

Jessica Fichot, the HillBenders help show the vitality of free summer concerts around L.A.



L.A.-based singer-songwriter-multi-instrumentalist Jessica Fichot helps kick off the 2017 summer season of free performances at Levitt Pavilion in MacArthur Park and Pasadena. (Andy Sheng)

By **Randy Lewis**

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In this era of the mega-festival, it can be easy to overlook the crucial role that free, small-scale music fests play in our communities. That is, they provide a vital forum for artists operating outside the mainstream and offer a relatively painless way to discover new sounds.

Take Los Angeles singer-songwriter [Jessica Fichot](#) and Springfield, Mo.-based avant-bluegrass band [the HillBenders](#).

Fichot and the HillBenders are booked for the annual series of summer performances this summer at the [Levitt Pavilion concert series](#) in downtown and Pasadena. Fichot will bring her exotic mix of French *chanson*, gypsy jazz, klezmer and retro-pop — the kind that swept through China in the 1930s and '40s — to the MacArthur Park stage on Sunday.

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The HillBenders, meanwhile, are mounting their start-to-finish bluegrass rendition of the Who's rock opera "Tommy" on July 7 in Pasadena.

Fichot's music is a glittering testament to L.A.'s multiculturalism; she brings an art-song sensibility to delightfully catchy tunes, some sung in French, some in English and some in Chinese. Alternating between accordion or toy piano, her support also includes clarinetist-saxophonist Alex Budman, guitarist Adrien Prévost, bassist Ipei Ichimaru and drummer Greg Desgouttes.

"It was only after I moved here and started hearing all these bands that were singing in Spanish, that I got inspired to delve into my own roots and start performing French music," said Fichot, who was born in New York to a French mother and Chinese father.

She was raised in Paris and educated at Boston's prestigious Berklee College of Music, where she earned a degree in audio engineering while also carving out a steady job writing children's songs for English as a Second Language programs.

"I feel like I'm French, but I'm also now an Angeleno because I've been charting my own path here and had most of my success with my first album here," she said, referring to "Le Chemin," the album sung mostly in French that she released in 2007.

She followed it in 2012 with another *chanson*-centric album, "Le Secret," and then shifted gears to pop in the style of Imperialist China of the 1930s with her 2014 EP "Dear Shanghai."

"When I play live shows there's usually quite a mix of languages, up to six or seven," she said. "In terms of how the styles fit, when I'm performing my French *chanson* and Chinese songs from the '40s, those were probably influenced by gypsy jazz and other music for the '20s, '30s and '40s."

Oh, and did we mention she also moonlights composing music for video games?

"People often don't know that musicians can do more than one thing," she said. "I think one of the reasons I got the show at the Levitt is that people who went on my site and saw the information about the children's music I do and thought 'Great, Jessica is a children's performer.'"

Confusion also crops up when the HillBenders apply a banjo, dobro, mandolin, fiddle, upright bass and acoustic guitars to the overture that opens the Who's 1969 magnum opus, "Tommy," which they have rebranded "A Bluegrass Opry."

The act has been touring the show for about two years now.

The show started off as something of an experiment, the band members said backstage in April following a presentation of the work at the Stagecoach Country Music Festival in Indio.

The act has the blessing of the opera's creator.

“Tommy’ just seemed to catch the imaginations of loads of people,” Pete Townshend, the Who’s lead guitarist and chief songwriter told The Times recently. “The latest incarnation is being done by some friends of mine, the HillBenders, who do a really great version of it.”

HillBenders guitarist and operations manager Jim Rea said Townshend is “a real sweet guy, and he’s been nothing but encouraging and supportive to us. We’ve become kind of email pals.”

Translating the story of the deaf and blind kid who plays a mean pinball into acoustic mountain music gave the HillBenders a way to set themselves apart from the crowd.

“We don’t treat it as a joke — we’re not trying to be funny,” said banjo player Mark Cassidy, who spent time as a rapper in Orange County before discovering bluegrass about a decade ago and falling in with Rea, his cousin, bassist Gary Rea, mandolinist Nolan Lawrence and dobro player Chad Graves.

“We’ve always been kind of a black sheep in the bluegrass world,” Jim Rea said. “We don’t know all the traditional songs, and we definitely have more rock ’n’ roll background than so many groups that grew up in the bluegrass tradition. It’s definitely a learn-the-rules-then-you-can-break-them scenario for us.”

Fichot and the HillBenders are fairly representative of the often offbeat performances that fill schedules for free summer concerts around the city. The Levitt shows, with combined 80 performances through August, are the most ambitious in the region, but others, such as [Culver City’s Boulevard Music Festival](#), also bring a broad range of musicians in front of audiences at no charge.

On Saturday the 19-member vibrant musical-theatrical collective Vaud & the Villains launch the season at the Levitt Pasadena, while Malian singer-guitarist [Vieux Farka Toure](#) is on tap Friday at the Levitt in MacArthur Park.

Other highlights for the MacArthur Park series include local punk band the Regrettes (July 6), big-band jazz-meets-reggae act Western Standard Time (July 7), Dos Lobos, a duet with Los Lobos’ two lead singers David Hidalgo and Cesar Rosas (July 15), children’s entertainer Twinkle (July), the New Breed Brass Band (Aug. 5) and L.A. Latin jazz-punk-hip-hop group Buyepongo (Aug. 10).

“There could be somebody who would never, ever, ever see us who comes to these shows, and we hope to connect with them, said the HillBenders’ Jim Rea. “They might take a picture, post a video and one by one those people add up over the years.”

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