

Pavilion premiere: The 'new' Levitt stars in Sunday debut with Jose Feliciano

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The program for opening night at the Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts on June 15, 1973, listed as the entertainment "First Selectman Jacqueline Heneage conducts Tributes to Donors" with "Performances by Coleytown Junior High School choir -- 90 voices, directed by Jim Papp; and Guests."

Elizabeth Levitt Hirsch, daughter of the venue's namesakes, remembers the opening night party later was held at a Beachside Avenue home and Pepita, a member of the Levitt household staff, made paella for the festivities.

From that night on for the next 40 years, the pavilion's setting on the Saugatuck River, a site that once was a landfill, has filled the riverside with music and entertainment under the stars, with acts ranging from emerging to award-winning artists, "from high school bands to a nine-time Grammy Award winner," said Freda Welsh, the first executive director of the Levitt Pavilion, which was transformed from a humble band shell to a \$9 million newly constructed complex.

The new Levitt Pavilion will open Sunday with a performance by guitarist and singer-songwriter Jose Feliciano, a Weston resident.

In addition to a free slate of eclectic musical presentations, Welsh also envisions Shakespearean performances in the new space, adding that, "I want to restore our classical series." On July 22, for instance, Connecticut Ballet will perform there.

The pavilion was named for the late Mortimer Levitt, who died in 2005 at age 98, and his wife Annemarie "Mimi" Levitt, who remains on the pavilion board.

The pavilion was the vision of Lou Nistico, then-chairman of the Parks and Recreation Commission, according to Carleigh Welsh, Freda's daughter and the nonprofit Levitt Pavilion's marketing and development director. He brought his idea to the Westport Young Woman's League and the Kiwanis Club. The two groups raised seed money, and the Levitts contributed \$25,000 to the \$65,000 effort. The town's donation came in the form of the 2-acre riverfront parcel.

It was then and continues to be "the epitome of a successful public-private partnership," Carleigh Welsh said.

Westport's Levitt has produced one of the largest and longest-running free outdoor summer festivals in the nation, with nightly programming from June to September that includes jazz, rock, pop, blues, folk,

world music, big band and cabaret, plus dance, theater, comedy, circus acts, movies and a weekly children's series on Wednesdays. It has served as a model for the five additional venues of the same name around the nation.

"These are community treasures and it all started in Westport," said Hirsch, who spearheads the Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation's venture philanthropy program in Pasadena, and chairman of board of directors for Levitt Pavilions, a nonprofit that provided substantial funding for the new Levitt Pavilion in Westport.

Free community performances were important to Mortimer Levitt, a self-made man who grew up in a poor immigrant family in Brooklyn. His family could not afford admission fees to rides or shows at Luna Park of Coney Island, where his father worked, so Levitt would stand outside the gates of ticketed concerts listening to the music. Those experiences were magical and transcended his "joyless childhood."

That's why the Westport Levitt Pavilion has a Coney Island-inspired arch through which the audience walks to the lawn to set up chairs, blankets and picnics.

To date, the Levitt Pavilion has hosted combined audiences of more than 1.5 million people.

"Really huge names have been on that little pavilion stage," said Winnie Scott Downes, who now lives in Florida, but headed the Westport-Weston Arts Council at one time and as such was responsible for the operations of the Levitt.

Through the last four decades, local audiences have enjoyed performances by Tony Bennett, Ray Charles, Huey Lewis, the Doobie Brothers, Beach Boys, Tom Jones, Dave Mason, Frankie Valli, Roberta Flack, Mary Wilson, Foreigner -- which performed indoors at Staples High School -- and Westport resident Michael Bolton, who "saved the day" by stepping in last minute for an ailing Ray Charles, who had been scheduled for a second performance, Carleigh Welsh said.

One of the most memorable performances occurred when Willie Nelson was joined on stage by local resident Keith Richards, a complete surprise for the audience. "You heard 2,500 necks do a triple take. You're watching these two icons jam. There's a lot of history here," Carleigh Welsh said.

The original performance venue was only a small band shell and lacked the amenities that most people would expect. There were no public restrooms and no green room to speak of where the performers could relax other than a recreational vehicle on site that Carleigh Welsh described as "rustic, and then downright primitive." When the tour buses of stars drove up to the venue, Freda and Carleigh Welsh said they wondered if drivers would keep going rather than stop.

Such thoughts are banished with the new facility. "Now it's world class, state-of-the art," Carleigh Welsh said.

The new Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts has a green room for performers, an office set aside for the road manager and a much more sophisticated sound system.

"It's going to be better than before for the performers, for the audience and the neighbors," said Freda

Welsh, whose involvement with the Levitt began in 1980. She was named its top executive in 1995.

"I'm thrilled that Freda has been able to make this renovation happen," said Mary Ellen Marpe, who served on the Levitt governing committee for three years, one as its chairwoman. "I saw the plans for it and was just in awe. ... It's nice to see it becoming what we all thought it should be," she said.

At least one person disagrees. Shelby Chaden, a member of the governing committee in the 1980s, said the new facility is not in the spirit of what Mortimer Levitt intended. The new design seems more like an arena than an outdoor amphitheater, said Chaden, who now lives in North Carolina and dreams of bringing a Levitt Pavilion to her adopted community.

Hirsch said her father loved the quaintness and innocence of the Levitt Pavilion in Westport, but that she and others always dreamed of a higher quality venue. Sound and lighting technologies have changed dramatically in the last half-century, she said.

Despite the upgrades, both Welshes said the pavilion remains an intimate space.

Bob LaRose, owner of Bobby Q's restaurant in Westport and organizer of the Blues, Views and BBQs festival, which is held annually at Levitt Pavilion and the Westport Library parking lot, said people will be pleased with the end result. It's going to be more musician-friendly and more spectator-friendly, LaRose said. He said the space was designed well, and gives people clear river views and a walkway around the pavilion allowing the public to interact with the space in a different way than in the past.

For this year's 7th Blues, Views and BBQs, LaRose said, "We took our lineup to a whole new level because we wanted to usher in the new facility with a lineup that was worthy of this great new facility." Performers will include the Spin Doctors, Raw Oyster Cult and Rick Derringer.

For information about the new Levitt Pavilion and this season's offerings, visit www.levittpavilion.com or www.facebook.com/LevittPavilion.