

Zac Brown Band serves it up big and satisfies

By CHRIS BRADSHAW

Monday, January 30, 2012

Southwest Florida got served some chicken-fried splendor last Friday night when Zac Brown Band and pals rolled into a sold out Germain Arena. The place was abuzz, inside and out — before, during and after.

The show appetizers were in the form of a hardheaded old soul, Nic Cowan, and a firecracker named Sonia Leigh (both are signed to Zac Brown's record label). If someone told the Lakeland-born Leigh she wasn't the headliner, she must've forgotten. She and her band delivered a fiery set, including the soul'n bluesy "I Just Might" and the more up-tempo "My Name Is Money" before closing with a few rockin' bars of Led Zeppelin's "Moby Dick."

Ten minutes before Zac Brown Band took to a stage with gorgeous lighting, recorded images of him on video screens drew wild cheers. When the huge white curtain finally dropped revealing the main course, the place went nuts (that would be pecans, of course, for the Georgia-based Brown).

With their sleeves rolled up, the boys went to work and made it look like so much fun.

While Zac Brown Band may be pegged as a country band, its sound is much broader: I heard blues and bluegrass, rock and funk. They reached for the hearts with beautiful, and at times, intricate, compositions with big harmonies like "Quiet Your Mind" and "Free." And they poked funny bones with "Sic 'Em On a Chicken" and the life-is-good hit "Toes."

That the word 'Band' appears after Zac Brown is no wonder. These guys cook. Fiddler Jimmy De Martini had a smokin' bow during his solo for the clap-and-stomp-along "Whiskey's Gone." Guitarist and vocalist Clay Cook grabbed lead vocals for the first of four encores, a pristine cover of Marshall Tucker Band's "Can't You See." He tore up the guitar solo on it, too.

The band also performed a catchy new song, "The Day That I Die," from its forthcoming album. In it, Brown asserts "I hope they find me in my home with my guitar in my hands."

Brown's stage chat between songs was just enough (his music does the talking). He acknowledged that all in attendance spent some hard-earned money to get tickets for the show, adding, "Thank you for letting us do what we do."

He also extinguished a tussle in the stage left pit area with a sprinkle of Southern candor, imploring those engaged to work it out or hug it out before they get kicked out.

The dessert on this fine meal? Simply knowing that a surging artist like this will be around and giving for a long time. How sweet it is.



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