

J.T. proves how sweet of a musician he is



James Taylor on July 13 proves why he has been a musical icon for decades. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

STATELINE – It was as if Tahoe found a friend this summer with long-time Grammy award-winning singer, guitarist, songwriter James Taylor, who showered the crowd at the Harveys outdoor concert Wednesday night with his love of music.

Aside from a triple encore capped off by one overzealous fan barely crawling on stage to hug him, Taylor – who has spent more than half a century making music – chatted often July 13 with the concertgoers who he referred to as “an outstanding audience.”

“Fire and Rain,” “Don’t Let Me Be Lonely,” “Walking Man,” “Mexico,” “Your Smiling Face,” “Sweet Baby James ” – J.T., as he’s often referred to, cranked out hit after hit as promised when he held up a board of the agenda on “some type of roofing material” before the 20 minute “intermission.” He told the enthusiastic attendees up clapping, yelling and dancing he didn’t understand the need for the break as he simply would stand behind the curtain and wait while looking at his watch. But that might have been the one white lie of the evening.

Instead, Taylor came down from the stage to autograph items for the throng of fans who swarmed him like a bee target. Two who got lucky enough to wedge into the small crowd at the stage both told Lake Tahoe News, they were “still shaking” from the encounter.

“This is my eighth concert of his,” Renee Rylander said, beaming from ear to ear. The Los Gatos resident who at 69 is one year older than Taylor got the singer to sign her album.

“I’m a huge fan. I’ve been with him from the beginning,” Terry Richardson said, while holding up her autographed J.T. hat. The Murphys resident saw Taylor in 1969 at the Mariposa Folk Festival where Taylor performed with the likes of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan and Joanie Mitchell.

Taylor is known for his big-time collaborations, including meeting his manager Peter Asher when he moved to London in the late 1960s as Asher took a job at Beatles label Apple Records. He would later work with Paul McCartney and George Harrison of the landmark band. Harrison’s classic “Something” was inspired by “Something in the Way She Moves,” a sentimental ballad by Taylor, who at the time was the only non-British artist on the label.

One of the most well-known collaborations Taylor cultivated was with longtime friend Carole King, who wrote “You’ve Got a Friend” -- a massive hit that earned Taylor his first of five

Grammies in 1972 for Best Pop Vocal Performance in the Male category. King won for Song of the Year. The "Mud Slide Slim and the Blue Horizon" album it was produced on sold 2.5 million copies.

King, who is undergoing a career resurgence of her own with a Broadway hit "Beautiful" that chronicles her life and tenure as a songwriter, worked alongside Taylor in their early days of performing at the Troubadour nightclub in Los Angeles.

Taylor also performed the Drifters hit "Up on the Roof," which King wrote, to a swaying, almost-entranced audience.

With "You've Got a Friend," a resounding "awe" was heard from the crowd when Taylor launched the sentimental tune, which ideally fit with the nostalgic, friendly atmosphere and picture-perfect warm Lake Tahoe summer night.

"It's beautiful here," the multi-dimensional folk-jazz-rock-pop-blues artist said. Taylor would often close his eyes and shake his head to feel the music, as if never tiring of what might appear to be hundreds if not thousands of performances of each song.

With the help of a high-powered ensemble of singers and musicians behind him, Taylor as a gentle soul delivered a take-me-back-in-time collection of songs meant to inspire and cherish.

The North Carolina native gave a heartfelt rendition of "Carolina in My Mind," which signified how homesick he was in England when the door was opening to a huge music career with timeless pieces through the years.

Taylor understood what the audience wanted to do – to be transported through those decades with the songs that forced them to reflect back on their own lives, and Taylor largely obliged often chatting it up with the crowd in a very personable way.

"I know you didn't come here for any god damn new music. But the new ones just sound like the old ones," Taylor said as the audience laughed. He pledged the new music such as the touching third encore "You and I Again" about love and aging would be performed quickly like the act of ripping away a Band-Aid.

Taylor's music explains a lot about his life – and that of his fans.

Before launching "Country Road," he insisted that through the years it's been "nature as my church" and poked fun at his self-proclaimed "country-hippie bulls-." With a beauty backdrop of Lake Tahoe, the audience bellowed and applauded at the notion of living for the power of nature and beautiful views. He grew up in the rural part of North Carolina.

But Taylor's been around. He also performed "Angels of Fenway," providing a sentimental explanation of the story that inspired the song about the Boston Red Sox baseball team. After enduring the curse of the MLB team trading the legendary Babe Ruth, the Red Sox would undergo an 86-year drought before winning another World Series. When they came from the brink to win it in 2004, the curse was lifted. The song was written about a Boston Globe photo showing a note on a tombstone of a grandmother who never gave up hope her beloved Sox would do it again. The note read "Congratulations Grandma. We finally did it."

Incidentally, Taylor performed the "Star Spangled Banner" at Game 2 of the monumental World Series.

The melodic music of the singer-songwriter – who often just relied on his acoustic guitar to carry his tunes to the masses – is designed to soothe the savage beast of a cynical, violent, troubling world.

At one point, Taylor relied on the harmonic melody of his back up band to belt out a tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. He was

also joined by an accentuating performance by back-up singer Arnold McCuller for "Shower the People."

A class act, Taylor would periodically introduce the 10 other performers backing him up and giving individual credit when due. There was Luis Conte of Cuba, who played the bongos as if running a reggae band. Joining McCuller on vocals was Andrea Zonn – who provided beautiful accompaniments on violin – as well as Kate Markowitz coming off the success of her "Map of the World" album. Steve Gadd played drums like a "big rock" percussionist, while Walt Fowler offered up the jazzy feel with his trumpet.

Taylor also singled out bluesy saxophone player Lou Marini, who came from the original "Saturday Night Live" band. On his teal-colored electric guitar he called "pretty," Taylor joined him and the rest of the ensemble in the high-energy nightclub-rocking tune "Steamroller Blues."

With every turn and every tune, the audience seemed impressed with what they were witnessing.

The crowd even played a part in the second encore.

"I hope Tahoe can sing," Taylor belted out to urge the thousands in attendance to help him take on "How Sweet It Is," a song he performed with ex-wife singer Carly Simon.

The Harveys Outdoor Summer Concert Series continues with rock duo Sting and Peter Gabriel tonight; country great Tim McGraw on July 23; former Eagles lead man Don Henley on July 24; country singer Keith Urban on July 27 and 29; ex-Commodores lead man Lionel Richie on Aug. 13; rock band Steve Miller on Aug. 18; red rocker Sammy Hagar on Aug. 26; and soul-pop singer Stevie Wonder on Sept. 2.