

STROBE LIGHTS, LONGHAIRS AND THE SMELL OF POT: 40 years later, rockers remember Detroit's Grande Ballroom

BY BRIAN McCOLLUM

FREE PRESS POP MUSIC WRITER

October 1, 2006

In autumn 1966, pop culture was in a growth spurt.

The Beatles were riding high with the markedly progressive "Revolver." LSD was on the rise, prompting California to ban the drug, with the feds braced to follow suit. "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet" aired its final episode; "Star Trek" made its debut.

And in Detroit, youth culture was set to come of age in a big way, a transformation whose start can be pegged to a single date: Oct. 7, 1966 -- the night the Grande Ballroom opened for rock business on Detroit's west side.

Depending on whose recollection you trust, there were either a dozen or three dozen bystanders that Friday night 40 years ago, when the MC5 and the Chosen Few inaugurated the waist-high riser that would become one of the most important stages in the annals of Motor City rock.

It was a little event rife with big symbolism: In the crowd, recalls MC5 drummer Dennis Thompson, were "kids with Princeton haircuts, buzzed haircuts. We were the first longhairs they were seeing -- shagadelic longhairs. The kids were totally square. They didn't have a clue."

Not yet, anyway. Within months, the Grande was packed weekly with the grown-out buzz cuts of newly groovy teens, kids devoted enough to the new code to at least try the turn-on-tune-in part of the counterculture formula. The tie-dye was cast: For the next six years, the Grande was the place where Detroit tutored itself in the fine art of loud music, and began its evolution into one of the world's most famously passionate live-rock towns.

On Saturday at the Royal Oak Music Theatre, Detroit's veteran rock community will celebrate what would have been the 40th birthday of the Grande (that's *GRAN-dee*) as a rock hall. On hand will be colorful figures from the Grande past -- notably founder (Uncle) Russ Gibb and emcee Dave Miller -- along with a slate of vintage bands.

A display of classic poster bills by Gary Grimshaw and Carl Lungren, distinctive psychedelic works whose originals fetch hundreds of dollars today, will drive home the point: In its prime, the Grande hosted the cream of the crop. It's a litany of names that can elicit envy in fans too young to have been at the intimate hall.



The Grande Ballroom closed in 1972, six years after it opened. This 2003 view of what's left of the interior is from the Fabulous Ruins of Detroit. (LOWELL BOILEAU/Detroit Yes)

Grande Ballroom 40th Anniversary

Featuring Big Brother and the Holding Company, Canned Heat, 3rd Power and Arthur Brown

6 p.m. Sat.

Royal Oak Music Theatre 318 W. Fourth, Royal Oak
248-399-2980 \$52.50

Ticket winners announced

Dozens of Free Press readers responded to our call for Grande Ballroom stories. We

Hendrix. Clapton. Zeppelin. The Who. Pink Floyd. The Stooges.

The folks behind the anniversary event -- a group cheerfully dubbed Old Stoner Productions -- couldn't throw their party at the Grande: The old hall, built in the 1920s as an upscale ballroom, has lain in disrepair for two decades. It sits humbly at the corner of Beverly and Grand River, pocked with rust and boarded windows. Even its graffiti looks worn and weathered. The parcel was purchased this summer by a church and the building is expected to be razed, to the chagrin of a local group (www.thegrandeballroom.com) that has sought national historic status for the site.

randomly picked five to receive tickets to Saturday's Grande anniversary event at the Royal Oak Music Theatre: Tom Savage, Betsy Clancy, Eric Geddes, Marty Rots and Patrick Connors.

But during its heyday, the Grande was a locus of raw young energy.

"Grande Ballroom was an incredible place to play," says Al Jacquez, vocalist with Grande performer Savage Grace. "I remember the sound bouncing off the back wall. I remember Dave Miller, the announcer with the wacky snake. The crowds were huge -- really responsive. There'd be a sea of faces, all different ages, different looks. Guys, girls, long hair, short hair, people dressed to the nines in hippie regalia, others dressed in just jeans and a T-shirt. I remember a lot of people smiling. The smells ... patchouli oil, pot. It was just so alive."

In a day when "rock concert industry" might as well have been an oxymoron, the Grande was the first venue in Detroit -- and among the first in the country -- to devote itself full-time to the business of rock music. Picking up where improvised teen hangouts in the suburbs had left off, it quantified and gave form to Detroit's burgeoning rock scene. It was the place where local cover bands learned how to become artists, where fans learned how to become connoisseurs.

It started in San Francisco

By his own description, Russ Gibb was a "starving teacher just looking to make a buck" as fall 1966 approached. A social studies and English instructor at Dearborn's Maples Junior High, Gibb had a foot in the local youth scene, hosting record hops and moonlighting as a DJ, when he visited San Francisco's Fillmore that summer.

On the West Coast, the rock world was in full shift. Youth culture was getting psychedelized. The bands, the fans, the music, the fashion, the art -- all were being reshaped and blasted with color, and San Francisco became the early nerve center of hippie life. The city's Fillmore and Avalon auditoriums were designed to supplement the otherworldly rock experience: flashing lights, loud music, heady visuals.

"We go into this place and I see, for the first time in my life, these hundreds of long-haired people, wearing the bell bottoms, all of it. I look up at the wall and it's crawling with these projected pictures. There was a strobe light. I was totally blown away by this thing," Gibb recalls.

"When I came back to Detroit, within days I started to look for a place and found the Grande."

The building had most recently housed a roller rink and mattress warehouse when Gibb cut a deal to lease it for \$300 a week. For several hundred dollars, he ordered a strobe light like the one at the Fillmore. The building's owners never installed air-conditioning, and a single overworked fan couldn't keep the room from becoming notoriously hot.

But the interior retained its classic ballroom charms, recounts Wayne Kramer of the MC5, which became the venue's house band.

The Grande "was designed for live acoustic music. It had a wooden dance floor that you could just glide on -- it was a joy to dance on," says Kramer. "It had a Moroccan-Spanish type architecture on the inside with

corridors that surrounded the ballroom with seating, so people could sit outside the dance floor and talk. A huge proscenium over the stage. Dressing rooms on either side."

Memories of the hall are sharp and clear. People reminiscing about the Grande tend to conjure the little details: the old sofas by the stage, the enrapt couples making out on the stairway, the bottle of Southern Comfort whiskey in Janis Joplin's hand. They remember the crucial stuff, too: The evening the Who debuted "Tommy." The Halloween week in 1968 when the MC5 cut its historic live album. The night somebody tripped in the dressing room and broke the neck ... of Eric Clapton's guitar.

Only the cosmos knows if every single person who claims attendance at one of the MC5's two "Kick Out the Jams" shows was among the 1,500 or so on hand. But if you were a Detroit rock fan in the late 1960s, it's a good bet the Grande left you something real, if a little surreal, to hold onto.

"My sons can't believe some of the stories we tell about the 'happenings' at the place," says Nancy Swanson, 56, of Royal Oak, who recalls "sitting in a claw-foot bathtub in the middle of the dance floor, under a black light, and laughing at how the light picked up the Visine eye drops we had used as a purple shadow down our cheeks."

The Grande was flower power with Detroit muscle. "A lot of it was an imitation of the San Francisco scene," rocker Iggy Pop said in a 1997 Free Press interview. "But Detroit wasn't San Francisco. So you had these heavy-lidded peace-and-love people on the edge of violence."

"This was the first time any of us ever saw a mirrored ball," says Jerry Lubin, former disc jockey with WKNR-FM. "It was just psychedelics, and Boone's Farm wine and the smell of reefer just permeated the place. It was just your hippie punk teenage heaven. It was no cops, do whatever you want."

As house band -- \$125 from Gibb for the night -- the MC5 defined the Grande aura, says former manager John Sinclair: "The aesthetic was loud, loose, sloppy, but forceful. And morally uplifting -- mind-expanding, if you will."

Those descriptions are certainly more generous than that once offered to the Free Press by Detroit rocker Ted Nugent, who curtly characterized the Grande as "dark, dirty, disorganized and drug-infested."

Then it all ended

Disorganized it might have been -- proponents would probably opt for "creatively disheveled" -- but on the blossoming national rock circuit, it was lucratively positioned: In its cozy I-94 nook, Detroit was geographically primed for acts traveling to and from shows on the coasts. And the Grande was the go-to venue.

In the work-hard-play-hard Motor City, touring bands that let it rip onstage found wildly receptive crowds at the Grande -- what Led Zeppelin guitarist and Grande performer Jimmy Page would fondly recall as Detroit's "hard-core rock 'n' roll audience." When Page and other hard rock acts moved up into the city's big arenas, that audience and energy followed, and helped Detroit forge a music-industry reputation as one of the most reliable live stops in the country.

The Grande closed in late 1972, poetically, with a final show featuring the MC5, also the band's last gig. The city's rock 'n' roll action had begun to migrate -- to Cobo Arena, the Eastown Theater, the Masonic Temple -- as rock culture moved out of its organic, seat-of-the-pants infancy and became big business. Gibb, who says he became disillusioned with the increasingly cutthroat climate, opted to get out: "When the money started to take over big-time is when I decided I couldn't do it anymore."

But for many of those who had been part of the Grande, the spirit stayed even when the sounds stopped.

Dave Miller, the emcee who roamed the club with a snake around his neck, says it's easy to look back on the Grande as historic, because everyone at the Grande knew that history was being made.

"I think we all sensed that at the time. That's how strong the energy was there," says Miller, now living in New Mexico. "Detroit was blessed to have one of the epicenters of that culture in the form of the Grande. The ambience of the place was very special. And it's still got an importance and relevance today."

Contact **BRIAN McCOLLUM** at 313-223-4450 or mccollum@freepress.com.

Copyright © 2006 Detroit Free Press Inc.