

Martin, Brickell and dazzling fiddler delight fans



Steve Martin and the Steep Canyon Rangers featuring Edie Brickell played to a sold-out showroom Out. 5 in Stateline. Photo/Provided

By Kim Wyatt

STATELINE – A few minutes into the finale, “Auden’s Train,” I wondered if Nicky Sanders had sold his soul – the Steep Canyon Rangers’ fiddler stole the show at the MontBleu showroom Saturday night. Mashing up songs from “Norwegian Wood” to the “Nutcracker Suite March” and bluegrass is no small feat, and it’s the song I wanted to track down long after the curtain fell.

Despite the headliners being Steve and Edie (this joke almost seems intentional), the sold-out show should have been billed Steve and Nicky. Steve Martin and the Steep Canyon Rangers featuring Edie Brickell in An Evening of Comedy and Music played a tight, funny 90-minute show to an appreciative audience of fans old and new. But it was the fiddler on fire who carried the 14-song set featuring classics and freshly penned tunes alike.

Martin kicked off the night by welcoming in the crowd at MontBleu in his best Inspector Clouseau accent – MontBleu does sound better when said this way – taking note of the median age of the audience. Noting he'd first played in Tahoe 40 years ago, he said it was good to see them again. "There are lots of familiar faces in the crowd, and I'm not kidding," he joked. There was no shortage, however, of bearded young men, facial piercings and fedoras. Some came for the comedian, others for the music, and all got their money's worth at a smokin' hot show, punctuated by a cool Brickell.

After a round of jokes, Martin and the five-man bluegrass band Steep Canyon Rangers blasted into "Katie Mae," a number that allowed each band member to showcase his instrument, including a memorable mandolin jam by Mike Guggino. Rousing tunes followed in which each musician had a chance to shine: Woody Platt providing luxurious vocals and guitar, Graham Sharp on the five-string banjo, Charles R. Humphrey III on the upright bass rounding out the band.

Martin and friends ran through songs from Martin's solo Grammy-winning album "The Crow" and "Rare Bird Alert," recorded with Steep Canyon Rangers, who met at a party in North Carolina four years ago, about the same time Martin began to play the banjo professionally. The pace was raucous, broken up only by Martin's comedic banter, and it was as welcome as the tunes.

His humor was topical: Divining messages from his "banjo tuner," Martin claimed to receive an email stating, "They just turned off Niagara Falls," referring to the government shutdown. Some of the heartiest laughs of the evening came during the tune, "Atheists Don't Have No Songs" – a Martin-penned nod to the influence of gospel in bluegrass – "They'll never sing a song of faith/In their songs, they always have a rule/Their 'he' is always lowercase."

Wearing suits like accountants at a hoedown, Martin led the

Rangers in toe-tapping, hand-clapping fun. Against a line-up of banjos, guitars and seldom-used stools, these cats worked it. When Martin excused himself for a beer from the standing bass that doubled as a refrigerator, the Rangers held their own with divine vocals that got some of the biggest applause of the night.

Martin is no slouch as a musician, showing range on Scruggs-style and clawhammer tunes, and particularly worthy on a duo with Sanders, homage to banjo great Earl Scruggs called the "Fiddle and Banjo." This crowd loved this number, with many in the audience unable to take their eyes off master fiddler Sanders.

The entrance of Brickell, previously with the New Bohemians, was understated. The Texas-native's songwriting prowess is the foundation of her collaboration with Martin; the pair just released an album, "Love Has Come For You." Performed to enthusiastic audience, the title track featured a rootsy vocal that sounded straight from the holler, and the haunting "Remember Me This Way" showcased Brickell at her melancholy best.

But back to the fiddler on fire.

As the band crested "Auden's Train," – yes, homage to W.H. Auden, and to trains – band members crowded to the right of the stage opposite Sanders, seemingly in awe of his heat, building to a standing ovation, followed an encore with two numbers that brought another standing O.

Even though the jokes were polished to a fine grain, Martin delivered them as if for the first time, making it feel like an intimate jam session. The blend of stellar musicianship and comedy made this a show to remember, and not to be missed if this train passes through again.

Martin, upon bidding adieu to MontBleu as Inspector Clouseau, agreed, as the group claimed the International Bluegrass

Association Entertainer of the Year Award in 2011.

“If you didn’t enjoy the show tonight, you’re wrong.”

He was right. I’ve never seen such a happy crowd file out of the MontBleu showroom. When asked of what could have made this show better, one concert attendee said, “A dance floor!”