

The Bay Area Music Scene: On the Ground

For young people growing up in the Bay Area, the regional music scene served as a constant sources of generational affirmation and grassroots community, and this too is a part of the story. That it brought people together there is no doubt. Musicians and performers speaking to this have often said how they too attended many of the same shows simply because the talent was so amazingly good.

Michael Shrieve: I used to go to Fillmore West all the time, driving up in my father's car from Redwood City where I lived. I would go and see everyone who played. That was the Mecca, you know? I'd go and see Charles Lloyd, and I'd go see B.B. King. I saw Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page, I saw Cream there. Everybody played there. I remember the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, especially *East-West*. To me that record kind of defined the sound of the Fillmore. If I hear that song, that kind of modal jamming going on there, I can smell the incense, I can smell the pot, I can see the apples that Bill Graham put out for the people, and I can see the pretty hippie chicks dancing and moving. It all comes back. A lot of emotion as well. (27)

Boz Scaggs: At the same time, I was with the Steve Miller Blues Band for eight or nine months and I got to see a lot in San Francisco too. A lot of the Chicago acts came out, the Texas bands. That whole Bay Area scene was a great melting pot of all kinds of music, when you have Ravi Shankar, Jimmy Reed, Cream, and everybody who was on the scene at that time. It was probably the greatest cosmo of music from everywhere ever. There was Miles Davis and John Coltrane, the poets Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg. Everybody came through San Francisco during that brief little period of time. I don't think there's ever been a confluence like that in the history of music. ([Boz Scaggs speaks with Holger Peterson — see YouTube](#))

Mat Callahan: The variety of music throughout the Bay Area seemed boundless. On any given night, concerts featuring the Young Rascals, Count Basie, Bola Sete with Country Joe and the Fish, or Lenny Bruce and the Mothers of Invention were attended by large and growing numbers. No doubt rock music predominated the scene, but what constituted rock music was more diverse than is usually acknowledged. So many influences converged under the umbrella of rock that listening today to representative samples well known at the time defies categorization. Bill Graham especially was a trailblazer in this regard, assembling performers for shows that only a few years before would have been unthinkable. (28)

Bill Graham: I was introduced to the blues early on by people like Butterfield and Jerry Garcia, because I was mainly into Latin music. But as I got more and more into the rock and roll world, these musicians said, "You ought to check out the Staple Singers, you ought to check out Otis Rush. You ought to check out Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, Muddy Waters and Albert King, and B.B. King and Freddie King." And in listening to them, their records, and then asking them to come here, all of a sudden this joyful situation presented itself where I could give the public what they asked for, which was the Jefferson Airplane or Quicksilver Messenger Service or the Grateful Dead, but also give them what they also might want, but not know it. (Bill Graham's '60s Celebration at the Fillmore, San Francisco - 1986 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6M5ASGI3WsY>)

Bill Champlin: Lots of people bitched and moaned about Bill Graham on some level, but in a real way he put San Francisco on the map. Single-handedly. And some of the things he did, some of the bills of performers he brought in were flat-out awesome. I always thought that part of it was the best, the diversity of it. I mean, for three bucks I'd go to see The Rascals, the Airplane. I saw the Charles Lloyd Quartet with Keith Jarrett and Jack DeJohnette. Man, you know? The Sons and the Dead were actually on the same bill for three nights with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band at Fillmore West. Now how's that for unusual? He would be bringing in guys who were not well known in the mainstream at the time. He did it a lot, and in that way, Graham was a true public servant. (29)

Bill Graham: I was fortunate enough to be there. That spirit, I am quite certain, is not going to exist again in my time. The guy on stage wasn't just an entertainer, he was part of our gang, part of our scene. He walked the same streets I did. I might not know you, but you're against racial inequality, and you're for the things that I'm for.



To this day I can recall the ease of settling in with friends at Fillmore West or Winterland for an evening's performances. Without fail, the quality of the bands, particularly the headliners, was always first-rate. Adding to the anticipation was welcoming ambiance inside: the low lighting, music flowing discreetly from the PA, light show artists weaving film montages over scenes of abstract color and art. On stage

was the glistening assortment of mic stands, amp stacks, drums and other sound equipment standing at the ready to deliver the goods. As always, the air was filled with the sweet aroma of an open and unencumbered enjoyment of people lighting up the killer weed. And save for a few on security detail looking the other way, nary a menacing soul was anywhere to be seen. For the audience, there was a knowing comfort in the subtle sophistication and professionalism of the operation; it was a safe space and the people running things knew what they were doing and liked being there. In speaking with others about their remembrances, this was the common experience. And although these events did not speak for any specific ideology or collection of cultural beliefs, there was an undercurrent of like-mindedness and shared understanding among the crowd. It was an atmosphere where people knew they belonged, and being there always felt right.

Listening to the Voices: Project Methodology

The end result of all the interviews and research, is a kind of oral memoir; a biographical account that lies somewhere between a conventional history and a personal chronicle resting on the testimonials of people who were there and experienced it, including my own. Nearly fifty men and women signed on to participate, some doing multiple interviews. The result was more than 150 hours of recorded dialogue and hundreds of pages of notes and transcribed material.

Everywhere I went, news of the project preceded me. Everybody was interested in knowing how life was treating old friends and comrades, and all were curious to know how others remembered the days past. I was surprised at first with the willingness to share what were often very personal insights and perspectives, but trusting to have their voices heard meant gaining some control of the story on their own terms. Some of what was shared was off the record, and some of the knowledge lies between the lines of the text. Through it all, I was granted the privilege of entering into a world that was often different from what I knew, expected, or necessarily understood. Speaking to the advantage of firsthand personal testimony, veteran activist and journalist Gloria Steinem articulated what I came to learn.

“[It is not surprising] that oral history turns out to be more accurate than written history. The first is handed down from the many who were present. The second is written by the few who probably weren’t.” (31)

For the purposes of this book, relying more on the former guarded against overdependence on the latter.

Finally, *Home Grown In Marin* is a look at a celebrated period of American popular culture, where much of the music that came from it was distinctive and unique, something the work of the Sons of Champlin exemplified. To this point, renowned Atlantic Records producer Jerry Wexler recalled his experience of recording some of soul music and R&B’s best during this same period.

Jerry Wexler: We didn't know we were at some cosmic threshold, you never know that. It's like certain movements in art. It's like that place outside of Paris where the light is so good, the Barbizon school, you know? The confluence of certain things, when the music was fresh, the musicians were fresh. You can't replicate it because there's something in the ambience, something in the atmosphere. **(32)**

As viewed through the lens of the band members and others living in and outside the Bay Area during this time, this story offers a candid look at the quest by a collection of young Marin County musicians to pursue their craft in a particularly challenging and consequential time in history. From their artistic genesis as young teens playing in public high school music programs, through the long and winding evolution of their professional career as the Sons of Champlin, these pages present the compelling maze of personalities and events that formed their story.