

Sacramento musician transitions from playing The Piano Man to singing the piano man's greatest hits with Joel: The Band

February 8, 2020



Joel: The Band lead singer Kyle Martin figures he's always had some sort of personal connection to Billy Joel. While a huge fan of the "Piano Man" growing up in Sacramento, Martin was more into the music that came from church services, and not so much pop music outside church.

In an interview by phone, Martin looked forward to performing at the Lucky 7 Casino Feb.14, while ticking off little coincidences that kept sneaking their way into his life, tying him to the pop-music icon.

"My dad had a friend in high school who ended up a writer for 'Bosom Buddies.' My family listened to the theme song every time it came on, 'My Life' by Billy Joel," Martin said of the 80s sitcom starring Tom Hanks. "My family listened to Joel as well. And, my son's name is Joel, totally coincidental."

Then, of course, there was the two-year period Martin played the Piano Man himself in the touring Broadway show “Moving Out” from 2007-09.

He was the one planted firmly at the piano, not one of the high-flying dancers throughout the production.

“If I was a dancer, the show would have been canceled in a week,” Martin joked.

And since 2009, Martin has been fronting Joel: The Band, the “best cover band on the West Coast,” according to the Sacramento News & Review, playing Billy Joel hits “as they were originally intended,” according to the band’s Facebook page.

So, in essence, not even six degrees of separation between Martin and Joel. Not a bad career trajectory for a music pastor, teaching voice lessons on the side in 2007, until a friend convinced him to submit a demo to a casting company for “Moving Out.”

“I had no idea what I was in for with ‘Moving Out,’ whether it was on ice or a dinner theater,” Martin said. “But it was amazing, life-changing. We performed in 48 out of 50 states.”

When he was ready to come home at the end of 2009, he hooked up with another friend at church with experience in the music industry, guitarist Jerry White.

“He said, ‘We need to do a band.’ Jerry’s the ‘smoother’ of the band. He had a lot of connections,” Martin said. “He knew a lot of players, and I was like, wow, I’m in awe.”

With his extensive career as a guitarist, Martin said White recruited other session players with equally impressive resumes — Larry Hart on bass played with Montrose and Eddie Money; drummer Tony Providence performed with Prince and Stevie Wonder; and on saxophone, they brought in three-time, Grammy-nominated Jeff Teczon.

They then capitalized on Martin’s experience as the Piano Man in “Moving Out” to play Billy Joel’s greatest hits for Joel: The Band, which he considers a cover band, rather than a tribute band.

“Tribute implies there’s outfits and stuff,” Martin explained. “We do a more cover performance that’s true to the music, a full-on authentic show. The most authentic on the West Coast.”

Martin said they’ve since toured across the country, hitting intimate locations like the Lucky 7 Casino, as well as theaters and stadiums.

“The Catalina Wine Mixer we just played was awesome,” he said. “Plus, we just signed in May last year to be Disney Parks official Billy Joel Cover Band.”

Martin said it’s not easy narrowing down to a two-hour show songs from a playlist that spans four decades.

“Plus he also has 31 number 1 hits, which makes it even more difficult,” Martin said. “So we try to pick the biggest crowd-pleasers. We also try to showcase each member of the band.”

He said a lot of Joel's songs are very saxophone rich, like "New York State of Mind" and "Just the Way You Are," while other songs are incredibly difficult, like "Angry Young Man" and "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant."

They also like to throw in his high-energy 80s hits, like "Uptown Girl," "Tell Her About It" and "Big Shot.

"It's a very high-energy show, from beginning to end. We get quite the reaction from the audience," he said.

Martin added what makes the performances stand out and remain fresh after more than a decade together is the band's camaraderie.

"We have an amazing group of players," he said. "There's just a different dynamic with this band. It's not only filled with exceptional players; each player brings a whole new spin and energy to a Billy Joel song. We're cohesive, a band of brothers. We're not just bandmates, we're close friends."

If you like what you hear, he seeks your nomination for SN&R 2020 Sammies awards for Best Cover/Tribute Band. Vote online at <https://go.newsreview.com/sammies/award/5/sammies-2020-nominee>.

Joel: The Band performs 7 p.m. Feb. 14 at the Lucky 7 Event Center, 350 North Indian Rd., in Smith River. Tickets are \$20 and are available online at <https://conta.cc/2GU4W5p>.