

# Using Music to Create Community



(<http://sitespecificmag.com/sites/default/files/field/image/Levitt%20SteelStacks.jpg>)



([http://sitespecificmag.com/sites/default/files/field/image/2013\\_06\\_15-LevittWebb\\_283.jpg](http://sitespecificmag.com/sites/default/files/field/image/2013_06_15-LevittWebb_283.jpg))

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If you've ever been to an outdoor concert on a warm and cloudless night, you know how pleasant and life affirming it can be. Here in Los Angeles, we are lucky enough to have two large outdoor music venues in the Greek Theater and the Hollywood Bowl. There's also a third: the Levitt Pavilion in MacArthur Park, where no tickets are necessary because the shows are always free. It's no accident that the Pavilion is located in the park; Levitt Pavilions is interested in bringing about neighborhood improvement and community building through free, live outdoor concerts.

We spoke with Liz Levitt Hirsch, board chair for Levitt Pavilions and the President of the Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation, about the organization and their mission:

LLH: Who were Mortimer and Mimi Levitt, and why did they have a passion for music in public spaces?

My parents, Mortimer and Mimi Levitt, shared a love for music and the arts, and this inspired their philanthropy later in their lives. My father grew up in Brooklyn, and his family struggled to make ends meet. As a boy, my father used to accompany his dad to Luna Park on Coney Island, where he worked as a street vendor. There, my father discovered the joy of live music. Unable to pay for a ticket, he would stand outside gates to ticketed concerts and listen. My mother, who grew up in Vienna under more affluent circumstances, loved music just like Mortimer, and when they were married in 1948 music performances were something they enjoyed together. Even on their honeymoon, my parents spent time in ancient amphitheaters all over Europe listening to music under the stars with people from all walks of life.



When my parents first met in the mid-1940s, my father had already become a successful businessman as the founder of the Custom Shop (<http://www.customshop.com/shop/>) clothing company in New York City. Following their marriage, they became noted philanthropists in the city, focused mainly on arts, culture and education. Meanwhile, they spent their summers in Westport, Connecticut. In 1971, community residents approached them with the idea to transform a problematic landfill into an outdoor concert venue for the town. My parents saw this as a wonderful opportunity to make the performing arts an integral part of the community, so they contributed to the campaign. Two years later, the Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts (<http://www.levittpavilion.com>) opened in 1973, named in honor of their gift. Its opening night concert featured a full orchestra with a Metropolitan Opera singer and an award-winning pianist. Over the next two decades, the program in Westport evolved from modest programming to an annual series of 50 free professional concerts featuring acclaimed performers. The success of the Levitt Pavilion in Westport inspired my father to envision more Levitt venues across America. When he sold his chain of Custom Shops in 1997, he transferred the proceeds to the Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation to develop and support Levitt pavilions across America.

Today there are six Levitt venues across America (<http://www.levittpavilions.org>), collectively presenting the largest free concert series in America with over 300 free concerts annually. Locations include Los Angeles and Pasadena, California; Arlington, Texas; Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Memphis, Tennessee; and Westport, Connecticut. Each year, more than half a million people are served by the program. More pavilions are in the works, including Denver and Houston, and we're in conversations with nearly a dozen other cities. We've also just launched the Levitt AMP [Your City] Grant Awards (<http://amp.levittpavilions.org>), an exciting new matching grant opportunity to bring free concerts to 10 small and mid-sized cities across the U.S. every year.

**How have you seen a Levitt Pavilion change places?**

LLH: Every place where a Levitt has been built has experienced positive change. In Los Angeles (<http://www.levittla.org>), MacArthur Park used to be filled with drugs and violent crime. It was a place that families didn't dare visit. Now the area surrounding the Levitt Pavilion is vibrant. The Levitt served as a catalyst in bringing people back to the park, and the city subsequently invested in a new soccer field, playgrounds, lighted pathways and more. Families have returned, and it's great to see. In fact, in the seven years since the Levitt opened in L.A., there hasn't been a single incident during any Levitt concert. The park is just that much safer. In Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (<http://www.levittsteelstacks.org>), we helped transform the nation's largest brownfield — on the grounds of the defunct Bethlehem Steel — into an incredibly vibrant arts campus. What was once dirt and weeds and prohibited from use, is now a state-of-the art performance venue and a grassy lawn that the community uses throughout the year. And in Arlington, Texas (<http://www.levittpavilionarlington.org>), the Levitt has brought record-breaking crowds to the once-dormant downtown area. So many people visit the Arlington pavilion each year—over 120,000 people during the concert season alone---that numerous businesses and restaurants have popped up to support the foot traffic. It's been a boon for the local economy.

That's the power of the Levitt (<http://www.levittpavilions.org>)—to transform a space that was once neglected or underused into a place that is now an anchor of community life. We partner with cities to identify those neglected public spaces, and — recognizing that music has long been a social connector — we use free, live music as the vehicle to bring people together and effect that change.

**Is the design of the pavilion important? What elements of the design encourage people to participate?**

LLH: Each Levitt venue is designed with our mission in mind: to make great, live music accessible to all. Equally important is that the design process is locally driven. Each Levitt stage is different. Some are refurbished WPA ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Works\\_Progress\\_Administration](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Works_Progress_Administration))-era band shells from the 1930s and early 40s. Some are new construction. In both cases, the local Friends of Levitt nonprofit works with a local architect and the community to create a design that resonates with its location. We strive to ensure that each pavilion—from the stage's architecture to the landscaping of the lawn or plaza—reflects the flavor of its city. After all, this is their stage. And of course, Levitt venues feature state-of-the-art sound and lighting so that Levitt performers sound fantastic and our audience experiences a show of the highest quality. All of this works together so that everyone feels welcome.

In front of the stage, there's always a beautiful grassy area—an open lawn where there's no front row or back row. Audiences bring lawn chairs, picnic blankets, food and games. You see families relaxing, people dancing, children doing cartwheels---there are even conga lines on some evenings! This is one of the keys to how the Levitt builds community. There's a freedom to the open lawn setting where you can easily run into old friends, meet neighbors, or be invited to an impromptu picnic. Anyone can jump up and dance, or run up to the stage. It's really a place for everyone.

## **SS: How do you program the spaces? Does the community get involved in who performs?**

LLH: In each community, the Levitt program is booked by the local Friends of Levitt nonprofit organization that also manages the venue. We've found that this local model works best because each city has its own vibe and personality. Programming reflects the local traditions, so we let the pavilions discover what resonates with them. Each Levitt venue presents at least 50 free concerts during the season. That includes everything from children's shows to every type of music you can imagine—blues, salsa, rock, Americana, jazz, country and more. All Levitt artists are paid a competitive fee, ensuring a high level of excellence. This enables local Levitt venues to attract critically acclaimed emerging artists to celebrated performers who have won GRAMMYS, and these artists hail from both the U.S. and abroad. Recent performers include Jose Feliciano, Rosanne Cash, Jimmy Webb, Dustbowl Revival, Booker T. Jones, The Dunwells, Delta Rae and Gregory Porter, to name a few.

The community is definitely involved in voicing their picks for artists they would love to see on stage. The local Friends of Levitt organizations are constantly listening to the audience, whether it's through conversations on Facebook and Twitter to surveys on the lawn. With this feedback, they can build their schedules to create a stellar season.

## **SS: Why are great public spaces important?**

LLH: Great public spaces are incredibly valuable in our society because that's where community starts. These are the places where everyone gets together—no matter their background or circumstance—and they enhance the livability of a city or town, improving the overall health of a community. In great public spaces, we are welcomed. We are invited to be together with things to do and places to go. We build understanding with one another. Our community grows because we have places that are for everyone.

That's exactly what we're doing at Levitt Pavilions (<http://www.levittpavilions.org>): using the power of free, live music to transform spaces into places, and, in the process, strengthening the social fabric of America.

