

Bruno Mars shakes up Lake Tahoe

By Kim Wyatt

STATELINE – If there is a population explosion in Tahoe nine months from now, Bruno Mars is to blame. The charismatic showman and his fantastic band delivered a romance-drenched retro pop fest to devotees young and old Aug. 14 at Harveys Lake Tahoe Outdoor Arena.

In Mars' Tahoe debut, he put on the kind of joyous, sexy show that's sure to spark sales and grow new fans. The stripped-down stage, reminiscent of "Soul Train," ensured that the front man and his stellar musicians were front and center the entire evening, and their smooth choreographed dance moves conjured the Jackson Five at their infectious best.

The Moonshine Jungle Tour showcased songs from Mars' second album, the double-platinum "Unorthodox Jukebox," including the hits "Locked Out of Heaven" and "Treasure." With only two albums behind him, Mars has created already a bestselling body of work, with five No. 1 singles. It doesn't hurt that the songs are all great when performed live, perhaps even better.



Bruno Mars with his band the Hooligans deliver a sexy, high-energy show Aug. 14 at Harveys. Photos/Kim Wyatt

And Bruno delivered. Born and raised in Hawaii by a family of musicians, the singer-songwriter has amassed quite a following, with many in the full house singing along to every song. Mars' faithful fans swooned, arms in the air, as if they were at a revival. It's a good time for an earnest singer-songwriter who croons about love and heartbreak without irony – maybe every generation needs one.

Mars' 13-song set was funk, R&B, Motown and pop-infused. I heard the influences of James Brown, the Police, Earth, Wind & Fire and the Bee Gees. But rather than sound like something old, the songs sounded like something new. Mars' eight-man band, the Hooligans, matched him step-by-step. This hardworking group had a great time and it was contagious. The high-stepping lineup of horn players and funk guitarists made great music look easy, right down to their '70s stylings. A few of them even seemed to be wearing polyester slacks, or some kind of miracle fabric that emphasized their swiveling hips and musculature.

Speaking of fashion, this was a well-appointed, fedora-wearing

crowd. Seriously, there were a lot of fedoras, even on children. Maxi-dresses and makeup were more Miami than mountain girl, and I saw several clean-shaven young men sporting tiny pompadours getting their groove on. Mars, wearing a Panama hat and shiny penny loafers sans socks, offered a straight-up, genuine connection with the audience and his band, stopping several times to chat up the crowd, encouraging lovers to love one another, and to let the band take care of the rest.



Bruno Mars delivers like a veteran musician.

“Tahoe, it’s time to get your freak on,” Mars cajoled, and many gladly obliged.

Mars’ energy never flagged, not after executing flawless dance moves, wailing on an electric guitar, or performing emotional vocals. Is there anything Mars’ can’t do? If so, we weren’t aware of it at this show. The encore featured two of his most popular numbers, “Locked Out of Heaven” and “Gorilla,” my least favorite song in his oeuvre. While Mars’ music is known more for its sincerity and pop hooks than its depth, the lyrics of this song never fail to make me laugh or cringe, depending on the day. I think it’s supposed to be Prince-like, but ... no. It’s too bad because I like the tune. I’m probably not the intended demographic. I did see several young women in the audience clutching stuffed gorillas.

Norwegian duo Nico & Vinz – they called themselves “Afro-Vikings” – primed the crowd with good vibrations and infectious pop, the kind of music you want to listen to in the summer with an umbrella in your drink. They ended their set with their hit, “Am I Wrong,” to the delight of a sing-along audience. It’s a real treat when an unknown opening group turns out to be so charming and talented, and a great introduction to what turned out to be masterful show.

It will be fun to see what Bruno Mars does next. In the meantime, having a little soul doesn’t hurt, and the world could use more love. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m off to buy a polyester suit.