

Entertainment — Music & Nightlife

5 revealing facts about concert promoter Bill Graham

Updated: SEPTEMBER 15, 2016 — 11:31 AM EDT



Concert promoter Bill Graham (left) talks with a manager of the Beach Boys at a 1971 concert in Oakland, Calif.



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When it comes to live rock music, few figures loom as large as concert promoter Bill Graham, who is the subject of “[Bill Graham and the Rock & Roll Revolution](#),” which opens Friday, Sept. 16 at the National Museum of American Jewish History.

Known for [his work](#) with performers such as the Grateful Dead, Carlos Santana, Jefferson Airplane, and the Steve Miller Band, the boisterous Graham organized shows across the nation from the mid-1960s until his death in 1991. His events at famed venues such as the Fillmore Auditorium, the Fillmore East and West, and the Winterland Ballroom defined the rock’s live presence, and earned Graham [a permanent place](#) in rock history.

Running through Jan. 16, 2017, [the exhibit](#) — initially produced by the [Skirball Cultural Center](#) in Los Angeles — looks at Graham’s extraordinary, musical life, from his escape from Nazi Germany as a child in the late 1930s to his trailblazing, countercultural rock concerts of the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s.

Ahead of the exhibition’s start, here are five facts about Bill Graham:

1. Graham came to the United States as a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany

Born Wulf Wolodia Grajonca, or [Wolfgang for short](#), in 1931 in Berlin, Graham was raised by his mother, with his father passing away just two days after his birth. Following the Nazi Kristallnacht in 1938, his mother sent the young Graham to France to escape the Holocaust, in which she would later lose her life. Graham, then 10 years old, fled France for the United States after Paris fell to the Nazis in 1941, and arrived at Ellis Island in September that year at a mere 55 pounds. A family in the Bronx, where he grew up, would later adopt him.

2. He named himself with a phone book

At 18, Graham, who was then not yet an American citizen, was drafted into the Korean War, where he would earn a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. However, since no one could correctly pronounce his name — still Wulf Wolodia Grajonca — he decided to change it to something a little more easy to pronounce for Americans. Graham settled on his new surname after perusing a Bronx phone book, writing in [his autobiography](#) that he “wanted a simple name” and that “there were hundreds” of Grahams in the book. According to his book, he never liked the name.

3. The only instrument Graham could play was the cowbell

He may have helped popularize some of the 1960s’ and 1970s’ most beloved rock acts, but Graham, in fact, wasn’t all that musical himself. He was, however, proficient with the cowbell, which he famously played onstage one night with the Grateful Dead after a crewmember dosed him with LSD, and again onstage at Woodstock with Santana. The Dead later presented Graham with [a bronzed cowbell](#) to commemorate the night. He did not, however, inspire the *Saturday Night Live* “More Cowbell” sketch (that was Blue Öyster Cult producer David Lucas).

4. Live Aid in Philadelphia would have never happened without Graham

Graham was a trailblazer in using large-scale rock concerts to promote charitable causes. Live Aid, held in 1985 at JFK Stadium here in Philadelphia, was one of his most notable accomplishments. Graham organized the American leg of the dual-venue concert, which, along with a show at London's Wembley Stadium, helped raise roughly [\\$125 million for famine relief](#) in Africa. Graham was awarded the MTV Lifetime Achievement award in part due to his role in Live Aid, and would later go on to organize similarly successful charity events such as A Conspiracy of Hope and Human Rights Now.

5. Graham's life was tragically cut short in a helicopter crash in 1991

Graham's interest in charity concerts continued up until [his death at age 60 in a helicopter crash](#) on the way home from a Huey Lewis and the News concert in California in 1991. Graham had attended the concert to get the band to agree to perform at a benefit concert for those affected by the devastating Oakland firestorm of 1991. On the way back from the concert, the helicopter struck a power line, which caused an explosion that killed Graham, along with pilot Steve Kahn and girlfriend Melissa Gold. Graham was posthumously inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1992.



Published: September 15, 2016 — 10:05 AM EDT | **Updated:** September 15, 2016 — 11:31 AM EDT
