



Impresario Extraordinaire

The National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia Presents a Retrospective Honoring the Life and Times of Legendary Rock Promoter Bill Graham



By Jaq Greenspon

Without knowing it, legendary concert promoter Bill Graham gave me the best 18th birthday present ever. And, yeah, that's kind of how you have to refer to him: legendary concert promoter. That's what he was. He was the impresario extraordinaire responsible for making San Francisco the "must be" destination on every band's itinerary in the '60s. You might even say if it weren't for him, Haight and Ashbury would mean no more than Valley View and Spring Mountain. Interesting, then, that the man largely responsible for the West Coast counterculture was himself an orphan and war refugee, who may have done everything he did just trying to find his own place in the universe.

Now, that "place" that Graham carved out for himself is in residency at the National Museum of American Jewish History. Bill Graham and the Rock and Roll Revolution originally was organized and staged last year by the Skirball Center in Los Angeles. According to the museum, the exhibit "explores the momentous cultural transformations of the '60s, '70s and '80s through the lens of rock & roll." It features iconic rock memorabilia from the various bands linked to Graham, who served as adviser, promoter and even mentor to many of the greats. Sure, it's cool to see Janis Joplin's tambourine, or intimate photos of Graham with world famous musicians. But what makes the show remarkable is the way it demonstrates how a Jewish German child became the fulfillment of the '60s version of the American Dream, one he helped design.

To say Graham was a self-made man makes light of the phrase. Born in Berlin on Jan. 8, 1931, (Elvis and David Bowie also were born on Jan. 8), the infant known as Wolfgang Wolodia Grajonca faced the immediate prospect of future heartache. His parents, Jacob and Frieda, had immigrated to Germany to escape the Russian pogroms of the early 20th century. In a country drowning in inflation, he must have felt a bit of pride to have brought a son into the world to go with three daughters. In two days, Jacob would be dead, succumbing to a blood infection. Wolfgang's early years would be spent in the company of his mother and sisters Sonja, Ester and Tanya, whom everyone called "Tolla."

But the relative safety that Jacob must have presumed he had secured for his infant son was short-lived. By late January 1933, then 2-year-old Wolfgang's family would be around for the appointment of Adolf Hitler as chancellor of Germany. It would be five more years before Frieda realized that drastic measures were needed to keep her children safe from Nazi Germany's anti-Semitism.

As it did for a multitude of Jews throughout Germany, the evening and overnight of Nov. 9-10, 1938, changed everything. Kristallnacht, "The Night of Breaking Glass," was the turning point for the Grajonca family. After the countrywide rampage that targeted Jewish businesses, buildings and synagogues, Frieda understood that if her youngest children were to survive they needed to be as far from Berlin as possible. Tolla, three years older than Wolfgang, was sent with her brother to a children's home in France. The boy who would some day take the name Bill Graham never saw his mother again. Years later, he would learn that she and Ester were sent to Auschwitz. But Frieda never made it to the infamous concentration camp in Poland; she was gassed in the train before it got there.

Wolfgang's hope, and the presence of his older sister, kept him alive in France through 1941, when the Germans invaded. Knowing the youngsters' lives were imperiled, a Red Cross worker took Wolfgang, Tolla and 62 other children on a harrowing journey to avoid the Nazis. In Lyon, Tolla contracted pneumonia and could not continue. Young Wolfgang was told "his sister had to stay behind in the hospital, but would join them again once she recovered." He never saw her again.

Wolfgang and the others traced a path to safety familiar to anyone who's seen Casablanca. From Lyon, they walked to Marseilles, then to a convent in Madrid, and on to Lisbon, where they boarded an ocean liner. They stopped in Casablanca and Dakar until finally undertaking a 19-day voyage across the U-boat infested Atlantic. According to the biography from the Bill Graham Foundation, young Wolfgang was "Suffering from malnutrition and rickets" when he arrived in New York on Sept. 24, 1941. Nearly 11, he weighed 55 pounds. He carried his yarmulke, a prayer book and some photos of his parents and sisters. Of 64 children who had set off from the French chateau three months earlier, 11 had made it to America.



Left: Janis Joplin's velvet top, bell-bottoms, feather boa, and leather bag, ca. 1968 Cotton velvet, linen, feathers, embroidered leather. Courtesy of EMP Museum, Seattle, WA. **Above Right:** Fender Stratocaster fragment smashed by Jimi Hendrix at the Royal Albert Hall, London on February 24, 1969. **Bottom Right:** Boots worn by Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones during 1981 Tattoo You tour 1980, presented to Bill Graham in 1982. Leather, duct tape. From the collection of David and Alex Graham. All photos by Robert Wedemeyer.

Wolfgang and the others were offered up like players on a schoolyard sports team. The Jewish Foster Home Bureau promised \$48 a month to any family that would take a war orphan in. Wolfgang, who spoke fluent German and French, spent the next eight weekends dressed in his finest clothes, standing next to his meager possessions, and being passed over by English-only speakers. On the ninth such weekend, a family took him home to the Bronx.

It didn't take Wolfgang long to learn English, but his heavy German accent led to teasing, including playground taunts that he was a Nazi. By the time he was 18, he had entered the U.S. Army to serve in the Korean War. No one could pronounce Grajonca, so the newly minted private opened a phone book and found the name Graham. It seemed close enough to his own that he could "wear" it comfortably. This feeling of alienation, of having to put on a mask to face the world, followed him the rest of his life. Robert Greenfield, Graham's biographer, writes that "Bill basically was an actor. It was the great desire of his life to become one."

He actually even tried, for a while. After being discharged from the Army (with a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart to his credit), he drifted. He worked odd jobs and went to California briefly before returning to New York. In the city, he sought out acting gurus such as Uta Hagen and Lee Strasberg. He was cast in a few productions, but had trouble dealing with authority, just as he had in the Army, where he had been promoted to corporal only to be busted back to private for refusing to follow an order.

"One of the great rejections and one of the great traumatic experiences of (Graham's) life,"

Greenfield writes, "was when he was forced to realize that he could not deal with the rejection associated with the business of acting. He couldn't take being passed over for parts that he thought he was right for, and therefore gave up acting."

He was pushing 30, but Graham still had no idea what he wanted to do with his life. He settled in San Francisco with his two surviving sisters (they had initially found refuge in Israel, only to immigrate later to the U.S.). He took on the same types of odd jobs he had worked before, but felt adrift – as if he'd never left the boat that brought him from Europe. He knew he wanted to be a force for change. Everything in life had prepared him to help where others couldn't – or wouldn't. But it wasn't until November 1965 that he got his chance.

He had managed to find a job as business manager for the San Francisco Mime Troupe, a politically slanted theater company that happened to give an "obscene" performance in Lafayette Park. On Nov. 6, he organized a fundraiser for the troupe's legal defense. It featured poets Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg reading their works, alongside musicians Sandy Bull, The Fugs, John Handy and The Jefferson Airplane. The evening was a rousing success. Graham called it "by far the most significant evening of my life in the theater." At last, he had found something he could do, something he was good at, something that might pay a living wage. That he was about to create The '60s, as we now refer to that period, was beside the point.

A second benefit for the Mime Troupe at the Fillmore in San Francisco marked the end of his association with the theater company. But it signaled the start of a long association with the Fillmore, a run-down venue he would transform into the heart of the Hippie Movement. Using the dance permit of Charles Sullivan to ensure the Fillmore was legal, Graham put together shows that featured talent combinations that had never been seen on stage together. Nowhere else could you find Russian poet Andrei Voznesensky opening for The Jefferson Airplane, or Lenny Bruce on the bill with Frank Zappa's The Mothers of Invention.

During his tenure with The Fillmore and (later the Fillmore East, a renovated movie theater in New York), Graham did whatever was needed. Having come from nothing, there was nothing he considered beneath him. He was "completely hands-on," according to his biography, booking shows, taking tickets and cleaning the bathroom during intermissions. Graham "made the Fillmore a safe haven, where kids could experience the music they loved without getting busted. The Fillmore was Bill's house. So long as you paid for a ticket, Bill treated you like an honored guest. And even when they drove him crazy, he treated his musicians like artists."

Starting the careers of Carlos Santana and Janis Joplin, or bringing black artists to white audiences for the first time, or even producing the large stadium tours of George Harrison and The Rolling Stones, wasn't enough for Graham. In 1975, he opened Winterland Productions (named for the 5,000-seat Winterland Arena that Graham also ran). And he singlehandedly created the market for concert merchandise, with artists also getting a cut. He may have been exhausted, but he was figuratively on top of the world.

Graham also discovered in 1975 that budget cuts were about to end extracurricular activities in San Francisco's public schools. He saw an opportunity again to make a difference. He staged SNACK (San Francisco Needs Athletics, Culture and Kicks). By the time the last person had exited Kezar Stadium in Golden Gate Park, 50,000 fans had seen The Grateful Dead, Bob Dylan and The Band, and the Doobie Brothers. They had also heard Marlon Brando and San Francisco Giants immortal Willie Mays speak (among many others). The event raised enough money to fund after-school programs for a year.

That same year Graham paid for Chabad's 22-foot-high "Mama Menorah" in San Francisco. It marked the first time a giant public menorah had been erected outside of Jerusalem. To this day, the Bill Graham Menorah Project, operated by ChabadSF, continues this work. And Bill Graham Menorah Day is commemorated every year on the first Sunday of Channukah.

From then on, life at Masada (his Marin County home) was a whirlwind. He acted (a small role in the film Bugsy) and managed and produced rock 'n' roll events. But he always found time for huge charity shows. On the last day of his life, Oct. 25, 1991, he was setting up a relief concert to aid the victims of the Oakland fire that had occurred a few days prior. He had arranged to have Huey Lewis and the News perform and was headed home in a helicopter when bad weather forced the aircraft into a power line. He was 60.

Graham left two legacies, by Greenfield's account: He took an "illegitimate" art form and legitimized it. And he "raised more money for good charitable causes through rock 'n' roll than any other man who will ever live. He was obsessed with the need to do benefits, and he was obsessed with the need for rock 'n' roll and the business of music to have some kind of social and political conscience."

Oh, about that present I mentioned. Graham produced Live Aid, the largest charity concert ever, raising more than \$45 million for famine relief in Africa. It happened on July 13, 1985 – my 18th birthday.

