

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.

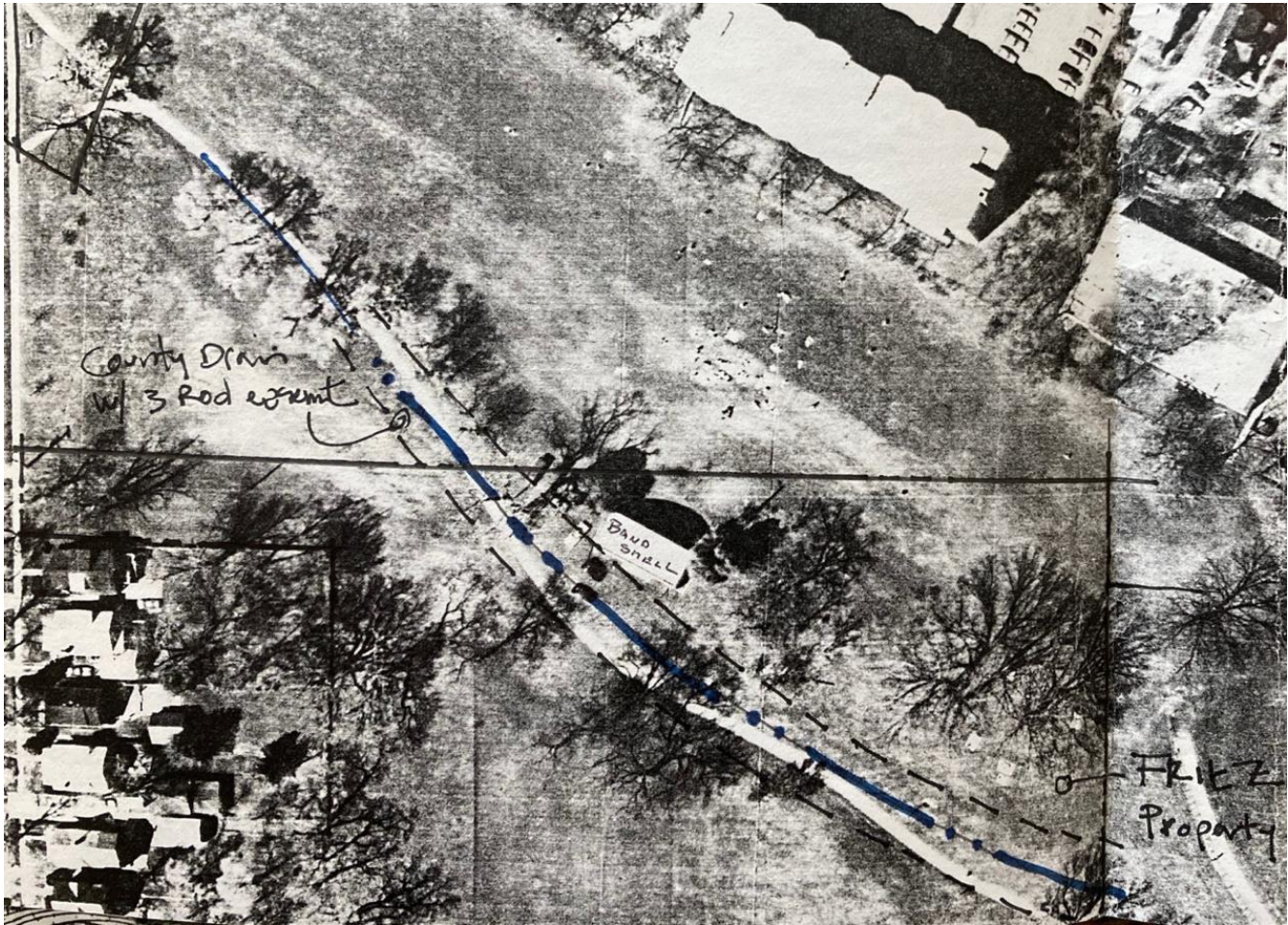
Bandshell, August

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



Unlabeled photo from Parks Department file for West Park.

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 INFORMATION
STRUCTURAL AND TECHNICAL BUREAU
PORTLAND CEMENT ASSOCIATION

No. ST31
APRIL, 1937

CONCRETE BAND SHELLS




Music Pavilion, Sioux City, Iowa. Henry L. Kamphoefner, Architect.

Acoustical Design of Band Shells

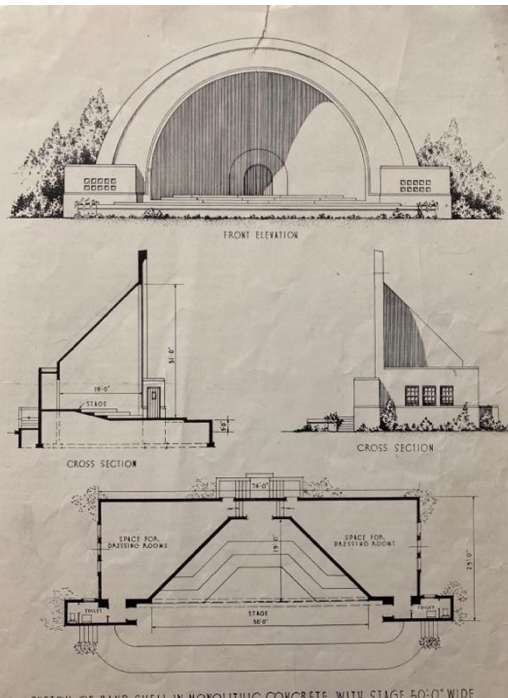
THE site selected for a band shell should be as free as possible from noise, since successful operation depends on good acoustics. The noise level should not be greater than 20 to 25 decibels. Hills, artificial embankments or dense growths of trees may be used to shield the site. A natural "bowl" or depression on a sloping hillside provides the best location for both seeing and hearing.

Reflecting Shell

The purpose of the shell is to project the sound of the orchestra or soloists to the listeners free from echoes and inter-



Band Shell, Fort Scott, Kan. Gerald Griffin, Architect.



FRONT ELEVATION

CROSS SECTION

CROSS SECTION

SPACE FOR BRASSING ABOVE

SPACE FOR BRASSING ABOVE

STAGE 50'-0" WIDE

SKETCH OF BAND SHELL IN MONOLITHIC CONCRETE WITH STAGE 50'-0" WIDE

'Concrete Band Shells', Concrete Information: Structural and Technical Bureau, Portland Cement Association, April 1937. From Parks Department file for West Park.

CONCRETE INFORMATION
STRUCTURAL BUREAU
PORTLAND CEMENT ASSOCIATION

No. AC 22
OCTOBER, 1937

FORMS FOR CONCRETE BAND SHELLS



FORMS FOR BAND SHELL AT FT. DODGE, IOWA. HENRY L. KAMPHOEFFNER, ARCHITECT; SAMUEL FULTON, SUPERINTENDENT OF CONSTRUCTION FOR WPA.

FORMING of curved surfaces, particularly those curved in two directions or tapered, present construction problems which, though not particularly difficult, are not encountered in straight wall work or ordinary building construction. A band shell that is essentially a half frustum of a cone is a structure requiring curved and tapered forms.

Usually a band shell consists of an arch ring at the front of the cone, a vertical back wall that cuts the cone off near its apex, and the shell itself. In order to lay out the forms for a structure of this kind, a large flat area is desirable on which the different parts of the forms can be detailed full size. The area should be large enough so at least one-half of the entire outer surface of the cone can be developed into a flat plane.

Assuming that the foundation and stage of the structure have been completed, the first step in the form construction for the superstructure is to erect the soffit of the arch ring. Although curved, it presents no special problem, being simply a circular curve of constant radius.

The inside form of the back wall, which is just an ordinary flat wall form, is next erected. The top of the form is cut to the curvature of the smallest radius of the cone. Following the inside back wall form the inside form for the shell proper up to the springing line of the cone is erected. This is likewise simply a straight flat form built up in the usual way.

Rafters or joists to carry the inside form sheathing must then be erected. These rafters extend radially from the arch ring to the back wall, their ends being supported on circular ribs (Fig. 1a) made of segmental pieces of 1x6 attached to the studs of the back wall form and the shores for the arch ring soffit. The segmental pieces are scribed to the right curvature on the layout floor and cut on a band saw.

With the rafters in position, provide intermediate supports (Fig. 1a) by bending short pieces of 1x6, generally making three laminations, to fit the contour of the cone.

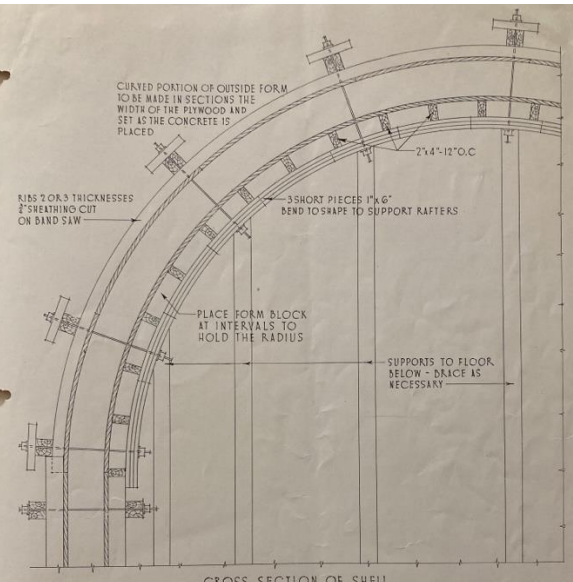
These short, slightly curved wales should be just long enough and so located as to receive the ends of two tie rods that hold the top form in position. The intermediate supports should be placed before any sheathing is put on and it may be desirable to cut in between the rafters some short pieces of 2x4 to help hold the proper curvature (Fig. 2).

The sheathing is next bent over the rafters and securely nailed. Bending the sheathing tends to lift and push out the side walls so they should be securely anchored and tied across the cone. Some difficulty may be experienced in bending the sheathing to the curvature of the cone near the small end. Sheathing boards should be kerfed on the inside to facilitate bending. If plywood is used it may be necessary to build up the desired thickness with two or more layers.

If the front form of the arch ring has not been completed it should be erected next and then all joints should be pointed to prevent leakage. The forms should then be oiled and the reinforcing set.

The outside form of the shell up to the springing line of the cone and the back wall form should then be erected, the sheathing having first been oiled. The form is now ready for concrete up to the springing line but no concrete should be placed until the top form panels for the cone and the inside of the arch ring have been fabricated so they can be set in position as the concrete advances.

A. I. A. File No. 4



CURVED PORTION OF OUTSIDE FORM TO BE MADE IN SECTIONS THE WIDTH OF THE PLYWOOD AND SET AS THE CONCRETE IS PLACED

7'x4"-12" O.C.

35 SHORT PIECES 1"x6" BEND TO SHAPE TO SUPPORT RAFTERS

PLACE FORM BLOCK AT INTERVALS TO HOLD THE RADIUS

SUPPORTS TO FLOOR BELOW - BRACE AS NECESSARY

CROSS SECTION OF SHELL SECTION TAKEN IN FRONT OF BACK WALL

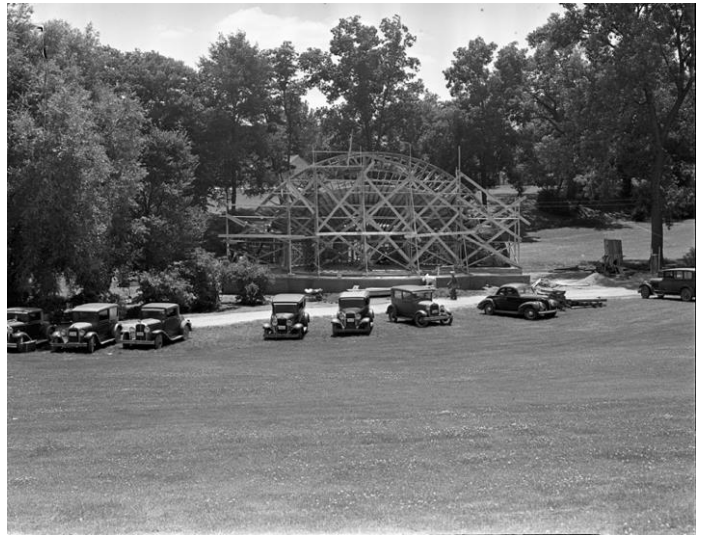
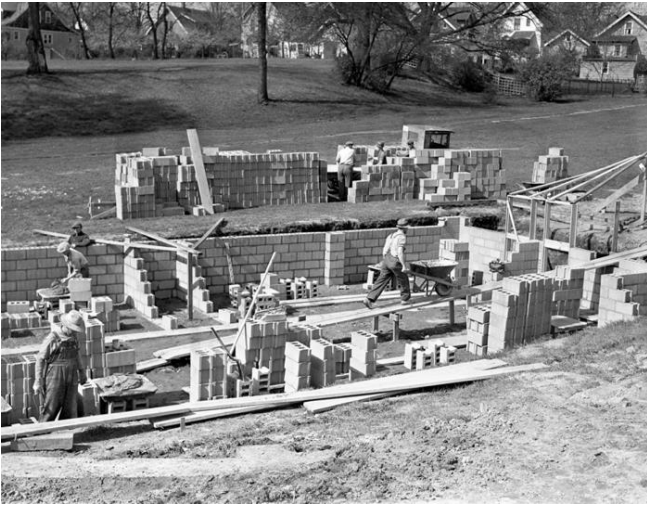
Fig. 2

In order to determine the shape of the panels, the position of joints and the curvature of outside ribs, the outside surface of the cone should be developed as shown in Fig. 3a. One-half of the surface will suffice.

Notice that the joint lines are concentric and radial. If plywood is used for the outside form, and it will be the most convenient, the rectangular panels will have to be cut to the joint line pattern as illustrated. It is advisable to start laying out the panels from the center line as large as a standard plywood sheet will permit. In this way the radial joints will be broken and it will be more convenient when placing the concrete to start at the springing line with a row of short panels. All the panels in each concentric row shown in Fig. 3a are the same size and shape except those marked A, which are cut to the same curvature but are not full length.

The outer ribs, consisting of three pieces of 1x6 (Fig. 1a and 2) are arranged in planes at 90 deg. to the axis of the cone. In other words, they are parallel to the concentric joint lines between the sheathing panels. The ribs are

'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:



[Top left photo](#), AADL

[Top right photo](#), Bentley Historical Library

[Middle left photo](#), AADL

[Middle right photo](#), AADL

[Bottom photo](#), AADL

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

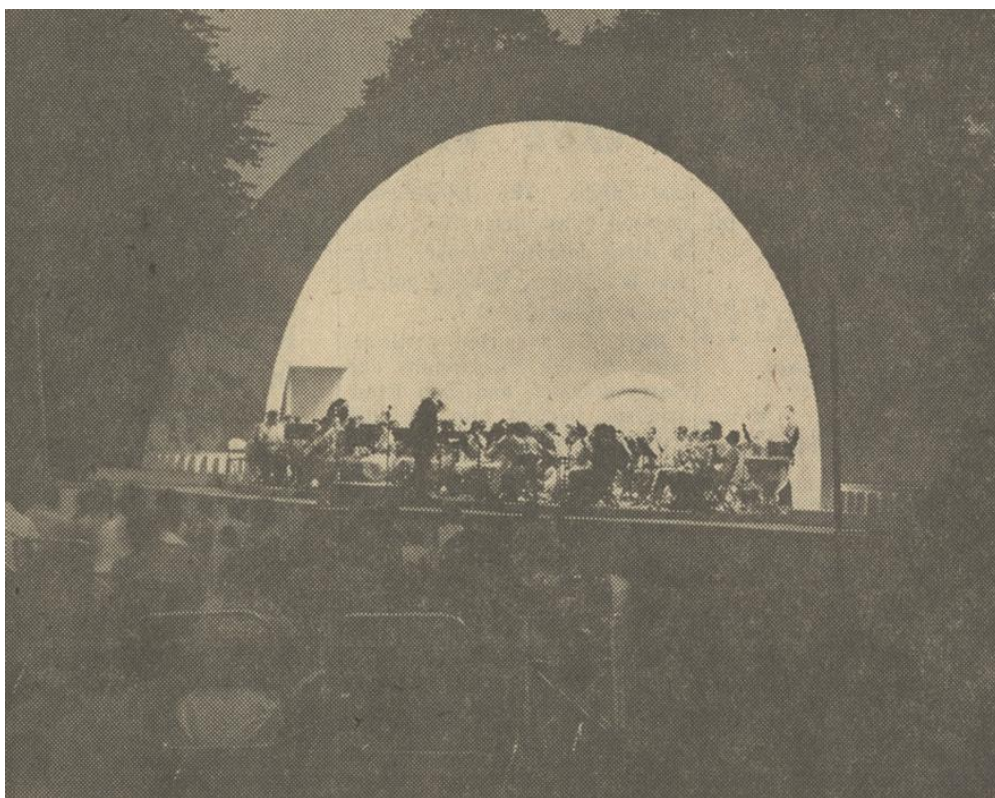
people attending a ceremony followed by a concert by the University of Michigan’s Summer Session band. It was a celebration for all of Ann Arbor’s communities – city, school, music, and recreation.

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:





['Ann Arbor Civic Band plays at West Park in 90 degree heat, July 1988.](#)

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



[MC5, Free Concert in the Park, C. 1968](#)

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:



June 1979, Ann Arbor News archives courtesy of OldNews. AADL.org

GOOD TIMES — The living was easy and the music was free Sunday when the U-M Eclipse Jazz presented a concert at West Park. An-fares and the Earthworks Jazztet performed for a crowd of about 250 people. This was the second in a series of free concerts, the next being at the Liberty Plaza in the downtown on July 13. (Photo by Loren Portnow)



July 1986, Ann Arbor News archives courtesy of OldNews. AADL.org

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.