

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Liz Levitt Brings Music Across America

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Cultural Weekly managed to catch up with peripatetic Elizabeth Levitt Hirsch (Liz), who spearheads the Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation's venture philanthropy program and serves as Board President of Levitt Pavilions, a national nonprofit that invigorates community life in American cities by transforming neglected public spaces into music destinations where all feel welcome. Beyond Levitt Pavilions, Liz has a long and distinguished history of hands-on involvement with nonprofit organizations, serving on numerous boards and supporting organizations that foster social justice and access to the arts. We salute and admire her work!

The Levitt season is in full swing in Pasadena and L.A. Any concert recommendations for our readers?

It's an extraordinary season, and there are so many stellar artists to choose from each week — 100 free concerts all summer long. The beauty of the Levitt program is that each concert is free to the public, so you can sample a wide range of acclaimed artists and genres without worrying about cost. It's a fantastic way to discover new artists. People return night after night, bringing their picnic blankets and lawn chairs. The atmosphere is friendly and relaxing, a great place to unwind after a busy day. And there's incredible talent on stage.

At [Levitt Pavilion Pasadena](#), I was so excited about the Grammy-award winning [Mariachi Divas](#) who performed last Saturday night. And I can't wait to see [The Dunwells](#) on August 16, an Americana/bluegrass group hailing from England whose star is quickly rising. I can't stop listening to their album. Levitt Pasadena is celebrating its 10th anniversary this summer, and to mark this milestone they're throwing a closing night party on August 26. It's going to be a terrific evening, and of course it's free!

At [Levitt LA](#), I'm looking forward to the African rap trio [SMOD](#) on August 3, and I can't wait to see [Bomba Estereo](#) on August 10. Bomba's take on traditional Columbia cumbia combined with electro is amazing! They've performed at the 2011 Coachella Music Festival and South by Southwest, so the fact that Levitt is presenting them for free is wonderful. Levitt L.A.'s season closes on Sept. 9 with the [Interdependence Day](#) festival, which includes a day of free concerts and symposia promoting global connectedness and tolerance, attracting people from around the world. I can't think of a better setting for this event, as MacArthur Park is one of America's most diverse locales.

Of course, there are also the children's concerts — all of the Levitt venues present children's concerts that are enormously popular. Locally, be sure to catch the [Bob Baker Marionettes](#) on August 5 at 4pm at Levitt L.A., and [The Funky Punks](#) on August 15 at 7pm at Levitt Pasadena. Both Levitt venues offer fun pre-concert activities like face-painting and water games, so arrive

early!

Simply put, Levitt concerts are an outstanding experience. Like the best restaurant, you know that everything on the menu is good. It's just a question of what you're in the mood for.

It's been 40 years since the first Levitt Pavilion opened in Westport, CT. Has the Levitt program evolved since then?

Definitely. In the 1970s, when my parents, Mortimer and Mimi Levitt, were approached by the Westport-Weston Arts Council to support the transformation of a problematic landfill into an outdoor music destination, they enthusiastically embraced the project. My father was a huge music lover and never forgot his humble beginnings, when he experienced the pains of exclusion. Without music, family celebrations and outings, Mortimer's childhood was joyless. Mom, on the other hand, grew up in Vienna and her life was filled with opera and other music experiences. Together, my parents became passionate supporters of the arts. My parents were the largest contributors to the new pavilion, named the [Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts](#). To this day, Levitt is the largest supporter and mom serves on the board.

In 1999, the continuing success of the Levitt in Westport inspired my father to invest the proceeds of his company into the creation of a national network of Levitt venues, so communities across the country could revel in the shared experience of free concerts under the stars, just like in Westport.

About the same time, dad passed the baton on to me, as he was in his early 90s. As I was thinking about how to approach the expansion of the Levitt network, I realized that what works so well in a protected suburban environment like Westport could work equally well in cities. We could bring that same joyful experience—this jewel of a program — to urban centers where access to public green space is often limited and at a premium. And we could also reach more diverse populations, introducing the Levitt experience to people who otherwise couldn't afford the price of a ticket.

So this focus on transforming and revitalizing our nation's public spaces — ensuring access to the performing arts along the way — has guided Levitt's efforts to the present day and propels us into the future.

How many Levitt venues are there?

Currently, there are six Levitt venues across the country — each programming 50 free concerts annually — making Levitt the largest national network of outdoor music venues presenting free concert series. More than half a million people each year experience Levitt's 300+ concerts.

Each Levitt venue is located on a formerly challenged site in a metropolitan area, continuing the theme of revitalization first realized by Westport. [Levitt SteelStacks](#), our most recent addition to the Levitt network, sits on the site of the nation's former largest brownfield in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. [Levitt Pavilion Pasadena](#), [Levitt LA](#) and [Levitt Shell](#) in Memphis are located in parks that were once crime-ridden and abandoned. [Levitt Arlington](#) is located in a downtown that just a few years ago sat dormant with little economic activity.

It's amazing to see how each of these sites has been transformed into a vibrant and family-friendly destination treasured by the local community. What I love is how each Levitt reflects the local tastes and character of the city. Each Levitt venue is managed and programmed by a local Friends of Levitt Pavilion nonprofit that has the support of the city and its people, so it's a real community-driven effort. It's a great model of public/private partnerships.



For people who have never been, can you describe the Levitt experience?

You can arrive feeling flat, and leave feeling buoyant. That's what happens at the Levitt. It's joyful! What I love most is the communal spirit and sense of humanity that's present at Levitt concerts. Music is a powerful social connector, and you can see its effect on people at a Levitt

concert — they're relaxed, smiling, dancing, or simply interacting with one another. People of all ages and walks of life, who otherwise might not cross paths. It's wonderful to see. And they bring their picnic blankets and lawn chairs, and it's just a friendly vibe for young and old alike. Many arrive hours before the concert and hang out after the show. It's a festival atmosphere and very welcoming.

People are continually blown away that the Levitt network offers these high-quality performances for free.

What's 'Build Up, Get Down,' and how's it going?

Build Up, Get Down is Levitt's invitation to civic leaders, engaged citizens and sponsors across America to bring the Levitt program to their community. We're aiming to expand the Levitt network into 20 cities by 2020 — and eventually in 65 cities — so that millions of people each year will be able to experience the joy of free, live music in welcoming outdoor settings.

Our mission is really about social impact through music. We envision an America filled with thriving public spaces, creating community and human connections that extend into daily life. Right now Levitt is in conversation with a handful of cities that look very promising, and I hope to make some formal announcements soon!

How does the Levitt program fit into the creative placemaking conversation?

Levitt Pavilions is proof that free, live music in a welcoming outdoor setting is a very powerful magnet for community. And when the community comes together, it creates a sense of place that has ripple effects. We've seen that happen in cities where the Levitt program exists — local businesses are flourishing from the increased activity surrounding Levitt venues, helping the local economies. There's increased opportunity for businesses, for families, for community engagement. Neighborhoods transform as Levitt delivers the promise of a better tomorrow today.

What are you listening to in your car right now?

As I mentioned, I'm addicted to The Dunwells right now! I'm also listening to Blame Sally, LeRoy Bell and Orleans. Coincidentally, these artists have all performed (or will perform later this summer) at Levitt venues across the country!

Photos: Top, Liz Levitt; below, Levitt SteelStacks, the newest Levitt venue that opened last year in Bethlehem, PA, on the site of the former largest brownfield in the nation.

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