

# Charles Sullivan High School

by Brian Crant



Charles Sullivan, Ralph Gleason (Chronicle Jazz critic), Lionel Hampton (with Wesley Johnson Jr.'s hat on), Jimmie Lyons (started the Monterey Jazz Festival), DJ Fatso Berry. The photo was taken most likely in the late 1940s or early 1950s given the style of the suits.

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The San Francisco Unified School District Board of Education made national headlines recently when they voted to change the name of San Francisco's Abraham Lincoln High School. Makes sense to me.

The question now is, who will replace our penny-printed president? One of the frontrunners at the moment is Jerry Garcia, the legendary guitarist and frontman for the Grateful Dead, a musical hero of mine. I am proud to live on Ashbury Street, just across the Panhandle from where the Grateful Dead lived together in the mid 1960's, at the helm of a cultural and musical revolution.

As a fan of the Grateful Dead and a music history nerd (I imagine that a schematic of my brain would look similar to the scene in *School of Rock* where Jack Black's character is drawing a web diagram of the lineage of music genres on a chalkboard), I must admit that the prospect of a Jerry Garcia High School is exciting, but I believe we can do one better:

Charles Sullivan High School.

## Part I: Beautiful Humans, Ugly History

As a "night owl", I often find myself deep in the crevices of the internet learning about entire subjects of things I had no intention of researching. Recently, I stumbled upon an excerpt from Gary Kamiya's *Cool Gray City of Love* that details the incredible history of the Western Addition in San Francisco, the Fillmore District as it is known today.

The history of this section of the city is fascinating, and serves as a microcosm for the racial inequity taking place all across the United States during the internment of Japanese-Americans in the 1940's and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 1960's. It is eye-opening. An uncomfortable look in the rearview mirror. And in a city that prides itself on its progressive values, a humbling reminder that our not-so-distant past is imprinted on our city.

Nowhere is this more evident than the Fillmore District, where in 1942, its Japanese-American residents were forcibly removed and taken away for internment, leaving their homes vacant and businesses shuttered.

During the second World War, thousands of job seekers from across the country migrated to the Bay Area in search of work at the naval shipyards, greatly enriching the cultural landscape of San Francisco. For many young black men and their families, especially those living in southern states, wartime employment in the Bay Area promised an opportunity to escape the discrimination and limitations imposed by Jim Crow laws and the senseless acts of violence being committed against them by white men.

The number of migrant workers far exceeded that of the available housing in the Bay Area. The vacancies in the Fillmore District caused by the internment of Japanese-Americans were quickly filled with migrant workers and their families.

Yet again, throughout the 1950's and into the 1960's, the Fillmore District had its cultural landscape decimated by the policies of white men, this time, through an urban planning initiative with overtly racist objectives. The San Francisco Redevelopment Agency exercised eminent domain on thousands of properties in the Fillmore District, shaping the streets we know today. In doing so, they demolished the homes and businesses of the African-American population that turned the vacant buildings in the Fillmore District into the premier music scene on the West Coast, the "Harlem of the West" as it was dubbed.

The building that I live in today, just a few blocks west of the Fillmore district, is valued at a little over \$2.2 Million dollars. It is a row house, just like many of those that were demolished, where I rent one of its four units, just as many of their families did. In the 1999 KQED documentary *The Fillmore* we meet Lloyd Federlein, who was forced out of the home that his grandfather built in 1870 and paid less than market value, \$11,500 in 1960.

In total, roughly 2,500 Victorian homes were demolished and twice as many families displaced<sup>[4]</sup>. In addition to losing their homes, businesses, and community, it is gut wrenching to think about the generational wealth that was taken from this neighborhood's residents.

I feel strongly that if we do not actively teach, learn, and grow from the wrongs committed in the past, and that continue to be done today, then the only thing separating us now, from us then, is time. Celebrating those who left the world a better place is a tangible way that we can learn from our mistakes.

There are many beautiful humans in our ugly history.

James Burns and Robert Gray, two Muni bus drivers who stood up to 60 union workers that refused to work alongside Japanese-American Takeo Miyama after the second World War.

Harold Stone, a member of that union and distinguished veteran, told his peers that, "I didn't go out to fight in the Pacific so people with differently colored skin would be discriminated against when I got home". Shortly thereafter, the union voted in favor of Takeo Miyama's right to work<sup>[1]</sup>.

There is no shortage of heroes in the history of the Fillmore District, but one stands out to me above the rest: Charles Sullivan.

## Part II: The Mayor of the Fillmore

A Bay Area businessman named Charles Sullivan, sensing opportunity in the Fillmore District in the years following the war, acquired properties in the Fillmore District, and proceeded to own and operate several businesses and nightclubs in the area. He became a top promoter of African-American artists, booking gigs and tours for acts like James Brown and The Temptations<sup>[2]</sup>. Sullivan, known to many as “The Mayor of the Fillmore”, was one of only a few black businessmen to survive urban redevelopment in the 1950’s and 1960’s.

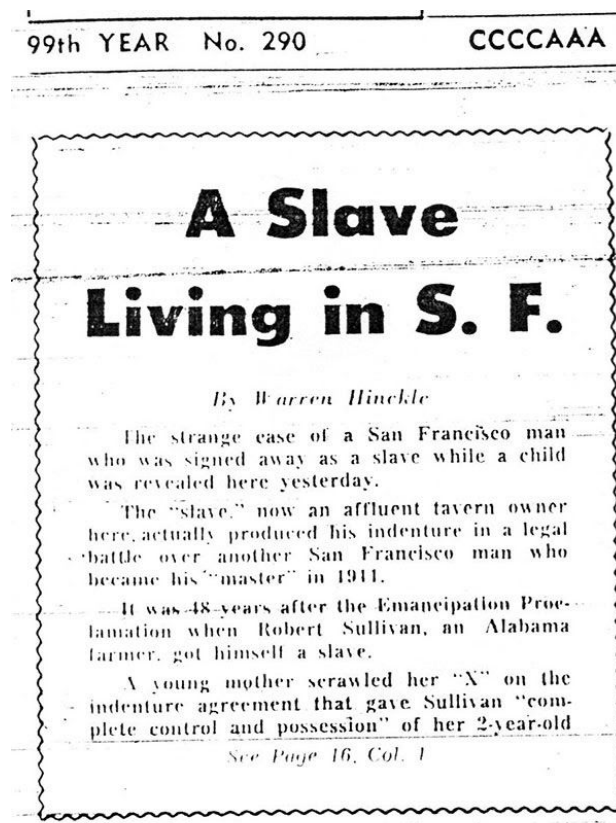
One of the buildings that Sullivan operated would continue to rock the music world well beyond his lifetime. KQED reported that in 1952, Sullivan snagged the lease of a segregated roller-skating rink at the neighborhood’s center and rechristened it The Fillmore Auditorium<sup>[2]</sup>. Sound familiar? The name certainly rings out to me.

The Fillmore Auditorium has a rich history of its own through present day, but even a self-proclaimed music history nerd like myself did not know that long before the Grateful Dead took the stage, some of the most influential artists of the last century packed the room from wall to wall: James Brown “The Godfather of Soul”; B.B King “The King of the Blues”; Little Richard “The Architect of Rock and Roll”.

Likewise, until reading the excerpt about the Western Addition in Gary Kamiya’s book, I had never heard about Charles Sullivan, the man who put those legendary artists on the stage of this once segregated roller-rink, and filled the dancefloor with racially integrated crowds. The Auditorium is only a fraction of Sullivan’s contributions to the Fillmore, yet hardly any record of him exists.

In *Harlem of the West: The San Francisco Fillmore Jazz Era*, one of only a handful of books on the subject, preserving the amazing people, places, and memories from this era, Herman Bosset recalls

*If you didn’t have a job, they’d say ... “We’re gonna go see Charles Sullivan” ... Charles asks you what you can do, and you say, “I can paint”. Next thing you know, you got a job painting.*



He *is* The Fillmore... but nobody talks about him.

Charles Sullivan was sold into slavery when he was two years old<sup>[2]</sup>. He overcame an unimaginable childhood, discrimination, union racism blocking him from employment, urban redevelopment and more, all to become a cultural leader in the community and one of the most successful African-American businessmen in San Francisco.

Slavery is an extremely important part of our history, and it is of the highest urgency that we are intentional about how we communicate its history in public places and which historic figures we choose to honor.

Renaming Abraham Lincoln High School does not change the fact that, among other things, Lincoln married into a family of slave owners<sup>[3]</sup>. We cannot make our history pretty, it is not. Charles Sullivan bore the last name of Robert Sullivan, the Alabama farmer that purchased “complete control and possession” of him in 1911<sup>[2]</sup>. Names are not pretty and neither is our history, but they mustn't be excluded from it.

In 1965, Sullivan took a risk by lending his dance permit to a controversial, little known promoter at the time named Bill Graham, who went on to be a cultural leader in his own right, and is widely celebrated in San Francisco as a result. The 21 Muni that I (used to) take home from work picked me up directly underneath the marquee on the backside of the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium, where Hayes Street crosses Market.

In his book, Bill Graham said that “I would have done anything Charles [Sullivan] wanted. Just out of gratitude.” This is something that we can still do, today. Charles Sullivan deserves the same reverence that he afforded Graham and many others through his life's work.

Jerry Garcia is on more walls than Sherwin-Williams. His music will live on for decades to come.

Bill Graham has a Civic Auditorium.

Charles Sullivan ought to have a High School.

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Special thanks to Elizabeth Pepin Silva for giving freely of her time and expertise to assist with this article. You can support her by purchasing the new edition of *Harlem of the West: The San Francisco Fillmore Jazz Era* from [Heyday Books](https://heydaybooks.com/).

<sup>[1]</sup> “The Haunted House.” *Cool Gray City of Love: 49 Views of San Francisco*, by Gary Kamiya, Bloomsbury USA, an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2014.

<sup>[2]</sup> Lefebvre, Sam. “Without Charles Sullivan, There'd Be No Fillmore As We Know It.” KQED, 14 June 2017, [www.kqed.org/arts/13414955/without-charles-sullivan-thered-be-no-fillmore-as-we-know-it](http://www.kqed.org/arts/13414955/without-charles-sullivan-thered-be-no-fillmore-as-we-know-it).

<sup>[3]</sup> “Slavery.” *Mary Todd Lincoln House*, [www.mtlhouse.org/slavery](http://www.mtlhouse.org/slavery).

<sup>[4]</sup> Fulbright, Leslie. “Sad Chapter in Western Addition History Ending.” *SFGATE*, San Francisco Chronicle, 9 Feb. 2012, [www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Sad-chapter-in-Western-Addition-history-ending-3203302.php](http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Sad-chapter-in-Western-Addition-history-ending-3203302.php).