

The Night They Closed the Fillmore Down

The last night at the Fillmore East. It's been called "The Holy Grail of Allman Brothers Band shows." The night the fan who shouted, "Play all night!" on the live Fillmore East album got his wish. Dickey has been quoted as calling it the best show they ever played.

The fact that there are no known recordings of this show only adds to the mystique. If you were there, you heard it. If you weren't, you can only listen to shows from that era and imagine one that went on for hours, ending with a stupendous jam. Kirk West says, "they had the recording equipment there but no one turned it on." Can you imagine? The closing concert at the Fillmore East and no one recorded it?! Perhaps, locked away in some secret vault in the Bill Graham organization, lies a tape, waiting for the right moment to surface. Or perhaps it's in some fan's attic, long forgotten, oxide slowly turning to dust with the memories.

If you have the tape from the FM broadcast of June 27, 1971, it's a helluva show, but that's not the "Grail." Read on and you'll see the whole story from the perspective of someone who was lucky enough to be there, in the right time, at the right place.

Come back with me to 1971. It's my senior year at Ossining High School, about 25 miles north of New York City. What a powerful time of change in my life! The friends I made that year helped me get in touch with music and myself. One of my closest high school friends, Dave Jaffe, a.k.a. "Dee-troit Willie," introduced me to the Allman Brothers Band, radical politics, bluegrass, social consciousness, and women . . . a heady mix indeed! It seemed like music was the background for everything we did. We talked about music, listened to music, hung out with friends who made music. We accompanied them with the finest in body percussion. Above all, we would go to concerts as often as our limited budgets could stand.

Going to a concert was so much more than just going to hear a band. It was a group social event. Five or six friends jammed into a car, passing food and refreshments around, playing tapes, singing along, journeying to Deepest Darkest New York City! We'd pay double at the toll booths and say "the extra is for the car behind us," who was of course a total stranger. We must have driven them crazy wondering who we were!

One day in early '70, Detroit tossed a new album on the record changer and said "listen to this!" I picked up the album . . . hmmm, ATCO, good R&B and soul music, right? I opened it up and there's this lush green outdoor scene with a bunch of skinny grinning guys, naked in a stream . . . cool! The needle swung over and landed on the first cut . . . "dah dum de dum dummmmm . . . BOOM!" Wow! That sure got my attention! I sat riveted through "Don't Want You No More," closing my eyes and soaring along with the music . . . through the crashing finale, slowly building up into the next song . . . then the first sounds from Gregg: "yay-eee-yeahhhh yeahhh!" Who is that singer?! What a set of pipes! Not that skinny guy on the album cover? Where's he hidin' that voice?!

I'll bet more than a few of you had a similar experience! Forty five minutes later and the Allman Brothers were immediately added to our concert "must-see" list. Detroit had first "discovered" them at the Capitol Theater in Portchester, NY, on his own, before we started to hang out together. Fortunately for us, the band visited New York frequently, and we got to see them five times in my senior year.

After seeing a couple of shows, the Allmans became my favorite band. I loved their albums but nothing matched seeing them live. To me there was music, and then there was the Allman Brothers Band. No other band's music reached out and grabbed my heart and soul the way the Allmans' did. I felt like they touched my emotions, the very center of my being, directly and personally. When Duane played a solo, I knew exactly what he was feeling.

I enjoyed other concerts, but they were just artists belting out their hits, impressing us with their musical talent, getting us on our feet, dancing and yelling. But none of them made me close my eyes tight and feel the emotions jamming in my brain, down my spine, clenching the muscles in my legs, right into the soles of my feet. No other musicians made me feel so connected to their souls as they played. It was like the difference between acting and living. Other bands seemed to be aware of the fact that they were on a stage and making music. The Allmans seemed to be living and feeling the things they were playing right there in front of us.

So, did I mention that I really liked the Allman Brothers?!

We went to a lot of shows, indoors and out, but our favorite spot by far was Bill Graham's Fillmore East. The Fillmore was a concert hall in the old tradition, seating only a few thousand people. There was a balcony and three sections of theater-style seats. The Fillmore staff allowed us to bring in our own munchies, and we always had a mix of healthy food and junk food: brownies, apples, carrots, cookies, you name it.

The ushers at the Fillmore kept busy running around the theater shining flashlights on people flaunting the "no smoking" laws, but there was always plenty of olfactory evidence that the cigarette lighters were winning the battle with the ushers.

The Fillmore had wonderful acoustics, something sadly missing from most concert experiences these days. Who decided that rock music sounds fine in amphitheater sheds, football stadiums, and gymnasiums, anyway? It's great that the Brothers still play real theaters like the Beacon and the Warfield even though they could make more money filling a 20,000 seat amphitheater.

Most Fillmore concerts had light shows, often put on by Joshua Light Shows. I hadn't seen a light show in years until I saw the Brothers at Walnut Creek in Raleigh, NC, on Oct. 26, 1991. As night crept into the sky, the giant screen behind them lit up with swirling colors and I was transported back to those nights at the Fillmore! Thanks guys, it's a great touch!

The Fillmore East was nestled in New York's East Village, where the real hippies moved when Greenwich Village went commercial. You couldn't walk a block in the East Village without getting hustled for dope or spare change. It was downright seedy, even by New York's standards. But traveling in a group of five or six, we were probably relatively safe. And on concert nights, the streets were full of other kids streaming in from the suburbs, all trying to look like they lived in the East Village.

The NY music scene was hot; we were proud of it, and we took it for granted. And so we couldn't have been more surprised that day in early spring '71 when Detroit read the news: "You won't believe this: Bill Graham's closing the Fillmore!"

Impossible! Bill Graham and the Fillmore were synonymous with rock concerts at their finest. Why on earth would he quit? The news reports over the next couple of weeks told the story of a burned out, jaded Bill Graham who was weary of the hassles of rock concert promotion. The bands were demanding more money, which he felt would price them out of the market (imagine what he would say about some of last summer's ticket prices!). He said the crowds were getting unruly and were less knowledgeable and selective about the music. He thought they were just "yelling for more" no matter how the music sounded.

Slowly it sunk in that this was for real, and that there would soon be a "last night at the Fillmore." We got the news of the final stand: there would be four public concerts, a late and early show each night, on Friday and Saturday, June 25 and 26th; and then an "invited guests only" private concert on June 27th that would be broadcast over the radio. The bands for the public shows would be: Albert King, the J. Geils Band, and headlining, the Allman Brothers Band. Talk about mixed emotions . . . the joy of seeing the Brothers honored as the last band to play the Fillmore East, mixed with the sadness of seeing the place closing down. Well, if the Fillmore had to close, at least we would be closing it down hittin' the note.

At the ages of 16 and 17 our connections in the music business were not yet well enough developed to pull an invitation to the private party on June 27th, so Detroit drew ticket duty. There was no Ticketmaster in those days. Detroit just mailed in a ticket request to the Fillmore and got us four seats for the last public show, the late show on the 26th . . . in the fifth row on the left! Bless you, Detroit! How we got such good seats by mail order, we'll never know, but I'm sure we dipped well into our good karma bank that day.

At last the week of the concert arrived. Fittingly, the Fillmore was not the only thing coming to an end that week. It was also the week we graduated from high school. We would go straight to the Fillmore after we graduated. Little did we know that we would be going straight from school—to church!

Detroit had a few more musical tricks up his sleeve for us that week. We saw the Rascals at Westchester County Center in White Plains, NY, one night. This was shortly after they released *Peaceful World*, their pivotal album where they replaced their Top 40 hit sound with a mellow groovin' rock and blues feel, with a horn section and extended jams.

We went to the Fillmore twice that week; the first time we saw Rick Derringer, Albert King and BB King. I believe Johnny Winter was scheduled but canceled out and Albert was recruited at the last minute.

The night of high school graduation finally arrived. I had been an "A-track" student and was not overly rebellious, but I was never very impressed with high school. I always felt that I could be learning and doing things at a much greater pace outside the halls of high school, but I was tradition bound enough to stick through and graduate. Going through the ceremony to be with friends and celebrate finishing was fine with me, but putting on a cap and gown was too much of an act of submission to the system that I was not feeling a whole lot of admiration for at the time. On the night of graduation, I found myself dressing in a wholly uncharacteristic way. I tied my shoulder length hair back in a

pony tail for the first time . . . put on black pants and a black turtleneck shirt . . . a pair of shades . . . a ratty hat . . . and I was ready to go to my graduation!

I can look back in amusement at this “acting out” on my part, but at the time it felt very liberating, letting everyone know that I was making the rules now! Let’s hear a rebel yell!

Graduation went by in a blur and we were concert bound! We piled into my red ’69 Camaro and headed south on Route 9, down to “The City.” By now we knew most of the shortcuts and could get to lower Manhattan taking free roads the whole way. It was always an adventure just finding a parking space somewhere near the Fillmore, but we found one on a side street just a couple of blocks away, a good omen for the night to come.

Since we had reserved seats, there was no giant rush to be first in line for the late show. We wandered up and hung out with a few thousand soul-mates under the old-fashioned, lit up marquee advertising the last shows. The side doors opened and out poured the early show crowd, a satisfied look on their faces. We knew that soon the front doors would open and it would be our turn to pass into the magical world of music at the Fillmore East for the very last time.

The Fillmore always gave out a program guide at the door, another nice touch dropped by most venues long ago. It was usually printed in brown on white glossy stock. Tonight the cover was gold. (Last fall at the Allman Brothers and Sisters Revival in Macon, I got a chance to visit the Big House and saw a copy of the program for the first time in many years, up on the far wall of Kirk’s Archives.) We filed inside and waving our prime tickets, swaggered past several sets of helpful ushers, all the way up to the fifth row. Duane would be standing right in front of us in a couple of hours! What great seats!

Now the excitement began to seriously mount. Rock music piped over the loudspeakers whet our appetite for the show to start as the theater filled with other lucky hippies, freaks, and young punks from the suburbs like us. The late show was scheduled to start around 11 PM.

The lights went down in the house and on came the spots to highlight Albert King taking off on a powerful set of electric blues. Although I don’t recall specifics, I do remember thinking that he played pretty much the same set he had played earlier that week. I was not very familiar with his work back then, but between Albert and B.B. King I was developing a taste for the masters of the blues. The roots of the Allmans’ music were unmistakable.

After Albert’s show, the stage hands came out and got things ready for the J. Geils Band. This was my first time seeing J. Geils, with Magic Dick on harp and Peter Wolf on vocals. They put on a boiling hot performance, with J. Geils playing stinging electric guitar, Peter Wolf strutting back and forth, then getting down on his knees and belting out the lyrics to songs like “First I Look at the Purse.” Magic Dick played a driving blues harp like his life depended on it. Little did I know that the next time I saw J. Geils, he would be sitting in with Dickey during one song at the Carnegie Hall show in late November that year, a few short weeks after Duane’s motorcycle accident.

The J. Geils band delivered over an hour of sizzling, flashy rock and roll. These guys clearly knew that this was a special night. We wanted their show to go on forever, but

the real reason we were there that night couldn't start until they finished. They went out in a blaze of rock and roll guitar and harp glory, and the house lights came up again. It was the roadies turn on stage, and now the excitement really began to build. We had seen the Allmans enough times that we recognized most of the roadies. Once they took over the stage it felt like the Allmans show had started at long last.

We drifted into conversation and time sped by. Then the audience noticed that the roadies had left the stage; all the equipment was set up, but the house lights were still on. Rhythmic applause, shouts of "come on!" and "let's go!" filled the air with energy and anticipation. When a song on the PA ended, the noise from the crowd would swell to a peak, and then another song started . . . now I was saying it: "Come on! It's time to start the show!"

Then, in mid-song, the house lights went down. Folks, I'm sure you know the feeling; we had just witnessed two excellent musical performances, but now the real excitement and magic were in the air.

The noise of the crowd was building to a feverish pitch . . . shadows moving across stage . . . a couple of riffs on the drums . . . then a spine tingling shot from a slide guitar . . . yesss! That sweet magical sound was here again, a wide grin spread across our faces . . . the Hammond B 3 sang out in the dark . . . a scale from the bass . . . then it got quiet. A lone spotlight followed Bill Graham onto the stage. Even Bill was caught between the emotion of closing down his concert hall and the excitement of introducing a band he had come to love. He spoke for a minute . . . "and now, the Allman Brothers Band!" "A one, a two, a one two three . . . da dah-dah dah DUM!" and the energy of "Statesboro Blues" lifted us out of our seats. The stage was lit up in the blaze of floods, the light show was swirling and pulsing behind Butch and Jaimoe, and we were up and clapping and hollering! No gathering of converted sinners had it over this crowd, we were going to make our last show at the Fillmore a night to remember.

The band powered into song after song from the early '71 repertoire. Duane was usually the only band member to talk between songs, and he only said a few words most of the time. Yet here he was, just 24 years old, leading the band that was obviously a personal favorite of Bill Graham's, carefully chosen to close one of the world's premier rock concert halls.

Duane usually played with his eyes closed and mouth open. He kept his head down, reddish orange hair covering his face, as his fingers seemed to effortlessly close the connection between his soul and his instrument. As we viewed it, he stood just to the right of Gregg's B 3, and would sometimes glance up to look over at Berry or Dickey. At times he would walk over to where Dickey stood, near center stage, and they would stand facing each other, trading piercing guitar riffs that made the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end. At other times, he would stand right behind Dickey, and occasionally Berry would walk over and join them, a trio of guitarists in a row, creating that driving, wonderfully complex fabric of sound. Sometimes after one of these group efforts, their usually serious expressions would change to broad grins. Yessss!

I don't remember the order of the set list, but they played everything. To keep this article flowing, I'll talk about the songs without adding the continual caveat of "maybe it wasn't in exactly this order . . ." But, if there are any historians reading, don't assume this is

the definitive ordering of the set list, OK? However, I am certain that they started with Statesboro Blues and ended with a jam!

Duane's slide work on "Done Somebody Wrong" sent chills down my spine; if he played any higher they would have had to evacuate the theater. In the early part of the show, Duane's solos were dominant. Dickey's were shorter but always riveting and poignant. As the night progressed, and the songs got longer, Dickey made it clear that he was worthy of sharing the title "lead guitarist" with Duane. He stretched out in "Hot 'Lanta," and then really got to show his stuff with his carefully building solo in "Elizabeth Reed," a demonstration of musical foreplay that put Bolero to shame.

The pace eased with "Stormy Monday," a showcase for Gregg's gripping vocals and soul searing work on the Hammond. "Best organ playing in rock and roll!" shouted Detroit in my ear. Gregg switched to his electric piano for "One Way Out," and Duane and Dickey traded searing solos that sent the crowd into a frenzy.

Berry played the role of the third guitarist, not a thudding, hidden part of the rhythm section. I was constantly aware of Duane, Dickey, and Berry's melody lines intertwining, perfectly woven together, point, counterpoint, and contrapoint. The bass line, although in a lower register, often seemed to be playing higher notes than the lead guitars, and it was never lost in repetition. Listen to Berry throughout "Elizabeth Reed" on the Fillmore East album. Berry could have settled in and just played a background bass line, there's plenty going on with Duane and Dickey, but he contributes beautifully and blends in perfectly. If you find your head bouncing along in time to the song, I bet you're in tune with Berry!

I loved this delicious interplay between Duane, Dickey, and Berry. Whenever a new fan would ask "why do they have two lead guitars?" I'd always point out that there were really three, just listen!

Dickey's solo skills shone again on the long version of "You Don't Love Me" as he led the band through changes, taking the song far afield from the original theme and then bringing it back home again. The band joined in for a strong finish at the very end of Duane's "Joy to The World" licks, and all the lights went out except for a white beam striking the rotating mirror ball and sending splinters of light dancing around the hall.

Through practically the entire concert, Bill Graham stood in the wings, on the right side of the stage, peering at the band intently, absorbed in the music. We were used to seeing Bill pop out at that side of the stage for a few minutes during many Fillmore shows, but we had never seen him stand there for most of a show, looking so focused the whole time. His comments later that day, introducing the Allmans at the private party on 6/27/71, would reveal just how highly he valued this band of Southern musicians.

At some point the band cruised into a long and flowing version of "Dreams." I'll never forget that other-worldly, twelve note descending sequence repeated over and over again: "Dah-uh, dum, dum; dah-uh, dum, dum; dah-uh, dum, dum; dum, dum dum . . ." It seemed to go on for hours. I'll never forget the image of Duane bent over his guitar playing those magical scales and transporting me wherever concert goes when they've heard the best there is to hear.

I got to watch as Berry launched the band into a lengthy version of “Whipping Post,” which segued into an even longer “Mountain Jam.” Everyone except Butch and Jaimoe left the stage at the midpoint of Mountain Jam for the extended drum solo. Ever wonder why the drummers, who seem to be using the most energy by far, have to work without a break while everyone else heads out for a smoke?!

Some of my friends automatically switched off during drum solos, but Butch and Jaimoe’s performance was special. When the whole band was playing, they drove the music—they were the framework on which the tapestry was hung. When Butch and Jaimoe played alone, I realized how they worked off each other, interweaving just as intricately and perfectly as Berry, Dickey and Duane. I had never paid that much attention to the drummers in a rock group before I discovered the Allmans. Drums were just, well, drums. I was amazed by how Butch and Jaimoe could be so in synch and yet never “stepped on each other’s lines.” I could actually hear the melody of “Mountain Jam” as they played. During their solo, I was so transfixed by their playing that I didn’t notice Berry walking silently back, standing on the right side as we faced the stage. The cymbals and snares slowed to a steady pace, and suddenly there was Berry again.

Berry’s solo after the drum break in “Mountain Jam” always blew me away, and this was no exception. I had never heard any bass player hitting so many chords before. This wasn’t bass, it was power guitar! Berry’s playing on this solo, and his singing in “Hoochie Coochie Man,” made me wish he had been given the spotlight a little more often.

After several minutes of intense playing, Berry slowed, stopped . . . and then took off on a driving run like a thoroughbred. Duane called out “one, two, three, four!” the lights shone back on the entire stage, and the band was off into those incredible soaring, final minutes of “Mountain Jam.”

Sometime around five in the morning, Duane stepped up to the microphone and announced, “Well, we’ve played all our material . . . so we’re just gonna jam!”

And jam they did . . . I wish I could remember what they played, but I don’t. It seems that they jammed on “My Favorite Things” but that may just be creative memory. I had never been to any concert before or since where the headline band jammed for hours. The light show finally stopped and that crazy mirror ball just ran on forever. Most fans know the story of the seminal ABB jam in Jacksonville, FL, before Gregg even joined the band, where they played for three hours without a word. Butch describes it in a radio interview during a 1979 concert broadcast like this:

“Butch Trucks is here with me on Supergroups in Concert. Butch, talking about jamming . . . the Allman Brothers has got to be one of the best if not the best jamming band in the world today”

Butch: “That’s how we started I guess the day we put it together and we knew that was it . . . one day early in 1969, I think . . . there was myself, and Jaimoe, Dickey, Duane, Berry, and another dude on keyboards . . . we started playin, uh, Shuffle . . . ‘hit that shuffle . . . ’ went from that to somethin’ else, to somethin’ else, to another change, three hours later we quit, and I’d gone through all the changes, the chill bumps up my back, and cryin’, and laughin’, and . . . it’s the first time I’d ever experienced that, you know, playin’ . . . when we got finished I was dazed! I looked at Jaimoe and said ‘Man, did you get off on that?’ and he got a grin from ear to ear and said ‘are you kidding?’”

And Duane walked to the door and said, 'Anybody in this room not gonna play in my band, you got to fight your way out!' We all started laughing and that was it. And all we needed was a singer so he called Gregg, and that did it. I mean it started with jammin' . . . that was our basis, and we can't stop it. Spontaneity I'm talkin' about . . . that's what our band's based on. If we ever lose the spontaneity . . . we did it once before . . . that's when we had to split up. But we got it back, and as long as we got it, I'm gonna keep playin'!"

What we heard that last night at the Fillmore East gave me some feeling for what the Jacksonville jam must have been like. No vocals, just jam, jam, jam. Trading solos, interweaving, building, soaring, driving . . . the very definition of hittin' the note. Playing on and on because it felt so good, because no one wanted that night to end, we all wanted the Fillmore to stay open, and if the band just kept playing, then maybe, just maybe

Even this incredible show finally had to come to an end. We had all gotten our second wind sometime around 4 AM and were wide awake and grooving when it wound down and ended between 6:30 and 7:00 AM. I asked Butch to recall anything he could from that night, and one of his memories is how it came to a close:

"I remember that when we finished playing there was no applause and the audience, all smiling broadly, just got up and quietly filed out. Also Duane walking off stage, dragging his guitar, shaking his head saying 'Goddamn, it's like leaving church.'"

And file out we did . . . no pushing and shoving, no rush to leave. I looked back over my shoulder as we neared the door; the open door that led us into broad daylight! I knew it was late (early?), and wouldn't have been surprised to see the sky growing light, but this was way past dawn. We had entered the theater before midnight, in total darkness. The echoes of what we had just witnessed rang through our heads as we scanned the buildings lit by the morning sun. I remember very clearly the feeling of walking two feet off the pavement. I never knew where that expression came from until that morning outside the Fillmore East. We found our car, smiles still plastered broadly across our faces, and drove quietly home.

That night, Sunday June 27, 1971, I invited some friends over for a post-graduation party in my basement rec. room. WNEW-FM in NY was broadcasting the private party from the Fillmore. There was a much bigger assortment of bands playing that night, but the Allmans were chosen again to close it out for good. Butch recalls another memory for us from June 27:

"Mostly, I remember the next night [June 27]. I hadn't really met Bill Graham at that time. He was, to me, a kind of mythological character that you simply didn't want to cross. I would hear him going off on some poor fool who didn't do his job well enough or fast enough from time to time, but I hadn't really met him yet. When I arrived at the Fillmore the night of the closing I was walking across the stage toward the dressing room and Bill was on the other side. When he spotted me he ran across the stage, grabbed me around the neck and began squeezing real hard. He said that the show the night before was the greatest thing he had ever seen and made all the bullshit he had been going through worthwhile. Then he said, 'if I could have my way, I would have been sealed up in a bubble and floated off to wherever I'm going when the show ended.' Hell of a way to finally meet."

By the time the Allmans were introduced it was after midnight, and many of the invited guests had gone home already. Tears of joy and pride welled in my eyes as I heard Bill Graham give the introduction, now immortalized on the tape of that FM broadcast:

“Over the years that we’ve been doing this, the introductions are usually very short, and this one’s going to be short, but a little longer than usual. The last two days, we have had the privilege of working with this particular group, and over the past year or so, we’ve had them on both coasts a number of times. In all that time, I’ve never heard the kind of music that this group plays. And last night, we had the good fortune of having them get on stage about 2:30, 3:00 o’clock, and they walked out of here at 7:00 in the morning. And it’s not just that they played quantity, and for my amateur ears, in all my life, I’ve never heard the kind of music that this group plays: the finest contemporary music. We’re going to round it off with the best of them all, the Allman Brothers.”

I still get chills when I hear this introduction. My friends and I partied through the night again with the Brothers, although this show was much abbreviated compared to the last public show. They played inspired versions of their standard '71 material, despite the thinning crowd of invited guests. I still shake my head at Duane’s comment about “oh, truth be, it’s awful quiet! what is it, early or what is it?!” Detroit still likes to think that even though the auditorium was half empty, the Brothers knew that their real fans were out there listening to the radio, and gave a hot performance just for them. I treasured this tape made off the air, and always preferred listening to it over the Fillmore East album. In college, a friend borrowed it and never returned it. I had given it up as lost forever when years later, I found that tapes are still around if you look for them, and now I can listen to that show once more.

But I’ve never found a tape of the show that went all night; the real last night at the Fillmore East . . . as Kirk West said, pointing to my head, “it’s all up there!”

Rowland Archer