

‘A Unifier’

Levitt Shell’s musical offerings, crowds growing with each new season

By Aisling Maki

The Levitt Shell recently kicked off its season of free public concerts with its most well-attended opening weekend to date, continuing a 75-year tradition of bringing together Memphians from all walks of life to enjoy music in Overton Park.

“We’re excited about the response we’re having from the Memphis public,” said Levitt Shell executive director [Anne Pitts](#). “More people know about the Shell and more people are taking advantage of such a great amenity in Memphis.”

The Shell, as its known locally, has a long history of uniting diverse people through the common denominator of music. The Overton Park Shell was constructed in 1936 by the City of Memphis and Works Progress Administration.

“It was built to give an impoverished people, who were struggling through the Great Depression, a place to come together and experience free music and entertainment during very difficult times,” Pitts said. “It was a unifier from the very beginning.”

During segregation, the Shell was one of the few local, public venues where black and white Memphians could gather to enjoy music together, and Pitts says that spirit of unity is what continues to drive the Shell’s popularity.

“No matter what our differences – no matter what divides us – we all love music,” she said. “We’ve become a little more isolated than we used to be. We visit with our neighbors a little less than we used to. But the Shell is bringing that spirit back. People get together and they picnic with each other and the kids play together. It’s a special place where people free to really engage with each other.”

The site of Elvis Presley’s first professional live show – which music historians call the first live rock ‘n’ roll show in history – as well as the site of [Johnny Cash](#)’s first professional live show when he opened for Elvis, the Shell also continues to attract out-of-town tourists daily.

Throughout its history, there have been numerous efforts to both destroy and revitalize the Shell.

But in 2008, the venue reopened as the Levitt Shell at Overton Park, with support from the Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation, which supports several free public concert venues across the country, from Connecticut to California.



The Levitt Shell has kicked off another season of free concerts. Shell executive director Anne Pitts said, “We’re excited about the response we’re having from the Memphis public.” (Daily News File Photo: Lance Murphey)

The foundation paid for about half of the Shell's \$1.3 million in renovation costs when work began in 2007, while the city of Memphis paid about another half and the remainder of money was raised locally.

Although it's connected to a network of national venues, the Levitt Shell operates an independent, Memphis-based nonprofit. The Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation had originally agreed to give the Levitt Shell \$100,000, representing about 20 percent of operating costs, annually for five years.

This would mark the last year of funding, but having seen the success of the Shell and the way Memphians have embraced the venue during the formidable economy these last few years, the Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation has agreed to continue funding at \$75,000 annually, or about 15 percent of the Shell's operating budget.

The majority of funding to support the venue's \$600,000 annual budget continues to come from local foundations, memberships, and corporate and individual donations.

"Without the people and the companies of Memphis, the Shell wouldn't exist," Pitts said. "We've had great support. Everyone has embraced the Shell and so far we're reaching our goals and hoping we'll continue to reach them for many years to come."

The venue's 50 free, family-friendly concerts this season, held Thursdays through Sundays from May to July, include everything from Latin Jazz bands to Celtic folk to Southern Funk.

"Our mission is finding common ground in a diverse audience," Pitts said. "In order to be able to reach that mission, we have to have as large and diverse an audience as possible by offering music that's going to draw everybody out."

In addition, the Levitt Shell hosts various community events year-round, from an annual December holiday lights show held in conjunction with the neighboring Memphis Brooks Museum of Art to the recent Memphis College of Art commencement ceremony that took place on the Shell's stage to a free outdoor film series.

And on Sept. 22, Levitt Shell will host its first annual "Stars in the Park" benefit concert, a ticketed fundraising event featuring a performance by a music icon, singer-songwriter Emmylou Harris.