

Business

Gizmo Guy: The American Jewish History Museum lingers on the legacy of rock promoter Bill Graham

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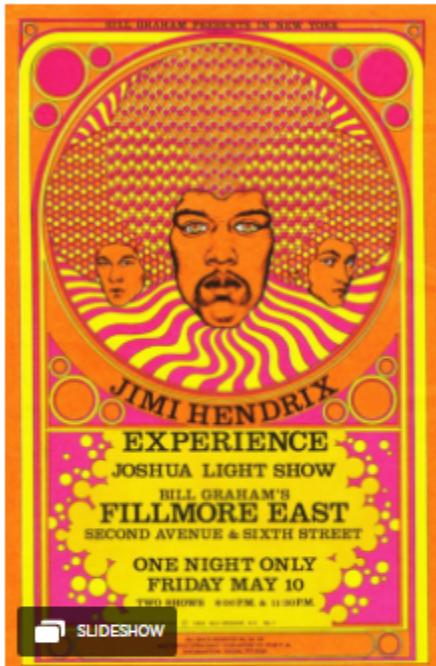


A Joshua Light Show backs up Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention.



by **Jonathan Takiff**, Staff Writer [@JTakiff](#)

These days, we take it for granted that a big outdoor show such as this weekend's Made in America Festival or an arena spectacle such as Barbra Streisand's recent "The Music . . . The Mem'ries . . . The Magic" will land with lots of high-tech eye candy.



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Think huge video close-up of the artists visible a half a mile away, plus abstract art flashed on LED screens.

And woe to the flimsy pop darling or the electronic dance music DJ if the video system crashes. The "excitement" would deflate faster than a popped party balloon.

But it hasn't always been so, reminded concert-art pioneer Joshua White (yeah, it's mostly his fault). The guiding spirit of the Joshua Light Show and Joshua Television, White got on the horn to discuss his role in a cool multimedia exhibit honoring "Bill Graham and the Rock & Roll Revolution," running here from Sept. 16 to Jan. 16 at the National Museum of American Jewish History, Fifth and Market Streets.

At heart the exhibit celebrates the bicoastal (and global) concert promoter Graham as "an artistic impresario in the vein of a Sol Hurok," said White. "Bill treated showgoers as guests, fed them more than they expected" - exotic opening acts, hot chocolate and apples - "and gave guys like me the chance and resources to express ourselves visually in a non-egotistical way serving the music first."

In White's case it would be with an arsenal of analog gear that today would be labeled "Steam Punk." We're talking movie, slide and overhead projectors, plus hundreds of color wheels, motorized reflectors, and clear glass dishes combined rhythmically to induce "dancing" blobs of paint.

All tools the JLS team of six to eight artists would use to throw head-spinning images onto a screen behind the band. "We'd work on scaffolding on the other side of the screen, out of sight of the audience. Everything was improvised, responding to the performers, like a kind of visual jazz," said White, the director.

Before guys such as White - fresh out of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon) and the University of Southern California, schooled in theater arts and engineering - "a rock promoter would rent the school gym, put up a stage, a sound system and a minimalist lighting rig with two follow spots and think he'd done enough," White said. "Then came the Beatles . . . Promoters started to realize that people had eyes as well as ears, and the music was too interesting to just listen to, especially when the musicians were often playing with their back to you."

Music visualizers had been dabbling for centuries with moving image machines such as the Lumia, a light-splaying invention by Thomas Wilfred that White first saw as a late 1950s teen at the Museum of Modern Art. An installation of White's own Joshua Light Show work is now on display at the same museum.

The modern illustrated concert was spawned in the mid-1960s on the West Coast by Ken Kesey, as chronicled in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. On the East Coast it took off at New York discotheques, where White started plying his trade, and at the formative Electric Circus rock ballroom where shows would feature "a band, an acrobat, a fire eater . . ."

White first connected with Graham at a '67 "Summer of Love" music fest in Toronto "that was actually no love fest at all backstage." A few months later, White led a brigade of like-minded artist hippies, "most of us Carnegie Tech friends," in luring Graham back to New York "where he'd landed in the U.S. as an orphaned German war refugee and spent his formative years. Bill had no interest in running a New York theater; he was strictly a San Francisco ballroom guy."

"But I got him backstage at the Anderson Theater, on the Lower East Side, while we worked a light show behind Janis Joplin. He peered out at the crowd and decided 'I could do that.' The next week he bought the much larger Village Theater down the block, renamed it the Fillmore East." And installed the Joshua Light Show as a house fixture - with billing virtually as big as that given to headliners like Frank Zappa, Miles Davis, the Doors and Jimi Hendrix. "I literally put our name up on the marquee," White says with a laugh, "and my friends did the posters."

The son of a TV producer, White was also in on the next big wave in concert visuals - closed-circuit video - with shoots that made the rock stars visible from afar and would play on such late-night network TV shows as Don Kirshner and Dick Clark's *In Concert*.

It all changed after the Joshua Light Show went to the Woodstock festival "and lasted one night, before the wind and rain ripped our screen apart," White said. (In the famous film, you can see the team visually vamping behind the Who.) "But we shouldn't have been there in the first place. Even with an 80-foot screen, the crowd was too immense, 400,000 people, and we couldn't connect. So I decided I had to evolve and grow, as the music scene did."

For the Graham exhibit here, a 45-minute continuous loop of Joshua Light Show video (yes, White does use digital tools these days) will be projected on three levels of the open atrium-designed museum on Independence Mall, said curator Josh Perelman. While grooving on the visuals, spectators can tune in a synchronized soundtrack of "Live at the Fillmore" performances streaming via WiFi to their smartphone and earbuds. "The idea is that they experience the visuals and music with the same holistic, immersive intensity that they would have at a Fillmore show," said the curator.

Your phones and buds also will deliver a no-extra-charge tour of exhibit highlights "in Bill Graham's own voice," said Perelman. A nifty stunt as the impresario died in 1991 in a helicopter crash. But his legacy lives on.

For more information, see NMAJH.org or call 215-923-3811.

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