

# ArtsMemphis

## Strike Up The Band



The concept of providing ‘music with no barriers’ - open air, open lawn seating and open to the public with no admission fee- is a perfect example of what can be done when business partners with the arts world for the good of the community. Image courtesy of ANF Architects.

What does Memphis have in common with Westport, CT, Pasadena and Los Angeles, CA, Harrisburg, PA, and Arlington, TX? The clue is that there is a powerful arts-related connection. Now for the correct answer. These six cities are all privileged to be sites of either an existing, or a planned Levitt Pavilion. To find out what this means exactly, ArtsMemphis spoke recently with Barry Lichterman, a lifelong Memphian with a history of civic involvement, who is founder and President of the Friends of the Levitt Pavilion Memphis, Inc. Lichterman explained that the historic Overton Park Bandshell was undergoing an extensive renovation to bring it back to life and was scheduled to reopen later in the year as the Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts at the Overton Park Shell, or “Levitt Shell” as he hoped it would be known.

The Shell’s timeline is that it was built in 1936 by the Works Progress Administration in conjunction with the city and was modeled on similar bandshells in Chicago, New York and St. Louis. Of the 27 depression-era bandshells, ours is one of only a few that remains. Recognized as the site of Elvis’s first rock n’ roll show, the Shell stage over the years CenterStage hosted luminaries from B.B. King to Johnny Cash to Marguerite Piazza. Originally accommodating some 5,000 people, summer concerts were performed at the outdoor amphitheatre off and on from 1937 into the 1970s. In 1983 the Shell was named for Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat credited with rescuing thousands of Jews in World War II. The Save our Shell Organization, formed in 1986, ultimately did not have the necessary renovation funds, and the city closed the facility in 2004 due to poor repair.

Now, however, with thanks to the Mortimer Levitt Foundation, help is truly at hand. This organization's mission is "the creation or restoration of music bandshells in dedicated open public recreational spaces of at least an acre... and the subsequent production of 50 free concerts each summer." It serves as the catalyst to mobilize the local community (in this case Memphis) into action by providing matching funds, a successful model and guidelines in the creation and operation of the Pavilion. Success is contingent upon the development of a strong partnership between the Foundation, the city, and private local supporters. This of course is where the Friends of the Levitt Pavilion comes in. In Lichterman's view, the concept of providing "music with no barriers"—open air, open lawn seating and open to the public with no admission fee—is a perfect example of what can be done when business partners with the arts world for the good of the community.

The obvious question in all of this is just who is Mr. Levitt, and why is he helping Memphis? Mortimer Levitt was the millionaire businessman, arts patron and benefactor extraordinaire and writer, who made the fortune behind his Foundation. He was a colorful individual to say the least, who died in 2005 at the age of 98, having built the Custom Shop Shirtmakers men's fashion empire that started in New York City and ultimately had some 82 branches around the country. His books had provocative titles with themes dear to his heart, such as *How to Start Your Own Business without Losing Your Shirt* and *Ninety-Six and Too Busy to Die*.

Levitt had a passion for classical music, as well as philanthropy, and in 1973 the first Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts opened in Westport, Connecticut near the Levitt family summer home. A foundation was subsequently set up dedicated specifically to supporting additional Levitt Pavilions from coast-to-coast. The mechanics of each project are such that a \$750,000 Levitt donation is made available over a 25-year period, with \$250,000 initially available as a matching grant, and an additional \$500,000 available over five years, also in matching funds. Additional funding for 25 years is also possible. The fact that the Levitt Foundation cast its eyes upon Memphis in the first place is a bit of good fortune. Based on referrals from friends, Elizabeth Levitt Hirsch, Mortimer's daughter living in Los Angeles, several years back began considering Memphis as a possible location for the next Levitt Pavilion expansion site. She contacted Katie Smythe Thinnies, founder of the New Ballet Ensemble in Memphis, to enlist her help in the project.

Later when Liz Levitt came to Memphis, it was clear that our historic Shell would be the perfect site for the Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts. Once the decision was made, it was determined that the renovation would cost an estimated \$1.25 million, of which up to \$500,000.00 was to be funded by the city and after the Levitt contribution, the rest would come from donors and sponsors. And in this connection, Barry Lichterman says that "fundraising is in full swing."

The "green" setting in the city's beloved old forest has clearly impacted the Shell's new design and the "greenness" and environmental sustainability of the overall project. Lichterman has been quoted as saying that his group hopes to show people that "we can do it responsibly and ecologically soundly, and reusing as much as possible from the original structure and its surroundings." According to Lichterman, the contributions of Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects, the firm responsible for the design, have been inestimable, as have those of OGCB Inc. Engineers and A2H Engineers. The actual renovation and construction phase started last month, with anticipated completion (except for sound, lighting and video) this June. The grand opening and first concerts are planned for early September.

The Board of the Friends of the Levitt Pavilion is a powerful mix of successful community figures and business elders, including arts leaders, performers and patrons. Katie Smythe Thinnies is a member (not surprising considering her pivotal role in the project) and, for example, so are Thomas Boggs, Joyce Cobb, Martha Ellen Maxwell, Jeff Goldstein, Mimi Phillips, Charles Blatteis, Robert Spence, and Blanchard Tual.

Cindy Buchanan is an ex-officio member representing the Division of Parks. In a demonstration of their continuing dedication, two leaders of the earlier Save our Shell organization, David Leonard and Jerry Brown, now serve on the Friends of Levitt Board. When asked to characterize Barry Lichterman's dynamic leadership style, prominent local lawyer Tual said their board President "has a case of terminal exuberance and enthusiasm."

Lichterman is quick to praise the long list of business partners that have done pro bono work because of their commitment to the project and its mission. The William Bearden Company made a cultivation video; Carter Malone Group handled public relations; Archer Malmo was helping with development of a communications package and provision of content for web development; Susan Dynerman authored and composed the business plan for the project; and the Pickering Firm had done engineering work.

Our local arts organizations have been extremely supportive. Since the Shell is located in Overton Park in close proximity to both the Memphis College of Art and the Brooks Museum, these two neighbors have been helpful in the planning process, and their representatives serve on the Friends of the Levitt Board. The UrbanArts Commission used this golden opportunity to encourage artists to present their visions for projects to artistically enhance the new Shell. The deadline for entries was the end of last November, and the high interest in the project brought in a number of applications from artists as far away as California.

According to Lichterman, the Friends of the Levitt were also in talks with the Stax Music Academy about a strategic partnership. He said too that Tania Castroverde Moskalenko, Executive Director of the Germantown Performing Arts Centre, and Cindi Younker, Executive Director of the Buckman Performing and Fine Arts Center, were helping to develop the musical vision for the 50-night free concert series. The Folk Alliance was helping to coordinate both adult and children's programming, and the Memphis Music Foundation was also working with the project.

Once the Levitt Pavilion was renovated, equipped and fully functioning, Lichterman said he looked forward to the presentation of all kinds of music including blues, folk, musica latina, World Music, R & B, jazz, gospel, Celtic, and American Roots. "The common denominator will be excellence," he said, and the aim was to enrich the arts scene through quality performances and to further enhance Memphis's image as a world music capital. The musical bookings were to be conducted professionally with demo tapes required. One exception to this practice was an innovative program called "Levitt Loves Kids." Excellence and dedication would be rewarded by giving school-aged, accomplished musicians their first performance experience in a safe, nurturing setting through their appearing live on the Levitt stage prior to a given night's featured act. In the end, Lichterman stressed that the mission of the Levitt Shell was to provide a broad range of free music to educate, entertain, enrich and inspire the lives of all our citizens and at the same time establish a strong sense of shared community through music and the performing arts. For our part, Arts-Memphis says let's strike up the band! The city is waiting.

January - April, 2008

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