

Levitt Pavilion SteelStacks enters fifth year with a 'smarter' season

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Of The Morning Call

MAY 21, 2015, 11:49 PM

When ArtsQuest's south Bethlehem SteelStacks campus opened in 2011 with the ArtsQuest Center and outdoor Levitt Pavilion venue, everyone had ideas for music and entertainment.

"The ideas weren't co-joined in the first year or two," says ArtsQuest Vice President of Programming Patrick Brogan. "We were just saying, 'We want to do this, we want to do that, we want to do this.'"

Four years of experience and audience feedback has resulted in a much smarter approach to programming, says Brogan. ArtsQuest knows what audiences want and has learned how to connect the entertainment at its venues.

That's clear in the lineup for the fifth season of Levitt, which formally kicks off at 7:30 p.m. May 22 with a concert by 1960s beach music and surf-rock duo The Rip Chords. It's the first in a series of 52 free concerts Thursdays through Saturdays through mid-September at the amphitheater at the base of the former Bethlehem Steel blast furnaces. Levitt Pavilion SteelStacks is one of seven pavilions built through the national Levitt Foundation, the creators of the largest free concert series in America, to encourage social interaction and create opportunities for all to enjoy the performing arts.

Audiences have told Levitt organizers they like iconic legacy acts, so The Rip Chords will be followed by The Crystals on June 27, The Brooklyn Bridge on July 10 and The Platters on July 30.

Audiences say they want critically acclaimed classic acts such as 1970s highmaker Orleans, playing on May 23, and 1980s pop-rock singer Marshall Crenshaw, at Levitt May 29.

They also want to the blues.

"The Levitt lineup is like a blues festival over the course of the summer," Brogan says, with regional performers such as Flamin' Harry and the Roadhouse Rockers on May 28 and Clarence Spady on Aug. 29; and national names such as John Cleary and The Monster Gentlemen on June 4 and Selwyn Birchwood, who just won the Blues Music Award for Best New Artist, on June 11.

"That's an audience that's regular for us and I think we really hit another home run with the acts that we've been able to bring in," Brogan says.

Levitt also is offering genres under-represented in previous years.

For example, traditional country music act Truck Stop Troubadours will play Sept. 11, and local country rock band Scott Marshall and Marshall's Highway takes the stage June 26.

"We haven't done a lot of country — not intentionally or unintentionally, we just haven't presented a lot of country on the Levitt lineup," Brogan says. "So that's a genre that we've added into the lineup."

Jazz also has been under-represented, Brogan says, "because I don't think we knew the right type of jazz to do out there." This season includes two jazz shows: Kellyee Evans on Sept. 5, who Brogan says "is phenomenal and a powerhouse vocalist with a kick-butt band behind her," and National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master Dave Liebman, a multiple-Grammy Award nominee, on Aug. 21.

Julie Benjamin, Levitt Executive Director, says part of Levitt's mission "is to bring music that perhaps folks in the Lehigh Valley would not know about, whether it be a specific band or a genre."

An example of that is Black Violin, which performs July 11. The pair of African-American, classically trained violinists with years of experience in the hip-hop industry in Miami play an amalgamation of hip-hop, classical, rock and R&B.

Black Violin was a hit at Levitt Pavilion and at Musikfest in 2014. Benjamin says she and her colleagues were so impressed they not only invited the duo back but recommended it for a national tour of Levitt pavilions. "And overwhelmingly the other Levitts said that was a great choice," she says.

Surveys and feedback also resulted in the Thursday through Saturday schedule, with Sundays added around the Fourth of July.

The surveys show that what the Levitt is doing is working, says Benjamin.

"We feel incredibly excited about how the Levitt has been received in the community," she says.

Since its first year, annual attendance has grown more than 160 percent. More than 65,000 people attended shows last season, and nearly 85 percent of those surveyed had been to Levitt before. Last year, 68 percent of the audience said they come to Levitt at least two or three times a month.

"It's just grown organically, because truth be told, we don't have a large marketing budget," Benjamin says. "But people who come down and experienced it, they tell their friends, their families, their neighbors, their colleagues. We have people ask us for program booklets so they can take them to work to share with their co-workers.

"I think that we've created a whole community of Levitt advocates, and they're the ones who are now sort of saying, 'Look at this great thing we have in our community. You should come and check it out.'"

In addition to making strides on booking acts, the Levitt is becoming a seamless part of SteelStacks' offerings, Brogan says.

For example, SteelStacks is holding its second Soccerfest and Viewing Party built around Women's World Cup finals and the U.S. team's big game against Sweden June 12. To accommodate that — and tie into it — the Levitt has move its concert start time to 6:30 p.m. and scheduled a young, female-fronted indie-rock act, Summer Scouts, that will appeal to the expected younger, female crowd. In addition, there will be a DJ on the Town Square between the Levitt and ArtsQuest Center as a pre-game party.

"As we see how that all plays with each other, we're able to — the analogy's coming to me — weave together the fabric to make a beautiful quilt rather than just squares of fabric," Brogan says. "And really make something out of everything we're doing at SteelStacks, rather than just a Levitt show versus Soccerfest versus a Town Square show."

For ArtsQuest's annual Sabor! Latin music festival June 19-21, the Levitt acts will serve as headliners, with Pablo Batista and The Mambo Syndicate on June 19 and Michael Stuart on June 20.

Brogan says Stuart "is probably the biggest salsa act we've ever done at ArtsQuest." Batista is a south Bethlehem native who plays percussion with Alicia Keys and Stevie Wonder.

Brogan says that, as always, "the whole lineup is accessible because that's the goal — to have 50 concerts that everybody can enjoy out on the lawn under the stars any night of the week."

That's also been part of Levitt's success, Benjamin says.

"One of the things we learned early on and we feel really fortunate about is that people trust the Levitt brand," she says. "So they may come to a concert not necessarily having any idea who the band is, but they trust that it's going to be quality, they trust that it's going to be entertaining, and they trust that they're going to learn something new."

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LEVITT PAVILION SEASON HIGHLIGHTS

The Rip Chords, May 22: Duo vocal group that had five Top 100 singles 1962-65. Best known for the 1964 hit "Hey Little Cobra."

Orleans, May 23: Return of the pop-rock band best known for its hits "Still The One," "Dance With Me" and "Love Takes Time."

Marshall Crenshaw, May 29: 1980s pop singer songwriter who had the hits "Someday, Someway," "Cynical Girl" and "Whenever You're On My Mind."

Trout Fishing in America, May 30: Family favorite duo from Canada featuring Ezra Idlet and Keith Grimwood.

Selwyn Birchwood, June 10: A 2015 Blues Music Award nominee for Best New Artist.

The Crystals, June 27: Considered one of the defining acts of the 1960s girl group era, they had seven Top 40 hits, including "Da Doo Ron Ron (When He Walked Me Home)" and "Then He Kissed Me."

Allentown Band, July 4: Patriotic music by America's oldest band, complete with fireworks.

The Brooklyn Bridge, July 10: Formerly led by singer Johnny Maestro, who died in 2010, the 1960s vocal group known for its hit "The Worst That Could Happen."

Black Violin, July 11: Duo of classically trained African-American men play an amalgamation of hip-hop, classical, rock and R&B. Black Violin is playing Levitt Pavilions across the nation.

The Platters, July 31: Rock and Roll Hall of Fame group had 40 singles hit the Billboard Hot 100 chart from 1955-67, including four that hit No. 1: "The Great Pretender," "My Prayer," "Twilight Time" and "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes."

Gandalf Murphy and the Grand Slamovians, Aug. 20: A quartet that has been called "the hillbilly Pink Floyd."

Luke Wade, Aug. 27: Texas native who made it to the quarterfinals of the TV singing competition "The Voice" in 2014; has released two albums.

Turkuaz, Sept. 10: Nine-piece Brooklyn-based funk-soul act with beats with twists of pop and funk. It will perform at major festivals such as High Sierra Music Festival, All Good Music Festival and Gathering of the Vibes.

The Mango Men, Sept. 12: Season-closing night party with regional cover band that favors Jimmy Buffet-type numbers.

LEVITT PAVILION STEELSTACKS

•**What:** 52 free outdoor concerts

•**When:** Thursdays through Saturdays, May 22-Sept. 12

•**Where:** SteelStacks, 101 Founders Way, Bethlehem

•**Also at Levitt:**

•**Ten free movies,** June 24-Aug. 26, all Wednesday except for July 5. Mostly family fare, such as "Annie," "Maleficent," and "Paddington."

•**Yuengling Summer Concert series:** Ticketed shows include Cake on July 12 (\$39) and Dr. Dog on Sept. 25 (\$30).

•**Info:** <http://www.levittsteelstacks.org>, 610-332-1300

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