

Trumpeter Botti takes audience's breath away



Caroline Campbell's violin complements Chris Botti's trumpet on Oct. 28 at Harrah's Lake Tahoe. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

STATELINE – It was nothing short of phenomenal.

Armed with an all-star ensemble of accomplished musicians who could seize the stage on their own, Chris Botti showed an enthusiastic Harrah's South Shore Room crowd that live jazz is anything but dead.

Botti is a rock star on the trumpet, taking the audience on a journey Saturday night through his compilations including his landmark "Night Sessions" 2001 album, signature jazz collection of 2003's "A Thousand Kisses Deep" and his latest "Impressions" assortment from 2013.

"It's so nice to be back," Botti told the crowd Oct. 28, while referring to the trip from New York as a "planes, trains and

automobiles” exercise.

“It makes all the long mornings and layovers go away,” he said in appreciation as he launched into an unforgettable evening of music composition.



The intimacy of the South Shore Room is ideal for Chris Botti and his jazz ensemble. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The jazz musician has played at Lake Tahoe before. Once he collaborated with jazz great Diana Krall on the piano in the Harveys Outdoor Concert Series. And years ago, he was one of saxophonist Dave Koz’s friends at the Hyatt in Incline Village.

Hands down, the intimate South Shore Room has turned out to be the best venue.

For it was not only Botti doing his magnificent renditions of jazz classics on the trumpet that made the event, it was what he didn’t do.

He often stepped back and let his stand-alone musicians demonstrate their undaunted dedication to their craft. To that, the crowd screamed and lunged to its feet on several

occasions – a somewhat uncharacteristic reaction to either classical concerts or jazz music performances.

Caroline Campbell's heart-stopping solo evolution from classical violin to country fiddle and onto Led Zeppelin's classic "Kashmir" rock fantasy dropped jaws.

In his introduction, Botti referred to her medley as an "opus jam." Then he stepped aside as Campbell transitioned from a soft sway with her violin to bouncing with an upbeat blue grass number.

Campbell, who's collaborated with the likes of opera great Andrea Bocelli, even interrupted her own performance to address the cheering enthusiasts who rose to their feet. One man in front imitated a cowboy roping when she broke into a fiddle sound. She scurried to the microphone and declared that "classical audiences don't usually whoop," adding: It's nice," she said, smiling.

And with a few flips of her long blonde hair, a steely look came over her face. From there, the predominantly baby boomer crowd instantly identified the legendary tune from one of America's greatest rock bands. It was like she was channeling Jimmy Page and Robert Plant.

"Way to bring it," Botti said, acknowledging Campbell's greatness.

Up to that point, the accomplished violinist had graced the showroom early alongside Botti's trumpet with sentimental jazz classics such as "When I Fall in Love," onto his signature "The Look of Love" and adding on Roberta Flack's well known "For All We Know." The melancholy of the sound based on the band's harmonious beauty was tear-welling. The performance represented dinner party meets sleepy jazz club meets billboard rock stage.

By captivating the stage with Botti, pianist Taylor Eigsti,

guitarist Leonardo Amuedo, bassist Richie Goods, keyboardist Rachel Eckroth and drummer Lee Pearson, Campbell was in good company that night.

Pearson also put on a nimble show of his own, tucking a drumstick under his armpit as he played and taking his superior percussion skills to the floor. He even played his drum set with his hands in a performance that could have competed with Iron Butterfly's most famous solo.

Botti had warned the crowd of the risk taking when he described his drummer's skills as capable of taking him "over a cliff" because of the degree of difficulty.

"It depends how he's feeling," Botti said. The audience laughed, and Pearson reaffirmed that attendees should brace themselves.



Sy Smith's vocal range is off the charts. Photo/Kathryn Reed

In what Botti referred to as his "Rubik's Cube of all-star" band members, guitarist Amuedo competed with Campbell and the quick-fingered Eigsti on the piano for solos that provided an emotional crescendo.

Amuedo accomplished such a task with his stirring rendition of the late Leonard Cohen's classic "Hallelujah." The trumpet-guitar-piano combo continued with the jazzy "Venice" off the "Impressions" album, compiled as an international testament to romantic melodies.

And as if all this wasn't take-your-breath-away enough, the music morphed into vocals when singer Sy Smith walked down the aisle for a few sets. Her vocal range appeared unbelievably

angelic at times.

She had the audience roaring with her singing and dancing to "Let's Stay Together," the blockbuster rhythm and blues hit recorded by Al Green and then Tina Turner.

The seemingly quick one and a half hours quieted down with Botti's encore fave – "My Funny Valentine," the legendary 1954 jazz classic performed by Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald that the trumpeter remade famous on his brass instrument almost a half century later.