The Band Shell: Open Air Performances

In 1938 West Park gained an architectural structure that would bring together crowds of people to see and hear outdoor performances. The structure—a performance shell—combines theater and concert stage. With a back arch, it reverberates sound, amplifying it in the process. Starting with the label ‘open air dramatic and concert shell’, West Park’s shell would also be called ‘performance shell’, ‘orchestra shell’, and ‘community shell’, but the name that really stuck was ‘Band Shell’ (sometimes Bandshell).

In the 1930s, performance shells were springing up across the country. The 1920s ushered them in, but now the federal government was helping build and refurbish them. The Great Depression was beginning to lift, but life was still grim with massive unemployment, especially in Michigan. The federal government with its New Deal programs was funding projects to employ workers of all types and raise the country’s spirits and sense of community, and performance shells were high on their list. West Park’s Band Shell became one of over 300 band shells and band stands built or refurbished by the New Deal’s Works Project Administration (WPA). Many of them are still in place today (2022).

The Band Shell began with a May 1936 request to the city from several Ann Arbor organizations. Though there was some disagreement between the mayor and city council about building the shell, a proposal to WPA with some lower-cost materials was submitted in 1937. The proposal was accepted, and construction began March 1938. The ‘open air dramatic and concert shell’ was a home-grown structure designed by the Department of Public Works with Bernard DeVries as Public Works Department architect. The project was supervised by the City Engineer.

1964, courtesy AADL, OldNews, Ann Arbor News Archive.

Site of the Shell  The site selected for the shell in West Park was on McIntyre land unsuccessfully sought after as the first parcel of land for West Park. As Fritz property, it became part of the park in 1915 in a story of devotion to West Park. The site provided a natural amphitheater. The sloping ground on a hill facing the shell served as seating for an audience to see and hear performances in the shell below. This natural amphitheater design was to prove a delight to those attending events at the shell. However, another important feature of the site—flowing water—was to also have a command performance.

At the time the shell was constructed West Park’s stream was out of sight, having been encased in concrete pipe drains ten years earlier. The drain pipe was fully adequate then for handling the flow of surface water in the stream’s watershed. No one at that time could have anticipated the extensive development and construction of impervious surfaces taking place in the stream’s watershed as time passed, raising the water table in low-lying areas of West Park.
Aerial photography provides a visual of how close the Band Shell was built to the stream drain. In the photograph (below) the Band Shell is the small rectangle in the middle, and the drain pipe is marked in wide dark ink running (underground) diagonally behind the ‘Band Shell’. The back of the Band Shell abuts the 3 rod strip of land above the drain containing the stream. The Band Shell was constructed very close to the stream’s drain pipe, which roughly followed the stream bed in its low-lying course. This has posed challenging water issues for the shell, especially as the stream’s watershed has filled in with more and more surfaces that keep surface water from being absorbed into the ground, so storm runoff runs to low-lying areas like the shell’s location.

**Constructing the Form** So, what exactly is a shell? In the realm of the performing arts, a shell is a curved, hard surface designed to reflect sound toward an audience. Shells focus sound outward in one direction while providing well-mixed, focused sound to both performers and audience. Rectangular pavilions with enclosed shell and stage were in use after 1900 and had proven to be effective outdoor performing venues when the city considered building a shell. The arch-shaped roof was a more recent shell feature that had come into vogue.

How to construct a shell from scratch? Manuals! Portland Cement Association published them:
Concrete Band Shells', Concrete Information: Structural and Technical Bureau, Portland Cement Association, April 1937. From Parks Department file for West Park.

Forms for Concrete Band Shells, Concrete Information: Structural Bureau, Portland Cement Association, October 1937. From Parks Department file for West Park.

Building a shell is not easy! A look at the 1938 construction process:
An amazing amount of lumber was used constructing the shell, including thousands of pieces in large dimensions rarely seen today – like 2x8s 14’ long (2,200 of them) and 2x10s 22’ long (1,000 of them). In addition, 2600 cement blocks were used and 35 gallons of paint.
Workers included 4 carpenters, a carpenter foreman, a cement finisher (and a helper), a plasterer (and a helper), a mason (and a helper), 2 painters, a mixer operator, 2 laborers, a labor foreman, and a superintendent. Work was anticipated to be a little over 100 man-months.

The shell project provided work for skilled craftsmen, journeymen, and technicians, plus their helpers. Back through the supply chain for the lumber and other building materials it helped support workers at lumber mills, concrete and concrete block factories, and electrical supply manufacturers. Constructing the shell allowed the work of all these people to shine in a public arena at a time when vast numbers of workers were unemployed. The completed shell gave the community, at a time of widespread scarcity, a way to celebrate life with music and plays available to everyone at little or no charge. Both the construction project and the finished product served exceedingly well at a crucial time.

Honoring the Shell Over the years the Band Shell received official honoring plus some less official but respectful attention. The Shell—being called at the time ‘Orchestra Shell’, ‘West Park Community Shell’, and ‘Ann Arbor Community Shell’—was dedicated August 14, 1938, with 1,800 people attending a ceremony followed by a concert by the University of Michigan’s Summer Session band. It was a celebration for all of Ann Arbor’s communities – city, school, music, and recreation. Photographs taken in more recent years can offer some sense of the event even if not a direct image of the event itself. Serving as a faint suggestion of the August 1938 dedication is this photo from June 1961.

‘The Magic of Music on a Summer’s Eve’

By the time the Shell’s 50th anniversary arrived the Shell was solidly ensconced in the name Band Shell (sometimes Bandshell). A City Council resolution put forward by the Ann Arbor Historic Preservation Commission offered appreciation for the Band Shell while also pointing to the need for restoration work. In the gala celebration of the Shell’s 50th anniversary, music played by the Ann Arbor Civic Band included pieces played at the 1938 dedication, and conductors included ones who were there at that event also. Photos below show the Ann Arbor Civic Band performing in sweltering heat a few days prior to the Band Shell’s 50th anniversary gala:
Approaching its 60th anniversary, the Band Shell was honored with historical designation. Along with the Entrance Pergola (nearing its 70th anniversary) and the Island Park Shelter, the West Park Band Shell was listed on the Ann Arbor Register of Historic Places. A letter to the Parks Department dated February 14, 1995 (effectively a Valentine for the Band Shell and the Pergola) announced the historic designation.

Performances and Events
Musical and theatrical performances proliferated following the shell’s construction, as did a whole variety of civic and charitable community events. The Ann Arbor Civic Band probably wins the award for most performances through its tradition of summer-time free concerts in the park almost continuously since West Park’s Band Shell opened. The Civic Band generally has offered roughly half a dozen concerts at the Band Shell each summer in the evening, playing to several hundred people seated in lawn chairs or stretched out on blankets, sometimes in 90-degree heat.

Innumerable performances and events have been held at the Band Shell over the years. To name a few:

- **Civic Amateur Theater**  July 1939
- **Historical Pageant**  July 1947
- **Grateful Dead**  August 1967
- **MC5** (Motor City 5 with manager John Sinclair)  1968 -1969
- **Poetry in the Park**  1973
- **U-M Eclipse Jazz**  June 1979
- **Count Basie Orchestra**  July 1986
- **Nicaragua Libre, Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice**  1986
- **Penny Seats Theatre**  summers 2000-2019
- **YMCA Welcoming Week event**  2017

The award for most talked-about event at the West Park Band Shell probably goes to the Grateful Dead concert in 1967, which seemed to kick off a controversy over rock and roll concerts in West Park. It was a hot Sunday afternoon when the band started rocking the music out at high volume to a large crowd. Rain earlier had left the Band Shell wet, so the musicians asked the audience for blankets to put down to not get electrocuted standing on wet cement playing electric guitars. Someone threw them an American flag, which one of the musicians ended up standing barefoot on rocking out songs. Police and neighbors seemed offended. There were widespread complaints from the surrounding community about the loud music and behavior at the scene,

The Grateful Dead concert – fueled by later rock concerts like MC5 with obscenities at times shouted to high volume sounds – led to a city crackdown on rock concerts at West Park. In the summer of 1968 city council
passed a resolution prohibiting the performance of electronic music in city parks. The resolution was subsequently amended in spring 1969 to permit the performance of electronically amplified music in the parks when a permit was granted by the superintendent of parks and recreation. Permits were to be issued on provision that such concerts performed at “reasonable sound levels, reasonable times and for reasonable duration”. Rock concerts shifted away from West Park. Word went out August 1969 that “West Park—that’s where the action used to be. Gallop Park—that’s where the action is now.” Fuller Park also hosted rock concerts.

Music performances at somewhat lower decibels continued at West Park, as the 1979 U-M Eclipse Jazz concert and the 1986 concert by the Count Basie Orchestra show:
In the early-mid 2000s the Band Shell was used for special events and performances by groups such as the Ann Arbor Civic Band and Penny Seats Theatre Co., often without amplified sound.

The Band Shell has been repaired and modified in various ways over the years to keep it alive and functioning. In 2021 it became apparent that it needed critical repairs. Walls and floor slab were deteriorated, mold was present, and the ground underneath it was compromised. The city and the Ann Arbor community face a choice where the options are to move the Band Shell to one of two other locations in the park, to put it up on stilts, or to either tear it down or let it collapse on its own. The options for keeping it as a feature of the park run in the $2 million range. Here in 2022 community engagement will be seeking input about the options.

We can rest assured that construction of the Band Shell provided challenging, satisfying work that helped put food on the table when urgently needed in the 1930s. We can also rest assured that the Band Shell has for over eighty years been a treasure chest of entertainment and community events. It has also given our community practice in working through challenges of balancing conflicting community desires.