

Bill Graham

Sunday afternoon, November 3, 1991, was a great day for a free concert in Golden Gate Park with the Grateful Dead, Santana, Joan Baez, John Fogerty and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. It was a classic San Francisco party with a 300,000-plus crowd, staged — of course — by Bill Graham Presents.

But Bill Graham himself was not there to orchestrate the proceedings with the clockwork precision and fiery intensity of a great conductor. Along with his companion Melissa Gold and pilot Steve Kahn, he had died just over a week earlier, on October 25, when their helicopter crashed into an electrical tower. Bill Graham was 60 years old.

"Perhaps the most appropriate comment on who he was and what he left behind is that his operation, in five days, could put together a concert for 300,000 people with good sound, in total safety and without incident," said Dennis McNally, publicist for the Grateful Dead. "And a show in which the last act, the Grateful Dead, went on stage and off on time, to the minute."

Graham's simple job description was "concert promoter." But no one who knew and worked with him would ever settle for so elementary a characterization. Graham was an actor, a curmudgeon, a friend and a fighter. He could be crude, rude and ruthless, yet he lived by a rare code of personal integrity. He was a perfectionist who thought nothing of alienating the very person for whom he was trying to create perfection if it meant proving his point. A high percentage of the most significant pop music events of the last 26 years were produced under the banner Bill Graham Presents.

An unapologetic capitalist, Bill Graham never pretended to be in business for love alone. Yet he loved the music as much as anyone in his audiences. He loved to challenge them and open their minds, to book Miles Davis with Neil Young or the Staple Singers with Steppenwolf, and he thrived on bringing together the many and disparate elements of a concert production.

Born Wolfgang Grajonca on January 8, 1931 in Berlin, Bill Graham literally walked across Europe to escape the Nazis. He made his way to New York and was placed with foster parents. After his Army service, Graham worked as a waiter to pay his way through City College. A visit to San Francisco in the mid-

Fifties resulted in his permanent move there to pursue an acting career. Instead, he found his true calling as an impresario.

Graham was serving as business manager for the San Francisco Mime Troupe when he arranged a November 6, 1965 benefit to raise legal funds for the organization. Among the performers booked into a hall on Howard Street was the Jefferson Airplane — the first rock musicians Graham had ever met. By the time of the second Mime Troupe benefit, on December 10, Graham had moved to the Fillmore Auditorium; for the third benefit, in January 1966, he hired the Grateful Dead. Graham had met the group a month before at one of the now-fabled LSD parties called the Trips Festivals.

"I was in an altered state one night and looked down to discover that the bridge of my guitar had collapsed," Jerry Garcia recalls. "That's when I saw this high-energy guy in a neat cardigan sweater, carrying a clipboard and trying to organize this completely unorganizable situation. He asked me what was wrong and then, not knowing a thing about guitars, he tried frantically to fix it. He didn't, but I fell in love with him and I've loved him ever since."

Graham gradually professionalized and expanded his operation to encompass the original Fillmore and then, in 1968, both the Fillmore West (which replaced the original hall) and the Fillmore East in New York. He closed both Fillmores in 1971 with a public declaration of disgust over the devolution of the rock concert business.

But in new venues on both coasts, Graham began to present ever-larger events, including the 600,000-strong Watkins Glen Festival. He created Winterland, the world's leading marketer of rock-oriented merchandise, and was the long-time manager of Santana and Eddie Money, among other artists. Yet he also presented many of rock's landmark benefit concerts — including Live Aid and the Amnesty International tours — and was a driving force behind the 1987 Soviet-American Peace Concert in Moscow.

Bill Graham was a man best defined by his contradictions. "He was one of us and one of them," said Grace Slick, "the only man I know who lived easily in paradox."

— Jeff Tamarkin

