

## Contra Costa Times (Walnut Creek, CA)

November 14, 2004

**Section:** TimeOut

**Edition:** Final

**Page:** c03

### PERLOFF: MAN BEHIND THE MUSIC

MORE THAN A YEAR AFTER HE LEFT BILL GRAHAM PRESENTS, THE PROMOTER HAS A THRIVING COMPANY AND SOME NEW VENUES

*TONY HICKS, TIMES STAFF WRITER*

GREGG PERLOFF once oversaw 12 states' worth of concerts for media giant Clear Channel Communications. Now he vacuums the office at night when there's no one else to do it.

"We're not letting our overhead swallow us up," Perloff says from his Fourth Street headquarters in Berkeley. "We're not trying to conquer the world. We're trying to do this in Northern California, where we live and breathe. My goal is not to have 30 offices and 10,000 employees." So far, so good. Another Planet Entertainment has one modest office and 10 full-time employees, many of whom share the main room in a U-shaped array of desks. There's no reception area: You walk in, you walk right into the fray.

Despite its apparent humbleness, Another Planet has accomplished much since July 2003. That's when Perloff, the president of Bill Graham Presents, and vice president Sherry Wasserman packed up and left BGP, where between them they'd amassed roughly 60 years of concert promotion experience.

That experience primed them to fast-track one of the great shows of 2003 -- Bruce Springsteen, at Pac Bell Park -- only weeks after starting the new company. They've also opened venues in San Francisco and given new life to Berkeley's Greek Theatre by aiming high for big tours, such as the Pixies' much-hyped reunion that ran three nights at the Greek in September.

Talking to both execs at once can be adventurous. They finish each other's sentences, interrupt and correct each other, and simply appropriate the narrative when one decides a story's off-track.

#### **A dark day**

Especially today, which may not be the best day to discuss BGP. Even before a baseball-cap-wearing Wasserman plops down on a couch and Perloff sits in a chair in front of his desk, the topic is "Black Monday" -- the laying off of 15 BGP employees three days earlier by parent company Clear Channel. "It's not Bill Graham Presents anymore," says Perloff, who can fix one with a stare of George Steinbrenner-like intensity. "The final nail in the coffin was on Monday, the 13th anniversary of Bill Graham's death. (The layoffs) show a lack of respect for Bill and what that company stands for."

Perloff isn't well-versed in double talk. He'll politely correct those he believes are misinformed (don't ever tell him there's not enough parking around the Greek Theatre). Even when he doesn't want to, he answers directly and honestly. His employees seem amused by his directness, such as when one

announces a photographer has arrived and, not to worry, he looks good. She laughs when, unsmiling, he rolls his eyes in dismissal.

Though Perloff wants to talk about the past 16 months, and the future, feelings about BGP frequently surface. It's understandable. Perloff, 52, came to BGP in 1977, after graduating from UC Berkeley and promoting shows for what's now Cal Performances. Wasserman, who's 47, started as a ticket-taker at Winterland in 1972, while still attending Berkeley High. Both consider themselves proteges of Graham himself.

Perloff finally looks exasperated, flipping his hands up at all the BGP talk. "We spent a year not talking about those guys," he says to Wasserman, who finishes her point anyway.

Four years after Graham -- the Bay Area's No. 1 rock 'n' roll impresario -- died in a helicopter crash in 1991, the pair led a group of investors buying the company, and its \$20 million debt, from the Graham estate for \$5 million. Two years later, they sold BGP to SFX Entertainment for \$65 million, remaining to run things, even when SFX turned around and sold it to Clear Channel, the media conglomerate that owns thousands of radio and TV stations, more than 200 concert venues, and hundreds of thousands of billboards nationwide.

Perloff and Wasserman weathered conflicts over the name, memorabilia and other issues not easily resolved when ultimate authority lies at Clear Channel headquarters in San Antonio, Texas.

"They didn't want our input," Wasserman says. "They said, ultimately, 'It's not your company anymore. Shut up and get in line.'"

### **Perloff's exit**

It got to be too much. When Perloff returned from a two-week vacation in July 2003, he quit.

"When Gregg left and they were trying to convince me to stay, they said, 'But you've got to get over this,'" Wasserman says. She didn't, and followed Perloff out the door.

Within weeks, Perloff had a unique opportunity fall into his lap. Bruce Springsteen announced he was playing a Bay Area show, and Perloff -- with no company, so to speak, but with stronger industry contacts than anyone still at BGP -- scrambled to put it together. Working from his Lafayette home, he booked Springsteen into Pac Bell Park. Clear Channel quickly responded with a lawsuit, alleging the deal was struck while Perloff was still at BGP. The suit is pending.

"We decided to start small," Perloff says, smiling. "But we've been doing this 30 years. There were approximately 1,200 people working that show; it was quite an experience. But it hasn't just been one show. It's been a wild ride so far."

Competing in the Bay Area market with BGP -- which enjoyed a stranglehold on the area's concert business since shortly after its 1966 founding -- isn't easy, not even with Perloff's contacts.

"They've become one of the top concert promoters in the country in a very short amount of time," says Gary Bongiovanni, editor of industry touring magazine Pollstar. "They've proven they can compete. The DNA (of BGP) is decidedly different. In the old days, the company dominated and did a great job. Part of

that was making the concert experience special, whether it was handing out apples at the Fillmore or doing the old Days on the Green."

Lee Smith, current BGP president and Clear Channel's executive vice president of its music division's Western region, was one of the partners with whom Perloff and Wasserman bought the company in 1995. Smith responds to criticism of Clear Channel's management of BGP by simply saying, "Both of them (Perloff and Wasserman) were involved in the sale of the company."

"There are pluses and minuses to any situation," Smith says. "There are a lot of independents out there struggling, and we have some resources. There's a standard there that hasn't been lowered."

### **Reviving the Greek**

Smith admits that BGP had to adjust to not being the only game in town, but recovered in 2004, despite national ticket sales being down and some tours, such as Lollapalooza (which was scheduled for two days at the Shoreline), being canceled outright. He said the recent layoffs, affecting nearly 20 percent of its 90-person work force, had more to do with a necessary streamlining years in the making. San Francisco wasn't the only place Clear Channel let people go.

"It's an opportunity to make the organization a much more efficient one," says Smith, who's been with BGP for 16 years. "I consider people in the company my friends, and (the layoffs) were difficult. But it will be a better company." As far as the competition goes, Smith says, "It might sound flip, but it motivates me. It makes you want to do better. I love to compete."

The competition, which Perloff repeatedly downplays, has both positives and negatives, Bongiovanni says. Bill Graham Presents controls many established venues, including having leases on the Fillmore and the Warfield in San Francisco, and management contracts with the Chronicle Pavilion and Shoreline Amphitheatre. Another Planet responded by opening the Independent and the Grand Ballroom in San Francisco, booking acts at the S.F. Design Center, and staging shows at SBC (formerly Pac Bell) Park. It also rejuvenated the Greek Theatre in Berkeley, bringing in bigger names such as the Pixies and R.E.M., while improving the stage, and adding restrooms and food stands.

The downside for fans is that big-name acts can now spark bidding wars between the two companies, ultimately driving up ticket prices.

"But Gregg has been around long enough, he's not going to try to get every show coming down the pipe," Bongiovanni says.

The list of acts with whom Another Planet has worked so far is impressive. Besides Springsteen, and the Pixies, there was the Cure, Bob Dylan, Dave Matthews, Brian Wilson, Neil Young, Franz Ferdinand, Metallica, Linkin Park, the Dead, Simon & Garfunkel, Van Halen and Shania Twain.

If that's not enough validation, it's also been contacted by a TV producer to do a reality show, Perloff says, almost embarrassed. Nothing's been inked yet, and it doesn't seem to be a priority. The company probably won't expand out of Northern California, but is looking for new venues in San Jose and possibly Contra Costa. "The fact that we got three (new) rooms open in one year is amazing," he says. Another point of pride is winning Pollstar's Bill Graham Award for Concert Promoter of the Year in February, an award he won in 1991 and '92 with BGP. "That's the highest award you can get, if you were schooled by Bill Graham," Wasserman says.

Perloff says he just wants to emphasize putting on the best shows possible while recognizing the unique flavor of Bay Area music. He tells a story of walking down Fourth Street in Berkeley in September when he spotted old friend Carlos Santana in a restaurant.

They start talking and, inevitably, the massive Dave Matthews benefit show in Golden Gate Park comes up, which Another Planet was promoting. Santana wanted to know why he wasn't invited, only he didn't exactly come out and say it.

"He gave me a look, and I said, 'Do you want to play?' (Santana did, joining Matthews onstage that Sunday in the park.) The reason he's onstage is because I'm walking down the street and he's at Bette's, and it just happens."

"I don't want to spend my time worrying about competition. I want to spend my time worrying about how to make the show better for the audience."

Tony Hicks is the Times pop music critic. Reach him at 925-952-2678 or [thicks@cctimes.com](mailto:thicks@cctimes.com).

Photo 1, Gregg Perloff and Sherry Wasserman. (Joanna Jhanda/ Times); Photos 2 - 3, Perloff clowns with Metallica and confers with Bill Graham. (Courtesy of Gregg Perloff)

Copyright (c) 2004 Contra Costa Times.