

Bill Ham

Light-Show Pioneer



with Michael Erlewine

Bill Ham

Light Show Pioneer

With

Michael Erlewine

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.

Michael@Erlewine.net

Here are some other links to more books, articles, and videos on these topics:

Main Browsing Site:

<http://SpiritGrooves.net/>

Organized Article Archive:

<http://MichaelErlewine.com/>

YouTube Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/user/merlewine>

Spirit Grooves / Dharma Grooves

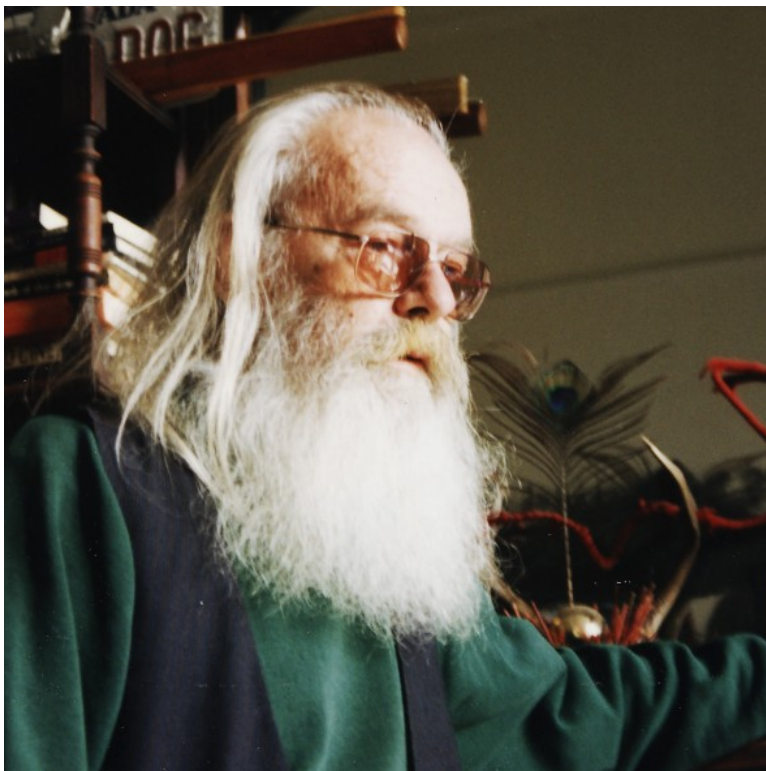
Copyright 2019 © by Michael Erlewine

You are free to share these blogs
provided no money is charged

Interview with Bill Ham

By Michael Erlewine

February 19, 2003



Michael: Well good. Well let me start off with what with basic biographical stuff. Your birth date and year, so we have it on the record.

Bill: September the 26th 1932, in Greenville Mississippi.

Michael: And your given name?

Bill: William Gatewood Ham

Michael: I am not an expert on lights. I know quite a bit about posters, but I did have a little light show of my own back in the mid-sixties.

Bill: Alright.

Michael: S,o I have run opaques, overheads and stuff like that.

Bill: And where was that?

Michael: Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Bill: I dig. Anyway, you got a good taste of San Francisco.

Michael: Oh yeah, I lived in Berkeley in 1964 for a whole year, during the riots

Bill: Oh yeah

Michael: In 1960 I also lived out on North Beach a little bit.

Bill: I see, OK

Michael: Chasing the beatniks. Right?

Bill: Yeah yeah.

Michael: I feel that the light shows have been ignored.

Bill: I think you're right. I'm interested that you have that perception of the light shows' contribution and significance to that period.

Michael: ABSOLUTELY!

Bill: San Francisco was kind of the capital of it. There were probably more light shows per capita in the Bay Area than all of the rest of the world put together, as far as I know.

So I don't know a lot about whatever else was going on around the country, but you know, your experience back there of getting involved with the music and then having a light show somehow, and you know, it went all the way across the United States and there were versions everywhere.

Michael: True.

Bill: But, San Francisco was the Paris of light shows.

Michael: Chet Helms says you're the man to talk to about light shows.

Bill: I respect Chet a lot and, you know to what ever extent some of the people are giving him credit, some people haven't. Chet ran the other place, the Avalon Ballroom, and those two places were the generators for the whole Bay area and then from there on out.

And you know people who have a perspective that weren't maybe in San Francisco and whatever, think it happened everywhere and it did. But it didn't happen quite like it happened here. And the light shows were one of the main elements that made it different,

Briefly, there were light shows before there was rock-n-roll. So rather than rock-n-roll creating light shows, light shows actually were here and helped create rock-n-roll.

Michael: Tell me how that came to be.

Bill: Well there were a number of painters, three of us that I know of, myself, Elias Romero and Tony Martin, who were in San Francisco and who were painting.

Michael: You mean Art painting. Fine art?

Bill: Yeah, you know, painting and that's what I think a light show still is. And it's the farthest out, you know, evolution of modern painting, that, partly because it was in San Francisco, has never been recognized and that's kind of what I am still working on.

The fact that several painters plugged into the wall and began using electricity and optics, is, you know, where the next step happened after whatever was preceding it in art. And there were a lot of things preceding it. People were beginning to use other media and projections and so forth and so on. And you know you can go back to wherever you want to, but by the beginning of the sixties, painters were beginning to explore something other than oil paint.

And some of the early ones began to use film. Most of that experimentation was pretty low budget. And along with that, there were several painters who plugged into the wall and started doing what's now called projected imagery, but at the time no body quite, you know, had a name for it. And each one of us, the three that I know of, were doing it in association with music in different ways.

So Elias Romero is the first person that I saw, that had an overhead projector. They didn't have them in schools, and I think I had seen one in the army. They would use them to put silhouettes of aircraft on or something, or ships so, people could recognize the silhouettes, you know.

There, supposedly there was a teacher at San Francisco State named Seymour Locks. He probably knew about the Bauhaus and other things, but anyway he demonstrated basic primitive use of the overhead projector, putting liquids on the surface.

The overhead projector is the thing that distinguishes what was thought of as light show coming from the West Coast.

And it's the difference between a lot of things that were done in the Bauhaus and other uses of lighting, you know, back lighting, and reflected off of sculptures and there were all these different things that they were experimenting with, but the overhead, I don't, I haven't read of them using the overhead projector. The difference with the overhead projector is that you can work in the present.

With slides, film, everything else you're working with something that you have to prepare and then you know you can do all kinds of things with it, but you're limited to whatever that is.

But if you make it up at the moment, that's a whole other trip, and the overhead projector, because it has a flat surface, allows you to make it up at the moment.

And going from abstract painting, abstract expressionism, industrial abstraction or whatever the categories are, when you plug it into the wall and use optics, suddenly you've got a painting that's the scale of a Kandinsky and all of a sudden it becomes the scale of a Pollock, or you know, and its' right now. So that was a whole other world.

Elias Romero had begun to use an overhead projector and there were a few people that had seen Seymour's class and there were certain ones that had kind of gone out and you know done a few little things. But it had not gotten very far and it was still part of the underground

And Elias was one of the pioneers that continued it out of that state. I knew him and we did a theater piece together called the 'Run', [that was written by] Lee Brewer, who founded Mabu Mimes. Elias did some projections, I made a sculpture, and a lot of other things were involved in this very interesting play.

Elias moved in across the street from me, here on Pine Street, and I talked to him about the projector, and he was

most generous and offered to lend me one of the two that he had. That's when I began painting with the overhead.

Michael: And this would be what year?

Bill: About 1964. And so then, Elias continued, you know, with his work with different situations, and did a number of theatre pieces.

Michael: Now, was he doing it to live or with recorded music?

Bill: Well, he was doing it to various things. When I saw him, he was doing it to live spontaneous music, that Christopher Tree, who was the first person that I did an extended period of playing with, had begun playing. But, there were several musicians and it was a Sunday night underground theatre, happening thing and Elias was collaborating with some dancers and other people. And it was, you know, a donation at the door and that was the first time I saw his work and so then we did a play.

Then I borrowed a projector. Then, I got my own projectors, built my studio and began playing kind of on a regular basis with different musicians. And it was all made up though, in the present

Michael: So, its' like improvisation in jazz, but with light?

Bill: Absolutely, also carrying on the idea of abstract painting, where finally they've done away with all the rules, and any kind of literary context or whatever and it was just painting.

So, when we plugged that into the wall, we continued that form of spontaneous art.

I found musicians that wanted to play that way. And Christopher Tree was one of them and we played that way several times a week in my studio.

And the neighborhood that was developing, the underground sort of neighborhood on Pine Street, which was -- you probably don't know where Pine Street is, necessarily. It's between North Beach and the Panhandle.

Bill: So when the first overflow of people artists and bohemians, North Beach was getting too crowded

Michael: I'll bet.

Bill: This is sort of the first neighborhood. And it was at the Japan Town end of Fillmore Street, which was the black jazz district and everything else. Then, on the other end of Fillmore Street is where the Haight district begins.

Michael: I see.

Bill: And that's still maybe ten blocks or twelve blocks before you get to Haight and Masonic. But, anyway that's the reason this neighborhood developed. So I was, you know people like Jim Gurley and Alton Kelley.

And the poster, you know, and the Family Dog-ers and... and you know about the Red Dog Saloon?

Michael: Yeah, I do.

Bill: Well, this is where everybody came back to. This is where they left and this is where they came back to, and this neighborhood is where the dances started.

Michael: Oh really.

Bill: And so Kelley, after coming back from the Red Dog Saloon, along with the Charlatans' George Hunter.

Bill: Yeah, produced the first dances at the Longshoreman's Hall. And they were called dances, and they were thought of as dances. And Kelley is a good one to talk to, relative to the kind of overlap of all of this -- the Neighborhood, the posters and the light show. Do you know Alton Kelley?

Michael: I did interview him, but I may follow up with him.

Bill: Yeah, if you do you might ask him about light shows and the dance thing. Have you ever seen this video that the young lady did a few years ago?

Michael: No I heard that there was one. I've never seen it. Is it available anywhere?

Bill: I think it is. Off the top of my head, I can't give you her address to order it, but it is available and it's the "Red Dog Summer", or something like that.

Michael: Well if you ever find it, email me and I will try to track it down.

Bill: OK, I'll try to give you whatever information you want that's useful.

Michael: Great.

Bill: But I had started playing on a regular basis across the street spontaneously with music and other artists along with Elias Romera and Tony Martin. Tony was associated with the Taped Music Center.

Michael: I have heard about that.

Bill: They were the West Coast/San Francisco, you know, official taped music avant-garde composers.

Michael: Right.

Bill: Like in Europe, and Rome and...

Michael: We had a thing called the Once Group in Ann Arbor.

Bill: I dig.

Michael: Bob Ashley, Gordon Mumma, Robert Sheff, and people like that-- avant-garde composers.

Bill: Right, all those guys were hooked up, and the composers had decided that they wanted to work with a multimedia artist, so they invited Tony to be that artist. So he was a member of the Taped Music Center and they were doing concerts, and he was doing different kinds of projections. Tony was not using liquids very much and never got too far into liquids, I don't think.

As a result of the Taped Music Center being one of the main groups that participated in the Trips Festival, Bill Graham, when the Fillmore Auditorium began, invited Tony to do the light show there, because the light show was very much a part of what was bubbling up out of the underground. Tony was mostly using loops and slides. Elias was just using liquids and that was what I began with also.

It wasn't until I did the Avalon Ballroom that I began to use all the other possibilities of projection and strobes and whatever to make the environment.

And in between those times I made a Kinetic panel, that turned out to be the light show behind the Charlatans at the Red Dog Saloon. And in the San Francisco '60s folklore, that was the first, you know, demonstration of rock and a light show.

And it was also the first gig, that any band out of that bunch of garage bands, had gotten.

Michael: And when was this?

Bill: 1965.

Michael: Right.

Bill: And so, I'm not good on dates, but I just saw that date. So, in 1965, that summer, after, you know, preparations and (chuckle) rebuilding the saloon, it opened and the band stayed there the whole summer, and it turned into a rather famous happening.

And when everybody came back to the neighborhood, I was taking care of several houses that a real estate tycoon was buying up to tear down. I temporarily had all these keys to about 3 or 4 houses, so all these people were living in, you know, well anyway a lot people were living in those houses.

Michael: (chuckle)

Bill: And then the neighborhood had quite a few more people, the Zen Center, the Fillmore Auditorium and, you know, it was a real happening place. And this was kind of all before the Haight-Ashbury began to come alive.

Anyway, when everybody came back there was a need to make up some place to try and have an audience. And that's kind of where the dances started.

The Fillmore started happening and then Chet became the producer at the Avalon. And he invited me to come do the show at the Avalon. In the meantime, I had done a concert just prior to the Trips Festival.

We did three weekends of spontaneous light show, painting and music.

Michael: Yeah, that was quite something.

Bill: Yeah, and then a few months go by and the dances start and Chet invited me to do the light show at the Avalon. Tony Martin become the House light show at the Fillmore.

Michael: And what did he call his group?

Bill: I think it was called Tony Martin.

Michael: That's right.

Bill: And I think that's on the early Fillmore posters.

And it's actually on the first poster incorrectly at the Avalon, because when Chet and Bill parted company, Chet went across town and found the Avalon I guess he thought Tony would come do his show and Tony chose to stay with Bill's show.

So, that's when Chet came and invited me to come do the light show at the Avalon. So I actually did the first light show at the Avalon and made up how it was laid out, where the light show was going to be, and explained to Chet that there had to be screens; we couldn't project on the old drapes, and mirrors and things. Then, over a period of weeks, we got more and more screen up and the light show evolved and so, basically, each one of us just made our version, up.

But this opportunity to make up a different kind of light show, from the spontaneous one, that was like a spontaneous painting.

Now I had a situation that was like a room and we, along with the Fillmore, I think, both saw this as... the basic thing was to create this total environment.

Michael: Right.

Bill: And this went along with the idea of it being a dance. And the fact that it was done in these old ballrooms turned out to be very helpful.

The fact that the Avalon didn't have any kind of stage lighting or even house lighting gave us a wonderful opportunity to make up whatever the lighting was going to be.

And, I mean and the same situation, basically, was at the Fillmore. They had no stage lighting, and they had really no house lighting. They had these funny old chandeliers with some light bulbs in them.

So in each situation, the artist is presented with this 360-degree canvas and, you know, it is up to you to make something happen.

And out of that, we transformed these two old funky ballrooms into these psychedelic things that made everybody's mouths fall open when they hit the top of the steps.

After you've seen one, then you know you can go make one yourself.

So, those first few weeks and months were a very exciting time. At the Avalon it was established with Chet that the light show was in charge of the lights. At the Fillmore, Bill Graham very quickly got an old trooper's spot, and had it pointed at whomever he was paying the most money.

That was part of the evolution of turning it all back into stage lighting.

Michael: Right.

Bill: Originally there was no stage lighting, so when bands came, there were a number of situations that had to be cleared up, and usually there was no problem.

For example, I think it was the Lovin' Spoonful, somebody from LA came up, and they had a whole bunch of their own stage lighting on little traveling stands and things. And you could see, where if you had been playing in clubs, and you constantly went in and they didn't have any good lights, or if you'd just arrived at the Avalon without a light show, and they didn't have any either, it looked pretty professional. The problem was it didn't have anything to do with the light show, and it was going to wash out this whole new thing we'd made up.

So Chet explained to them that they couldn't use those, and they were a little puzzled, but after the first set everything was great.

And we had a number of instances like that. And other than that, we made up this total environment performance that did relate, you know, to the music and to the people.

Somebody gave me a gift at my seventieth birthday. It's this very interesting book called "Live at the Fillmore East."

Michael: Yeah, I know that book.

Bill: This young lady at the time did it, and so forth. And I found it very interesting, first of all, that there has been no Fillmore West book done.

Michael: Right.

Bill: And of course, it was running for a couple of years in two different places, before there was a Fillmore East.

Michael: That's right.

Bill: And so the light show as well, and Bill Graham's official biography has several pages, but it is all by people from the Fillmore East, so you get that version of it. Tony Martin is the one who made it up here, but Bill from the very beginning was dictating what was going on.

Michael: Yeah, I met him in 1967, where I performed there.

Bill: And Chet didn't dictate, you know. He respected me as the artist; he didn't tell the bands what to play, and basically he didn't tell us what to project.

Michael: And you guys that were doing the light show, were all heads, right?

Bill: Yeah, I think, you know, the whole art community was into that, and it definitely had its part of the thing. And you know, there's still problems with discussing this, but that's the way it was. And it was definitely part, you know, of changing from alcohol.

Michael: Well right.

Bill: And, some of this has been... that was the main drug of the fine arts.

Michael: Yup.

Bill: As well as the country.

Michael: Alcohol and cigarettes?

Bill: Alcohol and cigarettes, and I don't particularly care for either one.

Michael: No, me neither.

Bill: I do drink Guinness for my health, but I'm not into getting drunk.

Michael: Yeah.

Bill: So, in this book, the Fillmore East setting was part of what made it unique, and she gets around to the idea that it had theater seats. And that's one of the things that's never been, and that this created a situation where this was not a ballroom, no open air stage, gymnasium, or club with a floor, where fans could mill around, smoke dope, go into a trance or dance during the shows.

Not that they didn't try of course. Countless Fillmore East seats and their springs were ruined by people jumping up and down.

But anyway, this was a radical idea at the time, she says, and it formalized the rock experience into a theatrical event. And I can understand her perspective, but basically that was exactly the thing that we had revolutionized and gone away from.

Michael: You are right, but we're looking at East Coast vs. West Coast here.

Bill: And it wasn't done very intellectually here. Whereas theater people had written a whole lot about their effort to tear down the proscenium, or something, and get the audience involved.

The dances were the most logical and ancient way of getting people involved. And at the early dances at the Avalon, the people were really involved, and the bands who hadn't had any kind of commercial experience at the

time, were, you know. I did a few light shows in Redondo Beach after we parted from the Avalon

And it was interesting, Buffalo Springfield [L.A. band] that looked like a San Francisco band, and kind of acted like one, and the others all were in uniforms and could play anything on the jukebox.

You know, these San Francisco guys couldn't play anything.

Michael: (chuckle)

Bill: On the jukebox.

Michael: (chuckle) right. I remember.

Bill: And so we had this brief moment there, where along with everything else, they were playing these long extended things and people could dance, and there was no popular dance step going.

Michael: Right.

Bill: Everything was going, you know, and so anyway when a year or so into the thing, when the Living Theater came to town.

Michael: I was going to mention them, weren't they something!

Bill: Well, when they came to town, according to Reggie Williams from the Straight Theater. You should talk to Reggie.

Michael: I have talked to Reggie.

Bill: Oh great and when they came to town, Reggie said that the warm-up band had started playing and Reggie

said that he was in the back with the Living Theater people getting ready, you know, drugs and various things. And Julian Beck came in and says ey, you know, we don't have to get it started tonight, its just already happening. You know just go out there and be part of it. The audience was already happening.

So there was very definitely a different thing going on relative to what kind of light show we were trying to make up.

And I understand if you want to call it rock theater, that's great. And, as she points out in her book on the Fillmore East, it left that little (How many ever thousand seat) theater and moved on to stadiums and whatever.

Michael: Yeah.

Bill: And the funny thing was, that was a blow to the local music situation, because all of a sudden, you either play stadiums or you're back in these funny little clubs. And no longer were these intermediate sized ballrooms, that launched all these people.

Michael: Yup.

Bill: But anyway, the light show here, conceptually, was trying to create a total environment. And, all of the elements, the band, the light show, and the people sort of made this thing whatever it became.

Then it turned in to the music business, and as the music business continued to grow, light shows finally became absolutely irrelevant. And, that was the demise of the rock light show.

Michael: What about today?

Bill: In the meantime, I left the Avalon for various reasons. And one was, that you know it didn't look like they were going to go in that direction. I mean, when you begin to use all the budgets to pay the bands, then the rest of the circus don't get much.

Michael: They probably didn't get much to begin with.

Bill: They didn't get much to begin with, and so, and that was partly because of a very unique thing that had happened at the first Family Dog dances that's never discussed. And the thing was that they were done in the Longshoreman's Hall.

And, it was a nice big place and there had been some radio, pop-something shows that maybe had used it. But anyway, when Kelley and the ladies did the first Family Dog dances there with George Hunter.

And George, you know, was the Charlatans, and then they booked a band each weekend, I think from L.A.

And the third weekend, which was the last one, it was the Mothers of Invention, but they weren't called the Mothers, they were called the "Motherfuckers".

Michael: (chuckle)

Bill: And they had to abbreviate their name to 'Mothers.'

Michael: Right.

Bill: But they hadn't become the Mothers of Invention, yet. So, anyway, when those first three dances were done there, the first weekend, they didn't get a lot of people, but strangely enough there were no fights. The high school toughies hadn't found out about coming and where you go to a dance, to have a fight.

So, everybody had kind of worried a little bit about security, but anyway everybody was encouraged. A few hundred long haired people and, you know, friends of friends had come and, so they were going to do one the next weekend.

And, Monday morning, the Longshoreman's whomever calls up and talks to Luria Castell, or whomever, and, said they have a real problem. So they went down, and it turned out that the musician's union had found out that they had had this scab dance at the Longshoreman's Hall, and this was pretty serious. Other than that, the Longshoremen hadn't been shocked by anything, but they were concerned "cause this was a union situation."

Well George said "We'll join the Union. Hey no problem. We were just trying to make some rent money." So anyway, they let them join. There was some concern, because they weren't sure they could pass the test.

Michael: (chuckle)

Bill: George only played tambourine.

Michael: Right. That's the union.

Bill: You know, one thing and another. But it turned out the way you passed the test...

Michael: Pay the money.

Bill: ... is to have a job.

Michael: Right.

Bill: So anyway, those first bands had to join the Union. And when Bill Graham started doing his dances and Chet started doing the Fillmore, they continued. They didn't fight the union, and then that gave Bill Graham an ally.

But the light shows came out of the art-part of the underground and there wasn't any union, and Tony never made a very good deal with Bill. And I made the deal I could make with Chet for the light show at the time. I became a partner of Chet's, and we had a four-way partnership in the Avalon.

Michael: Oh, really.

Bill: And so at one point, you know, I had a different perspective, maybe, of what the light show situation was supposed to be.

Michael: Yeah.

Bill: At that point it hadn't turned into the music business yet. This was just coming out of the whole underground of theatre, happenings, so forth. So, when you get back to the music business, then it becomes the marquee, the something, and who's on the top and who's on the bottom, and so forth and so on.

I moved on and I built a theater, and I had a light-sound theater, which according to the main art critic was the only one of its' kind in the world.

Michael: Where was it located?

Bill: On California Street, half a block up from Polk Street.

Michael: And it was called?

Bill: Light Sound Dimension.

Michael: Of course, I have heard that.

Bill: So that was the name of the group. And we had done a performance by then at the Museum of Modern Art in

San Francisco, which was probably the first performance of a light show in a museum setting. We were there for a week and they sold out, and people out on the street trying to get in. The Museum was ready for it.

But the problem with the light show, as far as what happened to the light show. First of all, there was no video at the time, no CD, DVD, so that people who could make money off of whatever was going on. And there wasn't any music business in San Francisco before rock and roll. I mean it was extremely limited. You know, there was Frank Werber. Frank Werber had the "Kingston Trio."

Michael: Right.

Bill: And the Kingston Trio begat the "We Five."

Michael: Right.

Bill: Anyway, there was a young guy who grew up in San Francisco and he became a big pop thing. And there was a heavy-duty jazz underground scene going on, and probably a pretty good scene going on over in Oakland, with blues bands and one thing and another. But nobody involved in the rock scene, had been involved in any of those.

They had kind of bubbled up out of the underground-arts scene. And as things became more and more noticeable here in town, everybody was looking for a contract. And Bill Graham got the Jefferson Airplane, who had managed to get the first contract with Matthew Kate. And then Bill took the band away from Matthew, and then they sued each other for 20 years.

But, anyhow, it was all pretty non-business oriented originally. And as business became a factor, and it turned into business, the light show just, really, couldn't find a place in the product.

Michael: I see.

Bill: And as the product turned into the music format, you know, it's back to concerts. And concerts got bigger and stage lighting got bigger, and so forth and so on. But in the meantime, I had built a theater and continued with this concept of painting, and painting with music spontaneously.

So I had continued all this in these studios that I keep building, and out of that came Light Sound Dimension. And then we went to the museum. And then we did performances that are found listed in my website.

Then we built a theater and we did that till we were exhausted, doing something that makes no money. And, by then, for me personally, the light show had reached a sort of impasse, locally. And at the same time we were all thinking the Sixties thing was kind of happening everywhere.

So, I decided to explore Europe. I knew very little about it, but I knew that jazz had a certain reception there. And I was playing with two of the best jazz musicians in the world.

Michael: Who's that

Bill: Fred Marshall and Jerry Grinnelli.

Michael: Oh yeah.

Bill: And so, Fred was the one who had gone electric. They'd gone from being the best rhythm section in town, you know for be-bop or whatever, to going into this sort of new music that Fred led them into, electrically. So when they came to my studio and saw a light show with some

other music, they said they'd like to come and improvise with me. Out of that developed Light Sound Dimension.

We continued that through theater and our studio. Then I went over to kind of check out Europe. I had a friend that had a house in Amsterdam, and we were going to stay with him and check to see if there was interest in jazz and light shows and whatever. I had a 45 day trip and I landed in Amsterdam, and my host had been delayed somewhere and we were just sort of in Amsterdam. But I had met this young lady, here in San Francisco, prior to going over, and we had decided to meet up in Amsterdam. So we met up, and three years later I came back to San Francisco.

While I was in Europe, I continued doing light shows. I did one at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, as part of a little light show festival that was put on there by somebody. I started living in the Alps in France, near Geneva in an old farmhouse. I built a studio there, and collaborated with several French bands and I brought the Grateful Dead their first invite to Europe, to a festival.

And, they went over and my group was brought over by the same guy and it's all in the books, but they forget to mention, usually, that I am the guy who brought them the invite.

MICHAEL: Right.

Bill: So we were going to do a light show at this festival, which was going to be outside Paris. It was going to be a free festival and we got there and it started pouring down rain, and people were getting a little nervous. And all of a sudden, they were surrounded by police, and (chuckle) they call the festival off.

So we spent two or three days there with the Grateful Dead, while the guy who had produced it tried to find a way to do it in Paris. And he couldn't come up with that, so

the Dead came home and he invited us to go to Montreux, Switzerland, and do a light show for an opening of his brother's, who was going to have a painting exhibition. So I went there with Britt, Jerry, Beverly, two other musicians, Bob Fine, and my companion Sophie, who became my wife. And so we all went to Montreux and did one. And Claude Nabbs, you know, who ran Montreux for years, the jazz festival there.

I had met him and tried to tell him about the light show a few months before. But anyway, he came to that and was quite taken by it. Unfortunately the musicians were having problems of their own at the time, so we never were able to do one for Mr. Nabbs. But we did three at Montreux, that he saw one of.

stayed in Europe for three years and came back. And I'm continuing to do light shows. I've done several, you know, for Chet since I came back.

MICHAEL: Yeah, you did one at the Maritime Hall and Sailor's Hall.

Bill: Right, and I did one at the Greek Theater and...

MICHAEL: Monterey

Bill: And Monterey. Yeah gosh. So anyway, I've done some that I have produced myself, a few concerts.

And my latest thing is that I have this video that was done downstairs in my basement studio. It's with a musician I'm currently working with, and he and a number of others are interested in working spontaneously.

MICHAEL: Cool.

Bill: I'm still trying to do some of those, but in the meantime with more limited means, I am able to produce this video and I'm working on a DVD.

MICHAEL: Oh really, that's a good idea.

Bill: So anyway, that and, you know, trying to be available if I can find some site-specific performance situation for live performances.

MICHAEL: Let me ask you a couple of questions that have just come up through this.

Bill: Okay.

MICHAEL: I spent a lot of time talking with various artists I have interviewed about the camaraderie, or lack of, between the different artists. What about the light show guys? Were you guys friendly with each other? Maybe you can name some of the other ones that I might want to scope out, that you think that were significantly good players in the light show.

Bill: Yeah, well I'm the least capable at judging other peoples light shows, because I got so few chances to see them.

I didn't see most of these people's light shows. So I can't say that I thought these were good and these were bad. I think that there were a whole bunch of good ones. I think there were a whole bunch that were just whatever they were.

And then, you know, everybody, including boy scout troops, were doing light shows in the Bay Area. I don't know who else, but I used to lend two projectors to an old artist friend who had a boy scout troop, a Mormon boy scout troop, and they were doing light shows.

MICHAEL: What were some of the big names that you would recommend?

Bill: I think that both Glen McKay and Jerry Abrams are important. And, I just don't know any of the other people personally.

MICHAEL: Okay, so you guys didn't hang out much?

Bill: No, didn't have a lot of time to hang out. There was quite a bit of rivalry. I think there was some hanging out. But I didn't have much time to hang out.

There was a lot of competition because there was so many light shows in the Bay Area. Initially, there were a lot of jobs that were being made up all around the Bay Area by one weekend promoters, or by, you know, the San Francisco State, Berkeley. There were dances happening everywhere, and all of those dances in San Francisco had to have a light show. People just didn't do 'em without a light show.

MICHAEL: What were some of the features that made yours unique?

Bill: Well I made it up (chuckle)

That was the first thing. And the second thing was, that where most people began seeing the light show at the Avalon and Fillmore. Those were the two light shows that set the standard.

MICHAEL: Right.

Bill: And Tony was only here that first summer.

MICHAEL: I see.

Bill: And then he was involved in academia, somehow, and he went back to the East Coast.

Several artists that had helped him, or begun to do liquids for him, or something or other ... out of that came some of the first light shows and Reggie Williams was one of the ones that had helped Tony.

Bill: And I think you'll have to ask those two guys. There was a guy, who made up a whole list of light shows that was part of the light show guild thing, Jerry or Glen might know who that is.

MICHAEL: Now I had a question: how often were the light shows done? Were they every week? Was there always a light show? Or was it once in a while? But the shows are not on all the posters. Lots of posters don't say there was a light show.

Bill: Well, all the posters I was on said there's a light show.

And, you know that was something that kind of had to be established in the beginning, because it was recognized by Chet Helms. The fact that they weren't featured more, is something that I probably would have dealt with more, if we'd continued working at the Avalon.

MICHAEL: I see.

Bill: Originally, it was left up to the artist where things went. And for those first few weeks, which is kind of the ones I am most familiar with, we were so busy trying to make up a light show. Trying to go from two overhead projectors, to filling up the Avalon Ballroom.

We had our hands full, and Chet, you know was having a lot of problems with meeting deadlines and all the other things that are involved in making a poster.

And so, in that early period, he apologized for the mistake on the first poster and he did confirm with me, the other day, that that was the way it was, that Tony Martin did not do the light show at the Avalon. And you know, it was a wonderful opportunity, to carry that art into that situation.

MICHAEL: Another question is: how did you get, as a kid coming up, how did you get into art?

Bill: I don't know. (chuckle) I always thought art was a good thing. I played in the high school band, and I probably... I think that's another commonality, maybe between most of the painters, or a lot of them, who got involved in light shows, was that a lot of them had a connection to music.

I know we did some radical things in painting. For the first time, as a painter, we were dealing with time. Always before, you finish the painting and it gets dry and then the other people look at it.

Here we were dealing with that, like musicians. And unlike most light shows, when I made my spontaneous light shows, they were recognized as having compositional quality. And it wasn't that we were just making effects, you know.

When you play with a band that's playing the same tune every night, you know, I mean that's one thing. And there's not a lot the light show can do with that. We were playing with bands, who if they'd played short, they wouldn't have had anything to play, so we had these long stretches where we could just all make it up. And that was, you know, what was exciting.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

Bill: And that's what I've done, myself, from, you know, in all directions. I'm not into making things that run over and over.

MICHAEL: I see.

Bill: I enjoyed making kinetic sculptures, that you can just turn on and they go on forever. But that's a different thing.

MICHAEL: Did you have any formal art training?

Bill: Yeah, it's nothing to brag about, and I really must not have been a very good student, because I don't think I learned very much. I went to three different colleges of something and got a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Houston in 1954.

And, that student deferment solved not having to go to Korea for several years. But when I did get out, I was drafted and did two years in the military in Germany. So I, for the first time, I got to visit museums and actually see real painting, more than I'd ever seen before.

Then I came back and worked a couple of years, sort of getting out of debt and one thing and another. And then I came to San Francisco and I got here in late 1958.

MICHAEL: Were you into the beatnik thing at all?

Bill: Well, I was a late arriver.

MICHAEL: So was I.

Bill: I had four years of G.I. Bill and I came out here and tried art school for a short while, but that took all the G.I. Bill. So I decided that I could just do my own thing and began just to be an artist, and part of the San Francisco bohemia.

MICHAEL: I was also a painter. In 1960, I lived in Venice Beach, in a place called the Gas House.

Bill: Elias Romero was down there, and he was involved with a bunch of poets and various people, so ...

MICHAEL: We probably know some of the same people.

Bill: Yeah, you would know some of the same people. Elias Romera was one of the ones who began to circulate, up and down between here and there, with Big Sur in between.

MICHAEL: And is he approachable, if I call him?

Bill: Yeah, he has a small apartment that's next door to a small apartment that his wife, and maybe one of his children still has. So leave a message, if you don't get him or if you get his wife. I'm sure he could call you back.

MICHAEL: I hear you.

Bill: I think it is very important to talk to Elias.

Bill: There's several of these light show posters that we did for Light Sound Dimension.

MICHAEL: Interesting, are these on your site.

Bill: I think several of them are. And there's a couple of others, that I am wondering if you have.

MICHAEL: And I think it would be wonderful to show whatever posters were light oriented.

Bill: Right

MICHAEL: And I don't think many people know about them.

Bill: Okay, on my site I think I've got a couple of the Light Sound Dimension posters.