

Etheridge's lyrics continue to resonate with fans

By Susan Wood

SPARKS – From her gritty heartland rock to the resurging heartfelt soul, Melissa Etheridge's love of her craft has stood the test of time.

It shows in concert when she switches guitars, engages her audience with a wink, a nod and a roll of the eyes as well as those times she belts out those confessional lyrics with that signature raspy voice.

Once again, she proved it in front of hundreds of adoring fans at the Nugget Saturday night in Sparks with a four-member band. At one point near the end, the singer-guitarist-songwriter clad in blue jeans and a black leather coat even joined the drummer with synchronized percussion.

Always dancing to her own drummer, Etheridge from the opener to the end gave the audience a taste of her diversity between light beams on stage with a few classics like "Hold On, I'm Coming" off her current album "Memphis Rock and Soul," a follow up to the more contemporary "This is M.E." compilation.

"I have so much music to play for you tonight," she said, with a coy smile in the beginning.

And the crowd reciprocated, raising phones to chronicle the moments. Throughout the night, many rocked out with abandon when she knocked out some of her biggest hits "I'm the Only One," "The Way I Do," "Come to My Window," "I Want to Come Over," "Resist," "If I Wanted To" and her career-launching "Bring Me Some Water."

With the help of good acoustics, the concert was delightfully

refreshing and certainly nostalgic. After all, Etheridge is more than a singer in these last 30 years.



Melissa Etheridge delights hundreds of fans at the Sparks Nugget on July 29.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

She's a songwriter with 15 Grammy Award nominations – winning two in 1993 and 1995. She's an accomplished guitarist, who can lay down the blues to accompany the searing rock anthems she's known for. She's a no-holds-barred activist, who has collaborated with other artists and organizations ranging from her contributions to gay causes and participation in the environmental movement. The latter led to an Academy Award for Best Original Song "I Need to Wake Up" for Al Gore's documentary "An Inconvenient Truth."

All of this is a far cry from those young days at age 8 when she first started strumming the guitar in Leavenworth, Kansas.

I wondered if she expected the extent of success and fame, so I asked her in an interview before the Sparks concert.

"That was the dream growing up, but it certainly was not what I thought it would be," she told *Lake Tahoe News*.

I saw her play at the 3772 Club in Pasadena.

“Yeah, but back then we called it Vermie’s,” she said, snickering.

It was the mid-1980s. She sat on a stool with a microphone and a guitar in front of about 30 people. I couldn’t understand it. People were talking over her, and I kept urging them to be quiet. They didn’t realize they were witnessing the early stages of musical greatness.

Etheridge met a record executive through a friendship at that tiny bar.

I also followed her outdoors.

During the West Coast Women’s Music Festival in the mid-80s outside Yosemite National Park, the announcer took the stage to announce “a special treat” of a performer. When the announcer yelled “Melissa,” most in the few thousand gathered didn’t know who she was.

But after that, I’m sure they remembered who they saw. She belted out “Piece of My Heart” in pure Janis Joplin style. The audience went crazy.

Her career hit full throttle.

And in the midst of it, I witnessed it again at the 5,000-seat arena of the Harveys Outdoor Summer Concert Series about a decade ago.

There’s only one Melissa. She has such a sense of a longing spirit. She is someone who knows the fragile state of love, writing about the angst like a poet. She also provides the impression of someone who would overcome life’s hard knocks. This especially became apparent when she was diagnosed with breast cancer about a dozen years ago.

But don’t call her a survivor.

"I'm a thriver," she told *Lake Tahoe News*. "I never thought I would be battling anything other than myself."

It makes sense. Much of her chronicling her music history Saturday night involved "redemption and resurrection." She sings it because she lived it – through failed relationships that have taken her on a journey leading to the best time of all. She's content, married with children, and still playing her music.

Indeed, she gets her strength from internal forces – but gives it out externally to others.

"I'm downright happy," she said. "I'm proud of my life's choices. They weren't always the best choices. But they're the best I could ask for."

This is what they mean by "live and learn."

She gravitates toward the intimacy of the smaller venues, recalling with affection those early days before being discovered. But the party and ride have been fun along the way.

"I've done it all. There's certainly a joy when playing to 30,000 people, but there's certainly a distance," she said.

She keeps touring because the opportunities arise, declaring her favorite venues are in Amsterdam, Montreal and Chicago, but she would agree to play in Lake Tahoe again.

Then, there are personal reasons.

"I've had two marriages and four children," she said, hinting at the financial aspect.

"This is what I love to do," she said, further admitting to having no plans "to slow down."

As long as she continues to approach new projects and more

opportunity for music exploration to match her life's exploration, she intends to chug along and fight the good fight.

Her music catalog spans 13 albums since 1988.

The compilations exemplify times in her life, and she touched on those times by addressing the crowd on July 29 with an understanding of getting your heart ripped out such as the stirring "Stronger Than Me" from the aptly named "Breakdown" album of 2000.

Throughout the highly personal setbacks and challenges, Etheridge has always used her life's experiences as an opportunity to professionally share insight.

She even used a selfie stick to record her audience connection.

"Say hi to Twitter," she yelled to the crowd, adding her extra fascination with Northern Nevada: "This is Reno Sparkssssss."

She left with the most obvious words of wisdom from a life bent on peaks and valleys.

"Choose love, spread peace," she called out.

Melissa Etheridge continues her musical journey, playing tonight at the California State Fair and onto the legendary Fillmore concert hall in San Francisco Aug. 1.