

## Berkeley's long-shuttered UC Theatre to get new life

by Frances Dinkelspiel

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A rendering of what Berkeley's UC Theatre could look like if it reopens. Image courtesy Berkeley Music Group

For the last seven years David Mayeri has had a dream: to refurbish [the old UC Theatre](#) on University Avenue, which has been closed since 2001, and re-open it as a state-of-the art concert venue.

Mayeri, the former chief operating officer of BGP, the successful concert company started by Bill Graham, has come tantalizingly close over the years to pulling off the project. He got city approval to refurbish the 1,400-seat landmarked theater in 2009 and seed money from the now deceased millionaire music lover Warren Hellman.



David Mayeri has been working for years to reopen the UC Theatre as a music venue. Photo: Frances Dinkelspiel

But the economic recession meant Mayeri never raised the funds he needed to redo the theater, located at 2036 University Ave., between Shattuck and Milvia. So he has shifted gears. Mayeri has now created a non-profit organization called the Berkeley Music Group to oversee the theater's refurbishment, its concerts and youth-oriented educational programming. He is hoping the non-profit structure will attract a new group of supporters.

Mayeri has raised more than half of his \$5 million goal, and he plans to start construction on the UC Theatre in the summer, according to Rina Neiman, his public relations consultant. When it is finished in the summer of 2015, Mayeri — and others — hope the new UC Theatre will be a major entertainment force in downtown Berkeley, drawing thousands of patrons on show nights.

“Turning on the lights of the new UC Theatre will broaden the music scene and appeal of the Downtown arts district for a more youthful audience, beautifully renovate a grand old lady of a theater, and revitalize a key stretch of University Avenue that serves as a gateway to Downtown and UC Berkeley,” said John Caner, CEO of the Downtown Berkeley Association.

Mayeri is not releasing many details yet about the Berkeley Music Group. He is saving that for a community kick-off scheduled for 2 p.m. April 23 at the theater. In a media release, Mayeri said there will be a “major news announcement” about the UC Theatre. Mayor Bates is scheduled to attend.

But work has already started on a new marquee for the building.



The interior of the UC Theatre now. Photo: Frances Dinkelspiel

When Mayeri sought city approval for the project in 2009, he characterized the UC Theatre as Berkeley's version of the Fillmore, the legendary San Francisco concert hall that hosted most of the top bands of the 1960s and 1970s, and continues to present vibrant music. When refurbished, the UC Theatre will seat 1,460 people, filling a niche between the 400-seat Freight & Salvage, Zellerbach Auditorium, which seats 1,978, and the [Berkeley Community Theater](#) on the Berkeley High School campus, which holds 3,491 people.

As it stands now, the interior of the UC Theatre is a mess, with graffiti, old seats and old lumber littering the space. Mayeri intends to build multi-tiered seating in the main hall so everyone will have a good view, according to Neiman.

The plan is for the venue to have at least 75 concerts a year — national and international headliners playing rock and roll and jazz. But Mayeri also hopes to also turn the venue into a community asset of sorts and bring in comedy acts, a lecture series, Americana roots music, zydeco, and more, said Neiman.

When the plan was initially conceived, Dawn Holliday, who books shows for Slim's and the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco, as well as Hellman's Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival, was involved with the project. Mayeri still hopes that Holliday will play a role in booking acts, although there is no formal agreement at the moment, said Neiman.

The UC Theatre was originally built in 1917 and was extensively remodeled after a 1940 fire. In the mid-1970s it was acquired by Gary Meyer and formed the backbone of his Landmark Theatres movie chain. Landmark ran first-run and art films (and popular midnight showings of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*) until 2001, when it shuttered the theater because it needed costly seismic upgrades.

Mayeri grew up on Shattuck Avenue about 12 blocks from the UC Theatre. He remembers seeing Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 *The Ten Commandments* there.

In 2007, Michael Caplan, the head of Berkeley's economic development department, brought Mayeri to see the theater. "I walked in the room remembering it as a kid but, now with 35 years experience with BGP running shows," Mayeri said late last year, "I knew exactly what to do."

The new organization will also have an educational component. Mayeri got his start when he interned for BGP at 16. That job gave him a chance to see how concerts were put together. The Berkeley Music Group plans to offer those types of experiences to East Bay youth as well, said Neiman.

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David Mayeri stands below the old UC Theatre marquee, which is being replaced Photo: Frances Dinkelspiel



The UC Theatre in its glory days. Photo: Berkeley Music Group