Bill Graham and the Rock & Roll Revolution
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Selected PR Images

One of the most influential concert promoters in history, Bill Graham (1931–1991) worked with the biggest names in rock, including the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Jimi Hendrix, Santana, Led Zeppelin, and the Rolling Stones, and launched the careers of countless music legends at his famed Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco in the 1960s, as well as at Fillmore East in New York City. Organized by the Skirball Cultural Center, the first comprehensive retrospective of the life and career of the legendary rock impresario features more than 300 objects—including rock memorabilia, photographs, and concert posters—that explore some of the 20th century’s momentous cultural transformations through the lens of rock & roll and looks at Graham’s personal connections to New York. Unique to New-York Historical is a special, immersive audio experience, providing a musical tour through the exhibition with songs by rock & roll superstars.

Ken Friedman
Bill Graham between takes during the filming of “A ’60s Reunion with Bill Graham: A Night at the Fillmore,” Fillmore Auditorium, San Francisco, 1986
Courtesy of Ken Friedman

Bill Graham combined an ear for talent with an eye for business. A refugee from Nazi Germany and a child of the Bronx, he instinctively grasped rock & roll’s relevance and potential, swiftly becoming one of history’s most influential concert promoters.

The Grajonca Family, Berlin, ca. 1938
Gelatin silver print
Collection of David and Alex Graham

Born Wolfgang Grajonca in 1931, Graham’s Russian Jewish parents immigrated to Berlin searching for a better life; the Nazis’ rise to power crushed those dreams. When Hitler became chancellor of Germany, Graham’s mother put him on a children’s transport to France, thinking this would keep him safe. He never saw her again. His mother perished on the train to Auschwitz.
Graham started using the 5,400-seat Winterland in 1966 for shows too big for the Fillmore Auditorium. Winterland became a communal hub, and people from across the Bay Area would cruise by on Saturday nights to see what was happening. Graham sometimes sold as many as 2,000 tickets at the door.

British singer, songwriter, and guitarist Donovan played a series of shows at the Fillmore Auditorium and Winterland, after which he composed a note to Graham that read: “You are, by far, the friendliest, most considerate promoter I have had the pleasure to work with.” He signed the note: “Thy humble minstrel.”

Headliners such as the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane practically guaranteed sold-out performances, freeing Graham to book diverse supporting acts like Otis Redding and B. B. King. “I never give the public what it wants,” Graham asserted. “I give the public what it should want.”
Baron Wolman
**Jimi Hendrix performs at Fillmore Auditorium**, San Francisco, February 1, 1968
Gelatin silver print
Iconic Images/Baron Wolman

*Graham once said: “Live, Jimi Hendrix was a combination of the ultimate trickster and the ultimate technician with great emotional ability. There was nobody close to him.”*

Bonnie MacLean
**Bill Graham gives his young son David a piggyback ride**, San Francisco, 1969
Gelatin silver print
Collection of David and Alex Graham

Gibson Guitar Corporation 1959
**Cherry Sunburst Gibson Les Paul played by Duane Allman of the Allman Brothers Band** during live concert recording at Fillmore East; recorded: March 12–13, 1971
Mahogany back, maple top, rosewood fingerboard, nitrocellulose trapezoid inlays
Collection of Galadrielle Allman
Photo by Robert Wedemeyer

*Led by Gregg and Duane Allman, the Allman Brothers Band wove together elements of blues, jazz, country, and rock to create soulful and driving Southern rock. Their March 1971 album, At Fillmore East, is widely considered one of rock’s greatest live albums. Seven months after recording it, Duane Allman died in a motorcycle crash, devastating the band and its fans.*
Baron Wolman  
View from the audience: The Rolling Stones at Day on the Green Oakland Coliseum Stadium, Oakland, California, July 26, 1978  
Gelatin silver print Iconic  
Iconic Images/Baron Wolman  

After a long and involved courtship, Mick Jagger finally agreed to let Graham take the Rolling Stones on a nationwide tour of the U.S. in 1981. They played before three million people in 30 cities and grossed $50 million in ticket sales, making the tour the most profitable in rock & roll history.

Leather, duct tape  
Collection of David and Alex Graham  
Photo by Robert Wedemeyer  

After the tour, Keith Richards handed over a pair of boots that Graham had repaired for him before one show.

Yamaha Corporation  
Yamaha SG200 played and signed by Carlos Santana, Hamamatsu, Japan, ca. 1984–1986  
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  
Collection of Carlos Santana  
Photo by Robert Wedemeyer  

In 1966, an unknown 19-year-old named Carlos Santana joined members of the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane on stage at the Fillmore and wowed the audience by playing a stunning solo on a borrowed guitar. A month later, the Santana Blues Band auditioned for Graham, who began booking them regularly. So phenomenal were their live performances that they became the only group ever to headline the Fillmore without having made a record. Graham later became Carlos Santana’s manager, as well as his friend and mentor.
Outraged by President Reagan’s plans to visit a German cemetery where Nazis were buried, Graham took out a newspaper ad and urged all who shared his fury to join him at a rally in San Francisco’s Union Square. Two days after Reagan’s visit, a firebomb destroyed Graham’s office. He lost virtually all the personal memorabilia from his 20-year career, including gold and platinum albums and hundreds of original Fillmore posters. Bill’s dance hall permit survived, however, and he went right on working.

Ken Friedman

**Bob Dylan and Jerry Garcia perform at Day on the Green**, Oakland Coliseum Stadium, Oakland, CA, July 24, 1987
Chromogenic print
Courtesy of Ken Friedman

*Day on the Green*, the hugely popular series of one-day outdoor festivals in Oakland, California, ran for nearly two decades, from 1973 until the early 1990s. Graham produced his last *Day on the Green* in October 1991, just weeks before his death.

Ken Friedman

**Prince and the Revolution perform at the Cow Palace**, Daly City, CA, March 1, 1985
Chromogenic print
Courtesy of Ken Friedman

Graham continued enchanting audiences, presenting memorable shows featuring Madonna, U2, Prince, David Bowie, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.
Ken Friedman

Madonna performs during her Blonde Ambition tour, Oakland Coliseum Arena, Oakland, CA, May 18, 1990
Chromogenic print
Courtesy of Ken Friedman

Ken Friedman

David Bowie performs at Shoreline Amphitheater, Mountain View, CA, October 21, 1995
Chromogenic print
Courtesy of Ken Friedman