

## Bill Graham: Holocaust refugee to super-producer

Nicole Pensiero, For the Courier-Post 3:41 p.m. EDT September 7, 2016



*(Photo: Collection of David and Alex Graham/National Museum of American Jewish History)*

He's considered the most influential concert promoter in the history of modern-day rock 'n' roll, playing a pivotal role in the careers of iconic '60s and '70s artists like The Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin and The Doors.

Music impresario Bill Graham — who died at age 60 in 1991 in a helicopter crash — also was a powerful force for supporting humanitarian causes, playing a big part in the 1985 Live Aid concerts in London and Philadelphia, and Amnesty International's Human Rights Now! tour, which touched down in Philly in 1988. His name is synonymous with the famed San

Francisco Fillmore, now a brand of concert venues that has a location in Philadelphia.

But there's another part of Bill Graham's story, one that's not commonly known. This story — of his escape from Nazi Germany as a child to become the embodiment of the American Dream — also plays a part of the exhibit opening Sept. 16 at the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH), "Bill Graham and the Rock & Roll Revolution."



*Bob Dylan and Jerry Garcia perform at Day on the Green at the Oakland Coliseum Stadium in California in July 24, 1987. This chromogenic print is by Ken Friedman. (Photo: Courtesy of Ken Friedman/National Museum of American Jewish History.)*

“Bill Graham’s life was remarkable, fascinating and exciting,” said museum Curator Josh Perelman. “We are so privileged to be able to tell his story, which opens the door to exploring a larger phenomena in our culture – that of rock ‘n roll.” Graham’s life, Perelman notes, also “illustrates the connectivity of Jewish life in the United States, while transcending one particular man and one particular museum.”

The Bill Graham exhibition will be based in three locations at the NMAJH: the concourse level, the first floor (which is free and open to the public) and the 5th floor: “Bill Graham and Rock & Roll are going to fill the museum because it’s a huge subject and it felt really natural to allow the show to express itself in a big way,” Perelman said.



Ken Friedman captured this image of Father Time (Bill Graham) on a magic mushroom as it glides over the crowd at a New Year’s Eve Grateful Dead show at the Oakland Auditorium, Oakland, California, on Dec. 31, 1982. This is a chromomagnetic print. (Photo: Courtesy of Ken Friedman/National Museum of American Jewish History)

Born in Berlin in 1931 as Wolodia Grajonca, the man who later became Bill Graham was placed in a *kinderheim* – a home for Jewish children – after the Hitler Youth Movement came looking to recruit him. After the school was shuttered in 1939, he was sent on a children’s transport to France, where it was believed he’d be safer. After the Nazis conquered Paris in 1940, the International Red Cross spirited Graham and other Jewish children to the United States. Arriving in September 1941, the 10-year-old refugee – whose mother later died at Auschwitz – was raised by a foster family in the Bronx. Graham was industrious even at a young age – he worked every day after school as a delivery boy, and read newspaper headlines aloud with his foster brother to lose his German accent.

While he dreamed of being an actor, destiny had other plans for Bill Graham. As a young man, he relocated to San Francisco – the city with whom his name remains synonymous even today. Graham

became the business manager for the radical San Francisco Mime Troupe, presenting his first show in November 1965. It was a transformative moment for the 34-year-old, who finally found something he was good at that could also earn him a living.



This 1980s Yamaha SG200 was played and signed by Carlos Santana. The Yamaha Corporation built the guitar in Hamamatsu, Japan, ca. 1984–1986. It has a nato wood body and neck, rose inlays in mother-of-pearl and turquoise, rosewood fretboard with dot inlays, chrome hardware, chrome Schaller-style tuning pegs. (Photo: Collection of Carlos Santana/Photo by Robert Wedemeyer/National Museum of American Jewish History)

Soon after, Graham took over the lease on the famed Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco, where he produced groundbreaking shows throughout the free-flowing '60s, including sold-out concerts by the Grateful Dead, Cream, Big Brother and the Holding Company, and the Doors. Graham's mastery at promoting, marketing and managing artists propelled him to become one of rock & roll's most influential figures.

"Bill Graham believed in rock music for its ability to create social change," said Randy Alexander, a South Jersey-based entertainment publicist and former newspaper rock critic who had several interactions with Graham in the 1980s and early 1990s. "He was a force of nature. He was loved, he was hated, he was respected and he was feared. The modern concert industry would not be what it is if not for Bill Graham. He was one of the greats; a truly iconic figure in pop culture."

Graham's son, David, 47, who grew up and lives in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, said the exhibit – which debuted last year at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles – was a "labor of love" for his family: "My father had such an incredible, full life, and this is a very vibrant and colorful show. I think people will love seeing all the artifacts and will be surprised to hear his backstory, which is something of a rags-to-riches tale."

David Graham — who went on the road with the Rolling Stones with his father the summer after eighth grade — still remembers "everything being at fever pitch, with my dad always on the go."

His mother, Bonnie MacLean, is a Philadelphia native and an artist who created more than 30 of the now famous Fillmore posters from the '60s, which were "very emblematic of the times," as David Graham puts it.



Roy, Alfred and Pearl Ehrenreich are shown with Bill and their dog, Fluffy in the Bronx, New York, circa 1943. This chromogenic print is from the collection of David and Alex Graham. (Photo: Collection of David and Alex Graham/National Museum of American Jewish History)

Although his father rarely spoke of his early childhood and its hardships, David Graham believes he was deeply impacted by those experiences, and very proud of his career accomplishments: "It wasn't about gold records; it was about trinkets and things that meant something to him or represented something that happened to him and the artist involved."

He also said his father was "all about taking care of the fans and the artists – everything that was going on in front of the stage and everything happening backstage, too."

"The exhibit has the positive energy of a concert," David Graham said. "We're very proud to be part of it."

"Bill Graham and the Rock & Roll Revolution" will feature iconic psychedelic concert posters, rock memorabilia, films and artifacts, including Janis Joplin's tambourine, a handwritten note from pop

singer Donovan to Graham, Pete Townshend's 1968 Gibson SG Special guitar, and Graham's personal scrapbooks. Fillmore concert posters will be on display as well, revealing the signature visual styles of MacLean and other artists. Graham's famous Father Time costume will also be on display, as well as an installation of "The Joshua Light Show," a trailblazing liquid light show conceived in 1967 that served as a backdrop to many Graham-produced concerns. Unique to the Philadelphia exhibition will be a number of items from the city's Live Aid concert.

Visitors will be immersed in sights and sounds, Perelman said: music stations will feature concert recordings and interviews with artists from every decade, new interviews with rock icons and an audio tour of interviews Graham gave during his lifetime.

"He rose to success in the most turbulent of times," Alexander said. "I'm completely in awe of the fortitude that made Bill Graham who he was – bold and fearless."



This is Janis Joplin's velvet top, bell bottoms, feather boa, and leather bag, circa 1968. Materials include cotton velvet, linen, feathers, embroidered leather. (Photo: Courtesy of EMP Museum, Seattle, WA/Photo by Robert Wedemeyer/National Museum of American Jewish History)

## If you go

Bill Graham and the Rock & Roll Revolution will be held at the National Museum of American Jewish History, 101 S. Independence Mall East (corner of 5th and Market streets), Philadelphia, from Sept. 16 to Jan. 16, 2017. Museum hours are Tuesday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. NMAJH is closed most Mondays; the museum will stay open late on Wednesdays (8 p.m.) throughout the exhibition's run. Museum admission is \$12 for adults; \$11 for seniors and youths; free to children 12 and under. Visit, [www.NMAJH.org](http://www.NMAJH.org) or call (215) 923-3811.



Bill Graham enlightens the Beach Boys' management: 'Your band is late.' This Robert Altman photo was shot backstage at the Berkeley Coliseum Stadium, Berkeley California, in June 1971. This is a chromogenic print. (Photo: Courtesy of Robert Altman/National Museum of American Jewish History)