in 1974. He had a lot of connections to the Jewish community, and he supported the Jewish community a great deal, having events at his house.”

Now it’s all on display at the NMAJH, an opportunity to appreciate not only Bill Graham’s music genius, but the difficult road he had to travel to accomplish it.

And to see just how many big names he helped along the way.

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