

# Bill Graham

1931-1991



by Wes Wilson

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## INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in in this series on concert poster artists and graphic design. Some of these articles still need work.

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BILL GRAHAM 1931-1991

By Wes Wilson

[Editor's note: This short article was written shortly after Bill Graham's sudden death by Wes Wilson, considered by many to be the founding father of the psychedelic poster. Wilson, who was the first artist to work with Graham, forged a sometimes-stormy relationship with the entrepreneur and went on to produce the run of incredible classic posters that are one of the highlights in the BG series. This article was first published in "Off the Wall," Wilson's excellent poster journal.]

Bill Graham, born Wolfgang Grajonca, Berlin, 1931, a Jewish child survivor of Hitler's Germany, a decorated Korean War veteran, raised in the Bronx, trained as an actor, most memorable quote: "Artists do better work when they're poor".

From hustling around San Francisco on his Lambretta motor scooter promoting the Mime Troupe to that last night in his chauffeured corporate helicopter overseeing the multimillion dollar "BGP" rock'n roll promo empire - a

phenomenal success story with an untimely and tragic end!  
An extraordinary personality for sure - now gone back to  
the vapors!

Now that the shock wave has dissipated and the gush of  
emotional hype has subsided - let me say first off that it is  
my sincere hope that the next 'Tai-pan of the House that  
Graham Built' will show us something much higher and  
greater than what's gone down before.

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And now the rest of the story - including some candid  
comments about Bill the "philanthropist" and even Bill the  
"patron of the arts".

I think it is important in understanding Bill to realize that he  
was first and foremost the businessman (with a strong flair  
for the dramatic) and he always measured himself  
accordingly. At the beginning of 1966 he found himself  
quite accidentally in a very fortunate position of financial  
opportunity and power in the newly developing San  
Francisco rock, blues and poster art world. Unfortunately,  
he was not a philanthropist nor was he a great friend of the  
arts. He was what we all have seen numberless times  
before, the archetypal, even 'antique' businessman. An  
eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth kind of  
businessman. In fact, Bill was nothing short of a  
profiteering opportunistic predatory businessman who did  
whatever he could to gain power and money and was  
almost shameless in his choice of methods and means to  
achieve that end. Moreover, he was quite proud of what  
he was! (On NBC's Bob Costas's recent show he referred  
to the elements of S.F. society who helped put him in  
business as "San Francisco society's soft underbelly".) I  
know that are some of us who admire aggressive business  
professionalism and chuckle at what outrages some have  
been permitted to get away with in collusion with their ever  
present brace of slick suited manicured lawyers. To

others, Bill might appear as just another boring predictably grasping ever hungry business dinosaur lumbering noisily off into extinction.

I'd like to clarify a point or two mixed up by some in the media. If anybody 'discovered' Janis Joplin, it had to be Chet Helms of the Family Dog organization, not Bill Graham. Nor did Bill 'discover' the Grateful Dead or the Jefferson Airplane.

His fortunate association with San Francisco's friendly and open, bohemian, acid, art, drama and rock community profited him in more than monetary ways. Perhaps for the first time in his life he was exposed to an entire community of very creative, sensitive, exceptionally loving people. In time, by sheer association and the spiritual osmosis there from, his personal evolution could have taken him further toward the discovery and appreciation of the subtle but lasting joys inherent in open, honest & fair personal and business dealings - and in the broader overview of life, perhaps even the realization (that I suspect all such committed "yuppies" are ultimately subject to) that all those glittering accumulations of that selfish little ranting god called Mammon are so quickly tarnished and can leave the grandest mansion as stark, lonely and cold as any other fogbound waterfront warehouse --no matter how much elegant contraband it might contain.

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In the early days Bill managed to get control of the auditorium where large elements of this new generation had its gatherings by getting an exclusive lease on the Fillmore auditorium and the Winterland arena. Using old time business logic, Bill saw he could 'have it all' by getting such a lease and then if anyone else wanted to use the building, Bill would have to be asked first - wow! As soon as he had garnered this exclusive Fillmore lease, he quickly denied Chet Helms (The Family Dog) permission to

use the building any more, forcing him into a costly search for another more expensive hall which ultimately would never bring him the profit margin of the original Fillmore.

From his newly bought position of power Bill could make it look like he was even being "philanthropic" on occasion by 'letting' benefits be scheduled. He could book them during 'off' days of the week and still make money on the rent which would come "off the top" of an evening's take. Bill, being your normal good businessman, was careful to make money through his vending operations, and security fees with the benefits, too. It's quite likely that Bill seldom, if ever, gave a truly "for free" benefit for anyone or any cause as is believed by a lot of folks.

No matter what his faults, he does deserve credit for what good he did do. One of the best and from our perspective, most important things he did was to commission posters without his having to approve every detail beforehand - allowing perhaps some of the most original posters created since the turn of the century (the 'psychedelic' poster style) to come into being.

Over the years much putrid water has gone under the bridge between Bill and I since the summer of 1967. That was the time of my rude awakening about Bill. Like others who naively took him at his word or trusted him to be honorable, I was lied to and cheated by Bill about poster sales, poster copyrights and royalties. All the hype in the world can't erase that experience from my mind. It happened.

Recently, however, on the Bob Costas show on NBC, a happier, more likeable Bill than I'd ever seen before appeared. I watched and enjoyed his many reminiscences and enlightened views about the current need for increasing the quantity and quality of our nation's educational efforts. He spoke of Bob Dylan as the greatest poet "our industry has produced". In the early days Bill

benefited from the inspirations of a multitude of so called "hippies" (including Chet Helms and Jerry Garcia, and myself, among others) who taught him something about soul music, rhythm & blues, good rock & roll, good poster advertising besides explaining to him who the hell this guy Bob Dylan was anyhow. (In fact, Bill in many ways reminded me of the Dylan song about the "poor immigrant".)

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Without question, Bill was indeed mellowing in recent years. He had finally amassed enough millions to allow him to feel secure enough to look around and take note of the world outside himself. He even began to think that he could help to make a better world.

I was amazed just a few years ago when he even agreed to repay at least some of what he owed me. Let me hasten to add that it was due to Bill's business considerations rather than any guilt or sentiment about our past on his part that prompted the negotiations - he wanted to use my copyrighted Fillmore posters in his book. Even though the timing was quite late and the amount much too small to wholly make up for the problems he had caused, I needed the money and at least the 'settlement' with Bill was 'something' rather than nothing. So, we agreed, I signed on the dotted line, got a modest check, and put our long standing rancor as far as possible behind me.

I understand that since the 60's he even had taken an acid 'trip' and sampled pot. He threw a few extravagant parties and invited tons of people (even flying me out to the west coast for one) and in that way I think he atoned for many of his previous less than generous tendencies. And, as he always said, it was 'respect' that he wanted more than to 'be liked'. I must note that lately he was getting more of that from me than he had for a long time.

A newspaper report stated that the day after his accident, taped to the front door of the old Fillmore Auditorium, was this hastily scrawled note. These words describe my sentiments as well:

"Bill - we liked you even more than we realized!"

[Note: This article originally appeared in Wes Wilson's publication "Off The Wall," and is used with permission of Wilson and the author. Copyright © Wes Wilson and Wes Wilson]