Recreation Park bandshell's summer season includes Shakespeare, Sondheim and a jazz festival

Supporters of the historic venue have more than 20 performances slated for 2024, more than twice as many as last year.

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Honey Buckets performs during a May 4 bluegrass festival at Long Beach's Recreation park bandshell. Photo courtesy of Friends of Rec Park Bandshell.

A summer full of entertainment at Long Beach's Recreation Park will feature a classic history play and a "lost" play from Shakespeare, concerts by tribute bands and choral

performances, all free at the park's Spanish Revival-style bandshell.

After putting on eight events in 2023, "we really stepped it up and added quite a few new things," with more than 20 performances scheduled this year, Friends of Rec Park Bandshell cofounder Steve Pruitt said.

Pruitt and his friend and former employee Hans Hellsund formed the booster group last year in hopes of bringing life and activity back to the somewhat neglected 1929 bandshell and raising money to spruce it up.

The first goal has been an unqualified success, with last year's events drawing hundreds of residents and more than 1,000 people turning out for a bluegrass festival about a month ago.

For theater lovers, a highlight of the summer is likely to be two plays from Shakespeare by the Sea, which will kick off its 27th season at Recreation Park after years of using San Pedro's Point Fermin Park as the company's home base.

The weekend of June 20 to 22, the theater troupe will perform a new adaptation of "Cardenio," which some scholars say was a collaboration between William Shakespeare and fellow playwright John Fletcher.

"Cardenio" hits the notes audiences expect from the Bard's work, with characters falling in love, conflict and a wedding at the end, said Stephanie Coltrin, Shakespeare by the Sea's co-artistic director.

The company's second production, on June 28 and 29, will be Coltrin's adaptation of the two-part "Henry IV," which she condensed from seven hours of material in the original history plays.

Coltrin said the troupe decided to make Long Beach its new home because of "some safety concerns" last summer in San Pedro, and because the bandshell at Rec Park is in need of engaging community activities – just like the one at Point Fermin Park was when the company got its start there.

“We’re really excited about it. Long Beach is a community that we love because we’ve toured there for a long time, so it’s fun to be able to open our shows there,” Coltrin said.

After starting the season at Recreation Park, Shakespeare by the Sea will bring its admission-free performances to more than a dozen cities around Los Angeles and Orange counties. (Find the company’s full schedule here.)

Other highlights of the Rec Park bandshell 2024 season are the Long Beach Camerata Singers performing a Stephen Sondheim revue on June 23, a series of Saturday concerts by tribute bands in July and August, and a concert and nonprofit fair for Long Beach Gives in September. (Click here for the bandshell’s 2024 calendar.)

Pruitt said fundraising to refurbish the bandshell has been slow going, “but it’s not something that we lose sleep over because our real mission is to get events back out there and support the community with these events.”

After this summer, the stage will be stripped and repainted, and bandshell boosters will be looking for corporate donations to help pay for longer-term projects, such as fixing up the inside of the building and redesigning the seating area.

Since launching the effort to “reactivate” the bandshell last year, Pruitt’s heard from many residents who have rediscovered the historic treasure in their community.

“We have not had one negative comment and most of the comments are just over-the-top positive,” he said.

The next event at the Recreation Park bandshell is a Battle of the Bands with up to 10 rock, pop, jazz and alternative bands from local high schools. The Battle of the Bands will take place from 4 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Sunday, June 2.

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