

# “The Allman Brothers Band at Fillmore East”-- The Allman Brothers Band (1971)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Alan Paul (guest post)\*



*Album cover*



*Original label*



*Duane Allman*

The Allman Brothers Band’s double album, “At Fillmore East,” is often and rightly proclaimed as rock’s greatest live release. It still sounds completely fresh, totally inspired, and utterly original. It is the gold standard of blues-based rock and roll. But, after almost 45 years of such praise, it’s easy to lose sight of what a radical album “At Fillmore East” really was.

It took a lot of guts for the band and their record label to release a two-LP live album as their third release. After all, when it came out in October 1971, the band was something of a commercial flop. Though drawing raves for their marathon live shows that combined the Grateful Dead’s go-anywhere jam ethos with a far superior musical precision, their first two releases still had caused barely a ripple in the marketplace. The band’s self-titled 1969 debut sold less than 35,000 copies and the following year’s “Idlewild South” did only marginally better despite two singles, “Midnight Rider” and “Revival.”

The lackluster sales didn’t reflect the increasingly large and rabid crowds the Allman Brothers were drawing on their relentlessly paced tours. Crowds loved the band’s rare combination of blues, jazz, rock and country and their willingness to play until somebody pulled the plug. Finally, it dawned on the band and its management that a live album was the only way to capture the band’s real essence.

What resulted was a recording of two shows at New York City’s famed Fillmore East, which still stands as a testament to a great band at the peak of its power. Sadly, it would prove to be the final album ever completed by guitarist Duane Allman, who died shortly after its release. As such, it has proven to be something of an epitaph for both him and the Allman Brothers Band, Mach 1.

“That album captured the band in all their glory,” producer Tom Dowd told me in 1998. Dowd, who died in 2002, was behind the boards for nearly a dozen Allman Brothers

albums, as well as classic works by John Coltrane, Ray Charles, Cream, Lynyrd Skynyrd and many others. Dowd marveled at the Allman Brothers ability, unique in the rock world, to truly swing in a jazz sense, playing everything with a hard-driving groove.

Indeed, the improvisation and length of the tunes on “At Fillmore East” was more similar to jazz than rock, with just seven songs spread over four vinyl sides, capturing the Allmans in all their bluesy, sonic fury. “You Don’t Love Me” and “Whipping Post” both occupied full album sides, while “In Memory of Elizabeth Reed” clocked in at 13 minutes. Still, from the clarion slide guitar of “Statesboro Blues” that opens the album to the booming timpani roll of “Whipping Post” that closes it, there is nary a wasted note in the 78 minutes of “Fillmore” music.

Propelled upward and onward by bassist Berry Oakley, whose free range style uniquely roamed the middle of the band’s sound, and the rhythmic onslaught of double drummers Jaimoe and Butch Trucks, the group seemed ready to blast off in any direction at any time. Dickey Betts and Duane Allman spurred each other on, while Gregg Allman’s authentic blues singing and surging organ vamps kept even the most ambitious jams firmly rooted to terra firma.

To truly understand the album, it helps to recognize just how hungry and desperate the band was at the time of its release. Then-manager and Capricorn Records President Phil Walden and Gregg Allman have both readily admitted that they had begun considering cutting their losses. Allman says that the band played over 300 nights in 1970, travelling most of the off days. As the band continued to crisscross the country jammed together in, first, a Ford Econoline van and then a Winnebago, their sound evolved and deepened, but there was a price to pay: the band was getting worn out physically and emotionally.

The first two weeks of September, 1971, just before “At Fillmore East” was released, provide a snapshot of the band’s grueling schedule: the band played Montreal on September 3 and Miami the following night. They had five days off, during which they went into Miami’s Criteria Studios with Dowd and laid down the first tracks for Betts’s “Blue Sky,” which would appear on their next studio album, “Eat A Peach.” They then played September 10 in Passaic, NJ, the following night in Clemson, SC, and the night after that in Shippensburg, PA. The band then had three days off and played September 16 in New Orleans.

Once the decision to record live was made--not an obvious choice in 1971, when live albums were still in their infancy--the choice of venue was simple. Promoter Bill Graham was an early and important supporter of the band, booking them repeatedly in his bi-coastal rock emporiums, The Fillmores East (in New York) and West (in San Francisco), where they established themselves as an elite band.

The Allman Brothers Band had made their Fillmore debut on December 26, 1969, opening for Blood, Sweat and Tears for three nights. Promoter Bill Graham loved the band and promised them that he’d have them back soon and often, paired with more appropriate acts. Two weeks later, they opened four shows for Buddy Guy and B.B.

King at San Francisco's Fillmore West. The following month they were back in New York for three nights with the Grateful Dead. These shows were crucial in establishing the band and exposing them to a wider, more sympathetic audience.

Something particularly special was happening between the Allman Brothers and fans in New York, which remained their most supportive audience throughout their career; they played what they say is their final show there, at the Beacon Theatre, on October 28, 2014. And in those dark ages of rock promotion, the Fillmores were a significant step above all other venues.

The power of the music captured on "At Fillmore East" was in the group improvisation, the fact that six extremely unique musical voices were expressing themselves as one complete entity. At the heart of the group's sound was Betts and Duane Allman, who reinvented the concept of two-guitar rock bands. Rather than having one player who was primarily a rhythm player backing a soloist, the group had two dynamic lead players. While Duane Allman is probably most remembered and revered for his dynamic slide playing, he was a fully formed, mature guitarist. Betts, while often in Allman's shadow, was also a wide-ranging, distinct stylist from the start. The pair had a wide range of techniques for playing together, often forming intricate, interlocking patterns with one another and/or bassist Berry Oakley, setting the stage for dramatic flights of improvised solos. And, uniquely, they often played harmonies together, a true rock and roll innovation that has been picked up on by countless bands.

The two drummers had a similarly easy and unique playing style, heard to full and perfect effect on "At Fillmore East." Trucks and Jaimoe rarely played the same thing at the same time. Instead they played complementary parts that pushed the band to great heights and offered not only increased power but greater depth. Trucks provided a hard driving beat while Jaimoe deepened the groove and pushed up against the songs with all kinds of interesting concepts and rhythms. Jaimoe was deeply rooted in jazz and often played patterns and riffs straight off of Jimmy Cobb's work on Miles Davis's "Kind of Blue" album. He had also introduced the band to the album and to John Coltrane and both had huge impact; this jazz influence can be heard throughout the expansive but never long-winded playing on "At Fillmore East."

Using only the last two nights at the Fillmore, the Allman Brothers ended up with enough great material left over to fill more than half of their follow-up album, "Eat a Peach," including the epic, 43:59 "Mountain Jam"--which was actually performed directly after the 23-minute "Whipping Post" heard on "Fillmore."

Just 90 days after recording the album, and just before its release, the Allman Brothers Band closed the Fillmore down, personally selected by Graham to be the hallowed venue's final band. Graham's insistence that the relatively unknown Allman Brothers must be the Fillmore East's final band must have seemed bold, even wacky, to most observers. But just weeks after the club shuttered its doors for good, "At Fillmore East" came out, forever linking the band and the club in the pop culture pantheon. Yet, the recording was almost never released in its extended, double-album form, an idea originally rejected by Atlantic Records, Capricorn's distributor.

Walden eventually won out and was proven right when the record--“people priced” at three dollars below standard list price for a double album--slowly became a hit and the Allman Brothers became the most heralded band in the nation. “Rolling Stone” proclaimed the Allmans “the best damn rock ’n’ roll band” in the country and by the fall, “Fillmore” was the Allman Brothers Band’s first gold album.

Still things were not easy within the band. They entered Criteria Studios with Dowd and recorded three songs in just about a week, the band took a break and returned to the road for a short run of shows, ending on October 17, 1971 at the Painter’s Mill Music Fair in Owings Mill, Maryland.

With almost everyone in the band and crew struggling with heroin addictions, four of them flew to Buffalo and checked into the Linwood-Bryant Hospital for a week of rehab: Duane, Oakley, Payne and Red Dog. A receipt shows the band’s general bank account purchased five roundtrip tickets on Eastern Airlines from Macon to Buffalo for \$369. Gregg was supposed to go as well and a receipt from the hospital shows that he was one of the people for whom a deposit was paid; he apparently changed his mind at the last minute.

The group spent less than a week in rehab, and then checked out. Duane spent a day in New York City, visiting with guitarist John Hammond and other friends before returning to Macon on October 28, 1971. The next day, Duane rode his motorcycle over to the group’s communal home, The Big House, where they were getting ready for a birthday party for Oakley’s wife Linda. After visiting for a while, Duane got on his Harley Davidson Sportster, which had been modified with extended forks that made it harder to handle.

Coming up over a hill and dropping down, Allman saw a flatbed lumber truck blocking his way. Duane pushed his bike to the left to swerve around the truck, but realized he was not going to make it and dropped his bike to avoid a collision. He hit the ground hard, the bike landing atop him. Duane was alive and initially seemed okay, but he fell unconscious in the ambulance and had catastrophic head and chest injuries. He died in surgery three hours after the accident. The cause of death was listed as “severe injury of abdomen and head.” Duane lived to see the band’s breakthrough coming, but was not able to fully experience it.

*Alan Paul is the author of “One Way Out: The Inside History of the Allman Brothers Band.” Visit him online: <http://www.alanpaul.net/> or <http://www.facebook.com/alanpaulauthor>.*

\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

