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Star Shines at Shell



PHOTO BY YOSHI JAMES

Homage to cult band's "Third" kicks off Levitt series

By Bob Mehr

The Levitt Shell's 2014 summer season opened Friday night, with a teeming crowd of roughly 4,000 who camped out under clear skies to hear the music of Memphis' greatest cult band Big Star, in a show dedicated to its dark masterpiece, *Third*.

Performed by an all-star troupe of local and national musicians, it was yet another reminder of how the group, critically acclaimed but commercially doomed during their initial run in the early 1970s, has developed into one of the unlikeliest success stories in rock and roll.

The *Third* album — alternately known as *Sister Lovers* — was originally recorded at Midtown's Ardent Studios in the mid-'70s, but vexed the music industry at the time, and was given a belated, minor indie-label release at the end of the decade.

However, the music and myth of *Third* would grow exponentially in the decades to come. When it was finally issued on CD in the early '90s, the record was hailed by Rolling Stone as an "untidy masterpiece ... beautiful and disturbing, pristine and unkempt — and vehemently original."



PHOTO BY YALONDA M. JAMES

Jody Stephens, the only surviving member of the original Big Star group, captures the spirit of Friday's concert at Levitt Shell.

North Carolina musician Chris Stamey had long been enamored of the record and the idea of recreating the *Third* album (along with full string arrangements) live on stage. He was close to realizing a version of the show with a reunited, latter-day Big Star lineup, when the band's camp suffered a series of losses: first, with the passing of *Third* producer Jim Dickinson in 2009, and then the subsequent deaths of singer Alex Chilton and original bassist Andy Hummel in 2010 — leaving drummer Jody Stephens as the group's only survivor. (Band co-founder Chris Bell died in 1978.)

Stamey finally achieved his dream and developed a *Third* concert production that has been staged in U.S. and around the world over the last few years. A logistically complex and expensive show — featuring a dozen musicians, including a chamber orchestra, horn section and guest singers — it took the efforts and backing of the Levitt Shell to bring the project to the city of its inception.

Producer Jim Dickinson once described *Third* as an album rooted in the physical geography of Midtown — its bars, clubs and dark corners. The songs provided an aural journey through a desultory period in Chilton's life, his fraying relationship with then girlfriend Lesa Aldridge and the nighttime world of '70s Midtown.

It was both fitting and strange, then, to hear these fragile, scarred and sometimes poisonous songs played in the heart of Overton Park for an audience of families and children.

With Stamey leading the band, which also included drummer Stephens and guitarist Mitch Easter, the night proved truly extraordinary, a concert that was by turns engaging, heart-rending and awe-inspiring.

Aiding in the effort were past and current members of Chicago post-rock band Wilco, with multi-instrumentalist Pat Sansone and percussionist Ken Coomer coloring the proceedings. The stylish Sansone took lead vocals, delivering an edgy "Kizza Me" and a delicate "Big Black Car."

A collection of local talents including jazz bassist Sam Shoup, and string players Anthony and Daniel Gilbert — relatives of Noel Gilbert, the Memphis Symphony violinist who played on and inspired the title of Third song "Stroke It Noel" — also made their presence felt as part of the house band.

Mostly, though, it was a parade of guest singers — many of them long standing Big Star and Chilton associates — who served as a highlight of the evening. Power-pop veteran Van Duren was particularly sharp on "Nature Boy" and "O Dana."

Others appearing included members of modern day Ardent band Star & Micey and old-school popsters the Scruffs. Lesa Aldridge, the subject and/or inspiration for many of the songs on Third, took the stage, performing a supple rendition of the Velvet Underground's "Femme Fatale."

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Josh Cosby, of Star & Micey, performs during the Orion 2014 free music concert series at Levitt Shell Friday night.

It was the band's lone surviving member, Jody Stephens, who seemed to capture the spirit of the evening best. He was clearly moved and moving in his performances of Big Star classics like "Way Out West" and "Blue Moon."

The opening weekend of the Shell's free concert season will continue on Saturday with a performance from Missouri bluegrass band The Hillbenders, and on Sunday with a show from Memphis native and R&B soul singer Gedeon Luke.

<http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2014/may/23/show-devoted-to-big-stars-third-opens-levitt/>

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