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All the world's onstage at Levitt Pavilion

The MacArthur Park venue, along with a sister site in Pasadena, taps global talent to complement its home-grown acts, all for an audience that's just as multicultural.

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As dusk fell over the Levitt Pavilion at MacArthur Park one recent Friday, Eddie Cota drank in the scene with quiet satisfaction.

On the lawn, kids and adults executed Brazilian *capoeira* moves while an impromptu drumming coterie tapped out muscular rhythms. Nearby, vendors selling tamales and *pupusas* did a brisk trade with Central American and Mexican families who were popping open picnic coolers, while clumps of twentysomethings spread blankets and snogged under the trees.

Half an hour remained before the evening's free entertainment, the Brazilian American soul-funk-samba artist Quetzal Guerrero, was due to step onto the Levitt bandshell and fire up his electric-blue violin. But the atmosphere already suggested a friendly fusion of neighborhood block party and indie nightclub.

"MacArthur Park, it's possibly the most interesting neighborhood in the country right now," said Cota, 29, artistic director of the Levitt Pavilion summer concert series at MacArthur Park as well as the Levitt Pavilion's sister series in Memorial Park Pasadena. "Within a five-mile radius, the number of ethnic cultures and city cultures and subcultures and pop cultures that I have access to is mind-blowing. And it takes one artist to bring all those people together."

Superlatives aside, Cota indeed could make a strong case for the Westlake neighborhood's ethnic wow factor. But what's equally striking about what's happening this summer at MacArthur Park is the range and vitality of the Levitt Pavilion's performers, especially its slate of Latin-alternative and progressive world-music acts such as the Colombian electro-tropical ensemble Bomba Estéreo and the Malian hip-hip folk group SMOD.

The Levitt's lineup in those categories easily ranks among the country's most cutting-edge, drawing hundreds and sometimes thousands of weekend visitors to the city-owned urban oasis just west of downtown.

"The core is Latin and also it's an experimental community," said Cota, who spent several years working in radio station promotions before joining the Levitt organization in 2008. "We just had Nosaj Thing. That to me is very sophisticated music that just happens to be electronic, but there's classical elements, there's jazz elements. It's a very complicated neighborhood, and for that reason complicated music works."

Thanks in part to the Levitt Pavilion series, MacArthur Park's growing reputation as a warm-weather cultural hub has cast a new light on the surrounding area: a blue-collar but gentrifying enclave that's trying to shake off its old image as an after-hours paradise for gangbangers, crack dealers and fake-ID hustlers.

"I think the work Eddie's doing is amazing," said Guerrero, who moved to L.A. from his native Arizona six years ago, "because he's giving a stage for a lot of obscure or outside-of-the-box, outside-of-the-status-quo musicians and artists to really express themselves."

The 6-year-old Levitt series at MacArthur Park and its 10-year-old Pasadena sibling are relative upstarts in Southern California's outdoor concert universe. Unlike the Greek Theatre or Hollywood Bowl, which lean toward familiar names with the proven power to draw, the Levitt series favor artists just surfacing from below the radar. And unlike those venerable venues, the Levitt series are free and open to all comers. So if you're accustomed to VIP parking and luxury-box seating, you're pretty much out of luck.

Or *in* luck, as the case may be. Three weeks ago, at the Quetzal Guerrero show, the attendees sprawled on the grass included not only working-class immigrant families who arrived on foot but also Elizabeth Levitt Hirsch, vice president of the Mortimer Levitt Foundation and daughter of the late custom-shirt magnate Mortimer Levitt and his wife, Mimi, the New York philanthropists whose largesse helps support Levitt pavilions in several cities in addition to those in L.A. and Pasadena.

Each pavilion has its own independent board of directors and must secure additional individual sponsors and grants to meet its financial goals, said Cota, who estimates MacArthur Park's annual budget at \$650,000 and Pasadena's at \$480,000. It's up to Cota, who oversees booking at both sites, to recruit artists who will give each space a separate and distinct identity.

Cota said he pays artists competitively so he can keep up with bidding against clubs such as the Echo, the Troubadour and the Satellite.

Artists who've performed at MacArthur Park say they enjoy playing to audiences that are more demographically diverse than a typical club crowd.

"It's very exciting to see how it's developing," said Levitt Hirsch, who was accompanied by Renee Bodie, executive director for the Levitt Pavilion MacArthur Park. "Eddie has an intuitive sense about how to mix music and community and blend that experience. Eddie will go to every club imaginable and Eddie will go into that underground-DJ, 5-o'clock-in-the-morning experience to hear what's going on so he can be that much ahead of what everybody else is doing."

This summer's MacArthur Park series will continue Sept. 2 with a 7 p.m. show by Dehli 2 Dublin, a Canadian band that mashes up Celtic music, Bhangra, dub, reggae and electronica. Sept. 6 will bring the garage jazz of Killsonic, followed on Sept. 7 by the AfroBeatles, which is just what it sounds like: a hothouse hybrid of beats by Afro-pop pioneer Fela Kuti and tunes by the Fab Four.

On Sept. 8, the Levitt will host a Colombian double bill of electronic-dance artists Palenke Soultribe and Monsieur Periné, a photogenic young gypsy-jazz swing band that Cota recruited after spotting them at the South by Southwest festival in Austin, Texas.

Cota, raised in San Diego by Tijuana-immigrant parents, said that programming Latin and world music doesn't just fit the Levitt's core mission "to reflect the community." More to the point, he believes, Latin culture is becoming the mainstream culture of a city whose population is about half-Latino, plus a recombinant ethnic cocktail of everything else.

"When you go to a La Santa Cecilia show you see everybody dancing — black, white, yellow, brown," Cota said, referring to the neo-folkloric pop ensemble that performed last summer at MacArthur Park. "La Santa Cecilia isn't a Latin band; it's an L.A. band."

Amy Davidman, a booking agent at the Windish Agency who has arranged for several client artists to perform at Levitt MacArthur Park, said Cota and his colleagues have brought much-needed attention to emerging Latin and Latino artists.

"I don't think it takes away from a focus on any other group," Davidman said. "The thing is that the community gets marginalized and not focused on all the time, so I think it's great to put some extra emphasis on that community."

Other local Latin-music advocates echo that assessment. Tomas Cookman, founder-owner of Nacional Records, a North Hollywood-based label that specializes in alternative Latin music, said he thinks "it's really brave of them doing the programming that they have done." Last year the Chilean rapper Ana Tijoux, who records with Nacional, drew more than 2,000 people to MacArthur Park.

"The challenge that they have is that it's still MacArthur Park, and as warm and fuzzy as people may want to try to make it to be, it still can get a little shady at times," Cookman said. "But if you can get beyond that, and I think enough people can, then I think it's great."

Cota said he wants the Levitt Pavilion not only to draw attention to up-and-coming L.A. bands but to let L.A. artists hear the great music the rest of the world is doing and be inspired to raise their own games accordingly.

"I want you to look at my season and see a story of what Los Angeles is," he said. "And I feel like every show is a page in the book."

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