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## Bill Graham

1992

Category:

Non-Performer

Bill Graham's résumé would make any music lover's jaw drop.

He ran the Fillmore and Winterland, put on concerts with Miles Davis and Neil Young (at the same time) and promoted national tours for Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones. Graham lived for the music that he evangelized throughout the nation.

## Biography

Concert promoter and artist manager Bill Graham forever changed the way rock and roll is presented.

He provided the business an organizational acumen that allowed the anarchic San Francisco scene of the mid-to-late Sixties to flower in venues such as the Fillmore, a dilapidated auditorium that Graham transformed into a tightly run concert hall beginning in late 1966. There, Graham booked such mainstays of the psychedelic era as the Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, Big Brother and the Holding Company and Quicksilver Messenger Service. In 1968 Graham moved the Fillmore into another old dance hall (the Carousel Ballroom, rechristened Fillmore West) and opened the Fillmore East in New York. Subsequently, he took over Winterland, another San Francisco concert venue, and branched into band management and tour promotion. A high percentage of the most significant pop-music events in the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties were produced under the banner "Bill Graham Presents." Among other things, Graham brought a new standard of professionalism to the business.

Graham was born Wolodia Grajonca on January 8, 1931 in Berlin. He was given the nickname Wolfgang as a child. He literally walked across Europe to escape the Nazis, and he was raised in New York by foster parents. He then moved to San Francisco in the mid-Fifties to pursue an

acting career. Instead, events conspired to thrust him into his calling as a concert impresario and business manager. Several fundraisers for the San Francisco Mime Troupe, a political comedy group he managed, were wildly successful due in large part to the Jefferson Airplane. Graham grasped the potential: something electrifying was beginning to happen in San Francisco, and the scene lacked only a focused, business-oriented mind to harness its power.

A tireless worker known for his gruff exterior and unsullied idealism, Graham challenged the rock audience by booking bills that mingled jazz, blues and folk artists in with all of the psychedelic rock bands of the day. One might walk into the Fillmore and find Miles Davis sharing a bill with Neil Young or the Staple Singers opening for Steppenwolf. His broad, generous view of music and the public's ability to appreciate it stands in marked contrast to the narrowcasting that would subdivide the rock and roll audience, to its lasting detriment, in the Eighties and beyond. After closing the Fillmores in 1971, Graham continued to run Winterland (site of the Band's farewell concert, "The Last Waltz," in 1978), while managing acts like Santana and the Neville Brothers, promoting national tours for Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones and others.

He also began to present ever-larger events on both coasts, including the Watkins Glen Festival, which drew some 600,000 people and featured the Grateful Dead, the Allman Brothers Band and the Band. He also presented many landmark benefit concerts, including Live Aid in 1985 and two Amnesty International tours, the Conspiracy of Hope and Human Rights Now! He was also the driving force behind the 1987 Soviet-American Peace Concert in Moscow.

Graham also had his dream of becoming an actor come true. He appeared in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Bugsy* (1991) and *The Doors* (1991). He died on October 25, 1991 when a helicopter in which he was a passenger crashed into an electrical tower as he was leaving a concert.

Inductee: Wolodia Grajonca a.k.a. Bill Graham (born January 8, 1931, died October 25, 1991)

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