

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

GRANDE BALLROOM, Wayne County, Michigan

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Significance

The Grande Ballroom was built in 1928 for Detroit investor and surety bond agent, Harry W. Weitzman. Weitzman hired as his architect Charles N. Agree, a Detroiter who specialized in apartment and commercial building work, including a “sister” ballroom, the Vanity, for the city’s east side that, similar in form, opened in 1929. Agree became a partner with Weitzman in the Grande venture. The construction firm was the W. E. Wood Company of Detroit. The Grande Ballroom opened in September of 1928. The Grande served as a ballroom/dance hall during the Big Band era from the 1920s into the 1950s. But the Grande’s greatest significance resulted from its use as a concert hall from 1966 to 1972 when, under the management of Detroit FM radio disc jockey turned promoter Russ Gibb, the Grande hosted rock ‘n’ roll concerts that featured both local Detroit rock bands and national and international acts. These years coincided with a brief but critical period in the history of Detroit music that was the heyday of Detroit rock ‘n’ roll. These years saw the rise of local acts – including the MC5 (*i.e.* Motor City Five), Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels (later just Mitch Ryder), the Stooges (later Iggy Pop and the Stooges), the Bob Seger System, Alice Cooper, the Frost, and the Amboy Dukes (later Ted Nugent and the Amboy Dukes) – to national and international fame. The Grande was the focal point for the Detroit rock ‘n’ roll scene during the late 1960s.

The streets off Grand River Avenue in the present-day Joy Road area were originally platted in 1887 by real estate developer A. E. Peppers as a residential subdivision called Ravenswood. Then located in Greenfield Township, the area was promoted as the “10,000 acre tract” and boasted of sites for fine homes on spacious lots that were “certain to increase in value.” The name Ravenswood was the developer’s promotional hook to connote the idea of birds and trees out in the country. Little development took place until after the area was annexed by the city of Detroit in 1915 and streetcar service was established. A street named Ravenswood remains near the original development site.

Detroit’s population exploded from 285,000 in 1900 to 993,000 citizens in 1920 to 1.5 million by 1930. The successful automotive industry drew mass immigration of new residents from other states as well as from other countries. The city of Detroit expanded by annexing property and housing developments followed the establishment of streetcar lines. A major streetcar line on Grand River encouraged development on the outer northwest edge of Detroit, and housing subdivisions soon proliferated along Grand River Avenue. Grand River Avenue soon also became a west side entertainment destination with the construction of the 2,786-seat Grand Riviera Theater (1925; John Eberson, architect) just two blocks north from where the Grande would soon be built. In addition, the 1,800-seat Riviera Annex Theater (also by Eberson) soon opened just a couple of blocks south of that. The Mirror Ballroom opened in the same block as the Grande in 1929. But the Grande Ballroom was a special destination on the west side. The dance floor of the Grande occupied 5,000 square feet and the atmosphere of the ballroom was rich with decorative detailing.

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Ballroom History

A dance craze swept the country, including Detroit, in the post World War I era. Two professional dancers instrumental in setting off the craze were Vernon and Irene Castle, who popularized the foxtrot through their vaudeville performances and movie shorts. The foxtrot, the black bottom, and the cakewalk were dances that defined the Jazz Age as the ballroom dance craze exploded. These dances came out of rural African American jook joints, but were taken up by white urbanites in the ballrooms that mushroomed around World War I. The new ballroom era exploded the society dance band craze. Society bands had a repertoire of ragtime, light classics, and popular songs within an arranged format that did not allow the musician to improvise. After 1922, the music evolved into Big Band Jazz where a combination of society music and improvised solos in big band jazz tunes came to define the new sound. The new sounds of big band jazz appealed to a much wider and more ethnically diverse and youthful audience than ever before.

By the late 1920's Detroit was well supplied with large ballrooms. The king of Detroit's ballrooms was the Graystone (1922) on Woodward Avenue near West Canfield Avenue. The Graystone was the city's largest ballroom. Opulent in design and located near downtown and the theater district, it catered to an older crowd and booked all the major big band acts. The Graystone billed itself as "Detroit's Million Dollar Ballroom," and it could handle 3,000 customers on its floors and balconies. The Graystone hosted every important jazz musician in the country as well as every major big band. The Graystone was also home to two nationally known house bands, McKinney's Cotton Pickers and Jean Goldkette's Orchestra.

Other nearby ballrooms included the Arcadia (1913) and Crystal (1919) on Woodward Avenue. The Palais de Danse (1919) was on Jefferson Avenue in Detroit a few blocks from the Belle Isle Bridge. In its newspaper advertising, the Palais de Danse asserted: "Strictly censored. Highest Standard." The Jefferson Beach Pavilion (1928) at the Jefferson Beach Amusement Park on Lake St. Clair at Nine Mile Road was a large dance hall on the far east side that was accessed by the Lakeshore bus line. Also located on the east side were the Vanity Ballroom (1929) and the Pier Ballroom (1914) at Electric Park, an amusement park at the foot of the Belle Isle Bridge. The Pier Ballroom was billed as "a ballroom of refinement" and catered to audiences of relatively high social standing. The Eastwood Gardens dance hall (1925) was located in an amusement park at Gratiot and Eight Mile Road. The Walled Lake Casino served dancers in its Oakland County summertime vacation area. If Detroiters took the Bob-Lo boat ride out to Bob-Lo Island, they could dance at the Bob-Lo Pavilion (1914), which claimed to be the second largest in the country. Smaller scale dance halls and ballrooms operated around town as well, including the Mirror Ballroom, the Campus, the Monticello (1928) and others that occupied the second stories of retail buildings.

The Grande's architect, Charles N. Agree, already had a successful practice by the time he designed the ballroom. Agree (1897-1982) was born in Stamford, Connecticut, but his family moved to Detroit and he attended Cass Technical High School in Detroit and then the Detroit Institute of Technology and the University of Michigan. He apprenticed with the firm of Williams Brothers and then W.E.N. Hunter. In 1919, after serving in the Army Corps of Engineers in World War I, Agree set up a private practice concentrating on commercial buildings and apartment houses and hotels during the 1920's. The 1922

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Whittier Apartment Hotel was one of his largest and most important projects of the 1919-1930 period. During the Depression years, the firm turned to designing neighborhood movie theaters in Detroit and the nearby suburbs. The Duke Theater in Royal Oak, the Royal Theater at Seven Mile Road and Meyers Street in Detroit, and the Dearborn Theater at Michigan Avenue and Telegraph Road in Dearborn were some of his commissions. One of the largest and most impressive was the Hollywood Theater on West Fort Street in Detroit. Agree's firm later specialized in store buildings. The Federal Department Stores in the Detroit area were all designed by Agree's firm, as were many local Woolworth and Winkelman stores, Kroger groceries, and Kinsel and Cunningham Drug Store buildings. Other major retailers followed, including Kresge, Wrigley Super Markets and Big Bear Markets. Agree's firm pioneered the suburban shopping center in Detroit and the design of the suburban grocery store as well. Charles Agree's long life and career led him to major commissions such as the design of Oakland Mall and Pontiac Mall, and he also designed the first K-Mart store in the United States. Agree's son, Arnold, became a member of the firm, and continued to practice after Charles' death in 1982.

Developer Harry W. Weitzman (1884-1942) had a colorful background. Born in Buffalo, he helped his parents run their hardware business on Gratiot Avenue in his formative years. After he married, Weitzman and his partner Dave Zubor owned and operated the Maryland Bar, a pre-prohibition saloon on West Larned Street near Woodward Avenue in downtown Detroit. The Maryland Bar became a rendezvous for political figures because city and county government offices were all within two blocks of this establishment. Harry made many connections through his businesses, and the saloon was likely well patronized by attorneys, politicians and gamblers alike. Near this intersection of Woodward and West Larned Street, Harry set up his younger brother Louis in a jewelry and loan exchange that included a pawn shop.

During prohibition Weitzman was head of a surety bonding company, the Direct Bonding and Insurance Agency, along with his brother Benjamin. Surety bonds were a form of bail bonds, and because of Harry's political connections, he helped bail out the rumrunners during the prohibition days. After the surety bond business became less lucrative when prohibition ended, Weitzman turned to real estate. Harry was known in Detroit as a professional gambler, and was said to have made a large gambling income. Harry had three children, Clement, Dorothy and Seymour, whose initials were carved into a plaque on each of the Grande Ballroom's towers.

In 1928 Harry Weitzman and Charles Agree saw opportunity in the rapidly developing area along Grand River Avenue near Joy Road. They built the Grande at the corner of Grand River Avenue and Beverly Court. The Grande Ballroom, like the slightly later Vanity Ballroom, was designed with retail store spaces on the first floor, and the ballroom in the entire second story above. In 1928, the retailers on the first floor of the Grande included a drug store at the corner – originally called the Economical Drug Store, it later evolved into a Cunningham's Drug Store. Likely named because of the location on Beverly Court, a dress shop, Beverly's, opened as one of the initial retail tenants as well. An interesting note is that Weitzman and Agree were also partners in the Beverly's store. By 1941, Beverly's had been replaced with the Maas Brothers Department Store.

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A sign on the Grande Ballroom building when it was still under construction stated, "The first private dance at this ballroom will be held the opening week by the Geo. F. Monaghan Council K of C." The Monaghan Council grew to become one of the largest Knights of Columbus Catholic men's organizations in Michigan. It was founded in June 1928 and did not have a hall of its own when the Grande was being completed in September of 1928. This dance was likely the first ever held by the Monaghan chapter. The Grande Ballroom held many such dances and events for local organizations and groups. The Grande grew to become one of the entertainment destinations of Detroit's west side during the jazz and big band swing era.

By the late 1950s as rock and roll became popular, ballroom dancing was going out of fashion. In 1957, a *Detroit News* article reported on an attempt to revive ballroom dancing at the Grande. A new manager, a Mrs. Hayes, wanted to make the Grande a wholesome place for young people to meet and enjoy dancing to live music. The dances held at the Grande then were carefully supervised. They did not prove popular enough to sustain business for very long.

In the 1950s the neighborhood evolved as whites began to migrate to the suburbs and more African Americans began to move into the neighborhoods. The Grande Ballroom was used for events and by organizations, but no longer had regular dance events. There was a short stint in the early 1960's when the dance floor was used as a roller rink. One of the retail tenants stored mattresses in the Grande Ballroom in the mid 60's.

Rock 'n' Roll

The cultural revolution of the 1960s had a substantial impact on the cultural scene in Detroit during the late and some of the first "shots" fired in Michigan were heard at the Grande. The Grande Ballroom was to become every bit as iconic to Detroit music as Motown records' Hitsville Studios. Though initially a genteel middle-class attraction for west side dancers in the '20s '30s and '40s, the then long vacant venue exploded in the late 1960s with the hard-driving industrial-strength, heavy metal sounds of Detroit rock 'n' roll during its brief heyday when a group of southeast Michigan rock 'n' roll bands emerged from relative obscurity to become national and international performing and recording stars. In the 1966-72 period the Grande Ballroom became a counter-cultural nexus for southeast Michigan that hosted and helped propel the careers of Detroit's own rock 'n' roll bands and some of the postwar generation's most influential rock acts.

In 1966 an enterprising FM disc jockey named Russ Gibb, then working for Detroit/Dearborn-based station WKMH, saw an opportunity and leased the Grande Ballroom for rock 'n' roll concerts. Gibb had gone to San Francisco and seen the rock 'n' roll success at the Fillmore Theater, and concluded that rock 'n' roll concerts had the same financial potential in Detroit. Searching for a concert venue, Gibb soon found the long vacant Grande Ballroom and took possession under a lease-to-buy arrangement. Gibb booked concerts, generally for Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays each weekend, that included local Detroit bands

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and international acts that went on to legendary rock and roll fame – generally three bands per night. Gibb began with Detroit rock bands, adopting the MC5 (Motor City Five) as the house band at the suggestion of Detroit counter-culture writer and poet John Sinclair. The MC5 was the only band in town who were writing their own music.

On October 7, 1966, the Grande Ballroom opened for business with the MC5 headlining. Gibb promoted the concert through his radio program, and with psychedelic posters produced by local artist Gary Grimshaw. Although a small crowd of only sixty people showed up that first night, the next night the number doubled. Just six months later, the MC5 had a following and could draw large crowds. The MC5 eventually were signed by Elektra Records and in 1969 their album “Kick Out the Jams” recorded the Detroit rock sound live at the Grande Ballroom.

Other Detroit rock groups who got their start at the Grande included Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels (later just Mitch Ryder), the Bob Seger System, the Stooges (later Iggy Pop and the Stooges), Alice Cooper, the Frost, and the Amboy Dukes (later Ted Nugent and the Amboy Dukes). All of these Detroit bands were signed to major record labels and most achieved national and international success. The birth and success of Detroit rock ‘n’ roll can be attributed to the oversold, over legal capacity crowds of about 1,500 who packed the Grande Ballroom and forgot about work at the factory, the war, and other negatives such as the 1967 riot and the 1969 draft lottery. Gary Quackenbush, formerly of the band the Fugitives, said, “The Grande was the best place to go, and the best place to play that there ever was. It was a great stage, great acoustics, great vibe, great crowd, great time on the planet. The Grande made Detroit the place to play, and the place to be from.”¹

Because of the success of the local acts at the Grande, Russ Gibb also booked international rock ‘n’ roll acts. The list of groups performing at the Grande under Gibb’s tutelage included Fleetwood Mac, Muddy Waters, Steve Miller, Howlin’ Wolf, Savoy Brown, Ike and Tina Turner, Chuck Berry, Jimi Hendrix, the Jeff Beck Group, Pink Floyd, Janis Joplin, Jo Cocker, Procol Harem, Arthur Brown, Jefferson Airplane, Cream, the Who, the Grateful Dead, and Led Zeppelin – on and on. Many nights the MC5, the house band, opened the show. Their loud, high-energy Detroit-style rock ‘n’ roll would sometimes overpower the national acts that followed them. The Grande had a reputation for bringing out the best in performances from the national groups because of the “competition” from the energetic, industrial-strength performances of the local bands that preceded them on the evening’s music bill. Most nights the standards were raised so that the national act knew they were performing to a tough audience. The Who’s manager stated that he had never seen the Who try harder. The band, then on their first United States tour and not well known, was met with an enthusiastic reception: the capacity crowd at the Grande not only recognized the band as they edged their way through the packed lobby, but sang along with the music – both experiences new in the States to the group, who had been playing up til then to much smaller and less enthusiastic crowds. The Who left Detroit in 1968 convinced they would be successful.

¹ Carson, David A., *Grit Noise and Revolution*, The University of Michigan Press, 2006, pp. 154.

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These new, happening shows drew huge crowds every weekend. Grande Ballroom manager Tom Wright was educated in England and had toured as manager with the band, the Who. He brought an international perspective: "...at that time, there was more music per square inch in Detroit than anywhere in the country. So what started as the idealistic musical dream of beat poets and entrepreneurs on the West Coast surfaced in Detroit as assembly-line revolt, the birthplace and nursery for heavy metal. And the Grande Ballroom was the hatchery."² Dave Miller, the emcee for many of the shows at the Grande, said, "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."³

As the bands that played the Grande went on to legendary rock 'n' roll fame, the Grande Ballroom's rock 'n' roll performance posters, handbills and recordings became highly collectable and have brought the building international recognition. For a generation of Metro Detroiters, and even younger people who never set foot in it, the Grande Ballroom has become a symbol of a time when music became a culture, even a revolution.

By 1969, Russ Gibb had started booking some rock 'n' roll shows at the nearby Grand Riviera Theater in order to accommodate larger crowds, and because of complaints about the Grande being run-down. He gave the new venue a hybrid name, "Grande Riviera," in order to maintain the association with the Grande Ballroom. Detroit's growing appetite for rock 'n' roll had allowed competition to move in and begin booking shows at the Eastown Theater on the east side of Detroit. Russ Gibb stopped producing shows at the Grande Ballroom in 1970. The Grande Ballroom struggled on and off under various promoters and then ceased operations, unable to compete for the big name groups. The large venues in Detroit accommodated the major booking agencies that required higher guarantees and percentages of the gate. Big-name acts headlined at Cobo Hall, Olympia Stadium, and other major venues. The last rock 'n' roll performance at the Grande Ballroom was held on New Year's Eve, 1972. The headline act was the very band that opened the rock 'n' roll shows there – the MC5.

The later years of the Grande Ballroom have not been kind to the building. During the later rock 'n' roll years of the Grande, there was criticism of the poor condition of the bathrooms and of the deteriorating conditions of the building. After the rock 'n' roll era, the building was vacant for a number of years, but by the 1980's, a church bought the property and ran various programs from the first floor and ballroom. Many storefront renovations occurred, and the building suffered from lack of investment. Today, only a handful of Detroit's ballrooms remain standing: the Vanity, the Monticello, the Campus, the Crystal, and the Oriole Terrace (originally built as the Duplex Theater in 1915). The Grande is in the same condition as the Vanity, Campus and Oriole Terrace, stable, but deteriorating due to lack of heat and investment. The Monticello Ballroom has recently benefited from a state grant and has a first floor tenant. The Crystal

² Wright, Tom, *Roadwork*, Hal Leonard Books, New York, 2007, pp. 117.

³ McCollum, Brian, "Strobe Light, Longhairs and the Smell of Pot: 40 Years Later: Rockers Remember Detroit's Grande Ballroom," [The Detroit Free Press](#), October 1, 2006.

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Ballroom is undergoing a complete reconstruction as the building is being rebuilt inside as the Crystal Lofts, preserving only the Woodward Avenue façade. One of the last of the many old Detroit ballrooms, the Grande has a significant Detroit music history that goes far beyond that of the remaining ballrooms in Detroit.