

# Chet Helms

## A Short Biography



with Michael Erlewine

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Short Biography

Notes

by

Michael Erlewine

## INTRODUCTION

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Michael@Erlewine.net

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## Chet Helms

A brief bio by Michael Erlewine

If there is a seminal person -- one key figure -- in the San Francisco dancehall scene, it has to be Chet Helms. It is not that he was the very first or even the most entrepreneur-like person on the scene (Bill Graham takes that spot), but to me Chet Helms most typifies the Sixties scene itself, because, like many great content providers, he was perhaps a consumer first and an enabler second. He worked to establish the scene, not just to make money, but first of all to have a place to get together with like-minded folk.

Although born in California, Helms moved to Texas when he was nine years old, where he was raised by his grandfather, who was a fundamentalist Baptist minister, making his living by starting churches all over Texas, running a bible college, and even a correspondence school.. Helms was raised with a solid work ethic and surrounded by printing, flyers, their creation and distribution. As Helms puts it:

"But basically, many of the same fundamentals for creating and producing churches apply to creating and producing shows. So, a lot of the skills that I had, that I brought to that, came, really, pretty directly out of, in a sense, being back stage at a church, you know."

When he was older, he went to the University of Texas, ostensible as a math major, but he soon switched to a more liberal arts program. Largely because of his fundamentalist background, Helms says that college was a real eye opener for him, and he had a lot to catch up on, when it came to social interaction, music, and literature and the arts in general. Since he was from a teetotaling family, alcohol was not a constant in his life, much less marijuana and peyote, which he soon discovered. While at

college, he also managed the transition from being a young republican (worked on the Goldwater campaign), by taking a radical shift to the left, to the very liberal person he is today.

So by the time he left Texas in 1962 and made a permanent move to San Francisco, he was well prepared for what was happening in that city. Like so many of us then, Helms was a Beatnik wannabe, writing poetry, hitching from coast to coast, and doing all of the things that went along with being "on the road" in that time. He wanted to get to one of the great bohemian centers, in this case: San Francisco.

Helms credits 1964 as being a pivotal year. For one, he took LSD for the first time, and around that time also met the woman he would soon marry. He also met Luria Castell, who was one of the original founders of the Family Dog. And he points to the advent of the Beatles as important, which meant to him that songs could have more than one meaning; they could carry a message. Suddenly these so-called message bands were springing up all over the Bay area, most more message than music, as Helms remembers.

Helms aspired to be a musician, and fell in with a group of people who decided to put on jam sessions in an old ballroom in the basement where they lived. It could hold, at most, around 300 people, and that was crowded. They held jam sessions every Tuesday night, hoping to winnow out the better musicians and form their own message band and help to get the word out. It was the thing at the time, and Helms was raised as an evangelist.

What started as a bunch of musicians jamming and a few friends as onlookers, soon came to be the same bunch of musicians, but now some 75 onlookers, friends, family, and folks who just liked to hang out. Out of those jam sessions

came {Big Brother and the Holding Company}, with Chet Helms as their manager.

Around the same time, the Family Dog was founded. Chet Helms:

"One of the other things that happened in the meantime was that {Luria Castell} and {Jack Towle}, {Ellen Harmon}, and {Alton Kelley} ... They all lived in a run down house, euphemistically referred to as the "{Dog House}" over on Pine Street. And we had all been kind of grass dealers, basically, but not a lot of people were trying to legitimize their lives trying to do something on the straight side of things."

"And so these folks ... {Bill Ham} who later went on to be one of the primary light show performers, and, in many ways, largely invented that whole technique. He wasn't the only one, or necessarily even the first one, but he was the guy I think that really brought it up to being a real masterful thing. Anyway, he was into all these Japanese marital arts. He was highly trained in Kendo, in particular, and wore long black robes and had a long black beard and long black hair, at the time. He always had those practice swords, the wooden practice swords, and so on. But through that connection, he had become the ... He worked for a Japanese property management company that owned four Victorian houses in that same block on Pine Street, and he actually still lives in one of them, all these many years later. But he maintained four houses. He had big dogs himself and didn't mind dogs and these were very run down properties that he was managing for offshore owners, and so on. And so he would allow dogs, which, in an urban environment, a hard thing to find is a place where you can rent an apartment where dogs are welcome. So that's why there were so many dogs in the Dog House. That's because he would allow them as a landlord and so we kind of aggregated - all these people who had dogs. And there were a lot of dogs in that house, and so many

dogs that that's kind of how it came to be referred to is the "Dog House." The dogs kind of (laughs) ran as a pack and kind of ran the show in a lot of ways with everybody."

As the story goes, the name "Family Dog" came from an idea that this group came up with to make some money, by creating a pet cemetery, a place for the family dog to be buried, something that might intrigue the idle rich.

Helms points out that this same group, the Family Dog people, attended one of his jam sessions, in the basement ballroom. That particular night, it was crammed, wall-to-wall, with musicians and onlookers, many of whom were smoking pot and drinking wine. The Family Dog folk like the scene and decided that this is what they also wanted to do. It was not long after this that the jam parties got further out of control, to the point that Chet Helms closed them down.

Chet was now managing Big Brother and the Holding Company, and hoped to get his band playing soon. The Family Dog had some connections with the longshoreman's union, with the result that the first three Family Dog dances were held in the Longshoreman's Hall on North Beach. The hall was actually a very large geodesic dome. The would-be parties soon morphed into the Family Dog dances.

Helms remembers these first dances as more like rent parties, than anything else.

"But anyway, I remember walkin' into that first Family Dog dance and seeing twelve hundred people that I recognized instantly were just like me. They were my kind."

"And as opposed to feeling isolated, suddenly I felt part of a much larger community and I remember a sense of sanctuary and a sense of relief, like, "there's twelve hundred people, there's not a facility large enough for us,

for them to arrest us all," you know. And that was a real threat at the time. There was somehow strength in numbers and in this pure recognition, you know."

There were the three dances in the fall of 1965 at the Longshoreman's Hall, followed by two others at California Hall -- five shows in all. Helms was still managing Big Brother, while the Family Dog folks took care of renting the halls and putting on the shows.

The next major event in this teleology is the Luria Castel, perhaps the main Family Dog spokesman informed Helms that she was out of money and the rest of their group had gone to Mexico. Helms pointed out that he had a committed date for the Jefferson Airplane that was left hanging. Helms gave Luria Castel some \$250, which was his life savings at that point, to book that date, and continue the series of shows. She agreed. This was to be the continuation of the Family Dog series.

As luck would have it, Luria Castel too soon left for Mexico, along with Helm's money, and she never making the deposit on the hall for that next dance. Helms was chagrined, to say the least. What to do?

What Chet Helms did, along with his friend John Carpenter, was to pay Bill Graham a visit, who had succeeded behind the Family Dog's back, in leasing the Fillmore Auditorium, out from under them, but that is another story.

Helms and Carpenter brought two bands to the table, Big Brother and the Holding Company and the Jefferson Airplane. Here was Graham with a dancehall, but with not enough capital and bands to use it to its full potential. Graham was putting on show, maybe twice a month. A handshake deal was made with Graham for Chet Helms to use the hall on alternate weekends, under the name

Family Dog. They agreed on who would put up the money and how the proceeds would be split.

Well, according to Helms (and the record), in about three months, Helms only put on about five shows. This was primarily due to Bill Graham not keeping his agreement, taking this or that weekend away from them, and so forth. Helms also claims Graham did not live up to his agreement, as to putting up funds, and so on. The two promoters were also divided on the issue of allowing pot to be smoked in the Fillmore, with Helms for and Graham against. Their breaking point came over the Paul Butterfield Blues Band.

As most of us who were on the scene and playing music in 1965, the hottest band we had ever seen live was the Butterfield band. Although this is not so apparent from their recordings, they were pure dynamite in person, just awesome. Chet Helms brought them to San Francisco, at that time as an unknown band in the Bay area. In fact Helms risked not only his cash, but also his reputation to put on the show. It was a landslide success.

And this did not escape the watchful eye of Bill Graham. The next day, he got up very early and called New York to reach Butterfield's manager, none other than Albert Grossman. He soon managed to book Butterfield in the San Francisco area for the foreseeable future. This was behind Chet Helms's back, of course. When Helms found out, it was the last straw and he was convinced that Graham was not a trustable partner, which was correct. Graham did what he had to do to get ahead.

The long and the short of it was that when Helms realized that he had been and was being taken advantage of, he looked for another venue and soon found it, the Avalon Ballroom.

The Avalon had been the Puckett Academy of Dance. It had not only good acoustics, but a great wooden dance floor, not to mention tall columns, mirrors, and ornate decoration.

Chet Helms did his last show at the Fillmore Auditorium on April 8, 1966 and his first show at the Avalon Ballroom on April 22, a period of about two weeks. And that was how the Family Dog shows at the Avalon Ballroom got their start. They ran until the fall of 1968, when the venue closed down.

After about six months, Helms continued his shows at a new location, now called Family Dog at the Great Highway. The shows at the Great Highway, were very much scaled-down versions of the Avalon, much more loosely run, with handbills, often very crude ones at that, published instead of posters most of the time. This went on until August of 1970, when the series closed down for good.

The series briefly was resurrected in 1995, the "New Family Dog," and shows were held at the Maritime Hall. These too ended, somewhere around May of 1996.

And he is generally very well liked.

Chester Leo Helms, Jr. was born August 2nd, 1942 in Santa Maria, California. "My background for presenting shows had to do with having grown up, after my father passed away when I was nine, under the tutelage, if you will, of my grandfather. He was a fundamentalist Baptist minister who essentially made his living and way in the world by starting little churches all over Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and back there. And he had the Worth Bible College, and he had a correspondence school. You could take private lessons. You just sent him money and ultimately got some kind of a little doctorate of divinity or

something of that order. But basically, many of the same fundamentals for creating and producing churches apply to creating and producing shows. So, a lot of the skills that I had, that I brought to that, came, really, pretty directly out of, in a sense, being back stage at a church. You know.”