

New Life for a Grand Old Theater

Downtown Miami's Gusman Center will host a summer concert series -- for free!

Written by Erik Bojnansky - BT Senior Writer

Downtown Miami residents and visitors will soon be able to enjoy free concerts *and* help support the continuing operation of a historic landmark that's under new management.

The free monthly DWNTWN Miami Concert Series will kick off a new summer session in May at the Olympia Theater at the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts, located at 174 E. Flagler St.

Since 2009, the original DWNTWN concerts, sponsored by Miami's Downtown Development Authority (DDA), have attracted big crowds and musical guests such as the Spin Doctors, Arturo Sandoval, the Jake and Elwood Blues Brothers Revue, the Spam Allstars, and various other jazz, rock, reggae, and R&B acts to Bayfront Park's Tina Hills Pavilion. But owing to the summer swelter, the outdoor concerts are only held from October to April. (On January 13 at 6:00 p.m., three local groups will appear: rappers ArtOfficial, the reggae-fusion band Jahfé, and the Afro-Colombian electronic group Afro Kumbé.)



Gusman executive director Margaret Lake: "We're incredibly excited." BT photo by Silvia Ros

"In order to continue year-round, we're partnering with the Gusman Center," explains Javier Betancourt, deputy director of the DDA, a taxpayer-funded organization tasked with promoting the downtown area's economic development.

Giving the partnership a big boost is a \$100,000 grant from the Knight Foundation. The grant, to be released over the next three years, requires a matching investment, so the DDA is putting another \$100,000 toward the summer series.

The popular outdoor DWNTWN concert series will move indoors during the summer.

Some of that anticipated \$200,000 will be flowing toward the Gusman itself. The DDA will be renting its 1567-seat Olympia Theater at a rate still to be determined.

Margaret Lake, the theater's executive director, says she suggested years ago that the DDA hold a few of their events at the Gusman. She's thrilled the agency has taken her advice. "This gives Gusman the opportunity to host an audience that may not have been inside the theater before, so we're incredibly

excited,” Lake says in an e-mail to the *BT*.

The theater can certainly use the money and publicity, especially after having lost a prominent benefactor: the City of Miami.

Built in 1926 and originally known as the Paramount Movie House, which screened silent films, the facility is acoustically superb and visually spectacular, with the concert hall designed as an ornate courtyard, complete with turrets and towers and a dome of night sky featuring twinkling stars and drifting clouds.

In 1975, its owner, Maurice Gusman, donated the theater and its adjoining office building to the City of Miami, on the condition that it be managed by the Miami Parking Authority, a semi-autonomous agency. Gusman reportedly insisted on this arrangement in hopes of shielding the theater from the city’s political machinations.

At the time, philanthropist Mitchell Wolfson, a friend of Gusman, chaired the parking authority’s board of directors. City officials contributed one-third of the theater’s \$1.4 million annual operating budget but could not designate how those funds were spent.

Last year Miami officials announced the city was no longer able to afford the Gusman’s \$475,000 annual subsidy. To keep the theater open, the MPA and city turned over the Gusman to Olympia Center Inc., a nonprofit formed by Herman Echevarria, a former Hialeah city councilman who owns the BVK/Meka advertisement agency.

Aside from managing the theater, Olympia Center, Inc. also solicits donations for the venue, a job that was once reserved for Friends of the Gusman, a 27-year-old charity.

This past October, Olympia Center “took over all financial responsibility for the theater,” explains Lake, adding that, so far, the new managers have risen to the challenge. “We are on track for our first year’s goal of \$500,000 and expect to exceed our goals,” she declares.

However, the Gusman needs to tap a variety of funding sources, she adds: “The Gusman’s present and future is not only dependent on donations, grants, and subsidies, but most importantly income that comes from the rental of the theater.”

So it’s no surprise Lake is grateful the DDA will be using the Gusman during the summer, an off-season period when fundraising and events are scarce, thanks to the heat and the threat of hurricanes. “The theater will benefit from the rental income, in addition to the concession sales and potential donations to



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the theater,” she notes.

Lake expects the concert series to help neighboring businesses as well. “These are free events to the public, but we can be assured there will be money spent downtown,” she says, citing a recent report by Americans for the Arts, which states that patrons of nonprofit arts and cultural events spend \$27.79 per person above the cost of admission nationwide. “A patron attending an arts event may pay to park the car in a garage, purchase dinner at a restaurant, eat dessert after the show, and return home to pay the babysitter,” Lake explains. “This generates related commerce for local businesses such as restaurants, parking garages, hotels, and retail stores.”

This isn’t the first time the Knight Foundation has supported the DWNTWN Miami Concert Series. In 2009 the DDA received \$150,000 from the foundation’s Knight Arts Challenge, a program that hands out matching grants to organizations and individuals for arts programs that benefit the local community.

Betancourt, the DDA’s deputy director, confirms that the Bayfront concert series attracted crowds to surrounding businesses as well as restaurants and shops across the street. He says the summer season at the Gusman can help “activate the Flagler Street corridor.”

Supporters of the Gusman have been applying for Knight Arts Challenge grants every year since the program was created in 2006. In 2010, Friends of Gusman snagged a \$100,000 arts challenge grant for a “theater rental subsidy fund” that will give up to five local arts companies priority booking for rehearsals and performance.

This year the Gusman was among 56 finalists contending for a \$100,000 grant for a “battle of the bands” event that was to be co-produced by Sweat Records, a Little Haiti-based independent music store and coffee lounge. In the end, however, Battle of the Bands wasn’t among the 31 ideas to receive grants from the foundation’s \$3 million pot of funding.

So what sort of acts will the DDA book at Gusman? That’s still being considered. “It’s a little early to have the bands lined up yet,” Betancourt says, although he’s sure the lineup will include a mix of local and national acts performing in a variety of musical genres, just like the rest of the concert series.

Another challenge Betancourt notes is that, unlike Bayfront Park, the Olympic Theater has limited seating. “We’re going to have to figure out some kind of ticketing feature,” he says. Such tickets, he adds, will likely be issued on a first-come, first-served basis.

For more information on the concert series, visit www.dwntwnmiamiconcertseries.com.