

NMAJH presents Dennis McNally and Susana Millman

Backstage with the Dead

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Three dozen Deadheads recently packed themselves into the **National Museum of American Jewish History's** (NMAJH) bright café to hear former Grateful Dead publicist Dennis McNally and photographer Susana Millman share stories from their lives working and touring with the band. The couple appeared at NMAJH in conjunction with Ardmore Music Hall. McNally started his career as a historian. After earning a Ph.D. in American history, his first job was archivist for rock concert promoter Bill Graham. Items he handled during that year are now part of the NMAJH's **Bill Graham and the Rock & Roll Revolution** exhibition.



Oh, just Bill Graham as Father Time on a magic mushroom during New Year's Eve at the Oakland Auditorium in 1982. (Photo courtesy of Ken Friedman)

A long, strange trip

Corporate conflicts led to him being fired from Graham's employ, and the Dead subsequently hired McNally to work for them. The museum's hour-long program took a format familiar to fans of the Dead's live oeuvre: McNally meandered through a set list of memories that followed no particular chronology. His speaking was unpolished, but comfortable.

Dressed in a crewneck sweatshirt, jeans, and slip-on shoes, McNally held the audience's attention with his impressive memory for detail and perspective. Sitting on stools with Millman — herself in a batik top with a small bag on her lap and a constant smile — I felt I was listening to my parents's friends visiting from out of town, chatting over dessert. The two kept up their own relaxed banter, bouncing off of each other as many couples three decades into marriage do. (Audio archivist Dick Latvala introduced them, and Jerry Garcia himself encouraged them to date. Garcia walked Susana down the aisle in 1985.)

McNally's monologue segued between events, with occasional pauses. He referred several times to notes in a thin Moleskine notebook he jotted in while viewing the museum's Graham exhibit. At one point he looked around for the notebook. He got up, only to discover the book had made its way under him on the stool.

A theme of the stories was the contrast of the Grateful Dead's easygoing family spirit and Graham's caring but detail-oriented personality. "Nobody ever accused the Dead of being perfectionists," McNally said, as the audience chuckled. By contrast, Graham's own staff would, when productions seemed to be flawless, plant trash on the floor so Graham had something to complain about when he checked.

They got their miracle

The event's requisite plug to buy Susana's book *Alive with the Dead – A Fly on the Wall with a Camera* was brief and contained entertaining stories of its production. For instance, the printer in China was briefly concerned about potential religious content and confused over the perforated blotter paper in the back, a wink at a classic LSD distribution method. Millman's photos reflect an intimacy with the Dead family, gained by being McNally's partner and touring companion for several years before she ever started taking pictures.

Audience questions and appreciations after the main program led to more charming stories, including several of the gathered fans's own interactions with the Dead and Graham. The hour was very much an insider's look. The stories were truly for diehard Dead fans, especially those with a keen interest in the band's commercial history and concert production values.

The museum's **Bill Graham and the Rock & Roll Revolution** exhibition covers Graham's entire life and contains a jaw-dropping number of personal artifacts, his professional activities (including organizing Live Aid), and the numerous classic rock acts he promoted. It surprised me to see shards of a Jimi Hendrix guitar on display, let alone see them just a few steps from Janis Joplin's tambourine. I could have spent hours poring over the beautiful, well-preserved concert posters alone. Graham's sons and employees have done an admirable job of managing Bill Graham's legacy.

