

## In Service to the Music: Marty Stuart & His Fabulous Superlatives

By Deborah Crooks  
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Marty Stuart is a musician's musician. That is, the five-time Grammy winner (enough said, right there, yes?), and Grand Ole Opry member is an exceptionally accomplished singer, guitarist, mandolin player, and writer — and photographer and music historian — who, after more than four decades in the business, still shows up fully in service to his audience, his band, and each carefully rendered song. He also paces a set impeccably, moving from uptempo honky-tonk, to truth-testifying ballad with ease, while relishing every minute of it.

As did the sold-out Berkeley crowd at the Freight & Salvage, who eagerly anticipated another dose of the Nashvillian goodness that Stuart and his Fabulous Superlatives — featuring virtuoso Kenny Vaughn on guitar, Harry Stinson on drums and vocals, and the newest member, Chris Scruggs on bass and pedal steel — play so very, very well.

Stuart has always beeb great. He played with the best of the country music best (Lester Flatt, Johnny Cash) since he was a teen, and 2015 finds him, as reflected in his band's apt name, superlative. Alternating traditional country, toe-tapping honky-tonk, and gospel classics, his show is equal parts tutorial in music history and world-class entertainment.

On this night, Stuart and band switched between acoustic and electric instruments in a set that traversed Stuart's storied career and the country canon, from "Sundown

in Nashville" to "The Ballad of Paladin," Stuart's early '90s hits "Tempted" and "The Whiskey Ain't Workin,'" to Johnny Cash's "The Wall," and the Danny Dill/Marijohn Wilkin-penned classic "Long Black Veil." Stuart paused after starting the latter, which was first recorded by Lefty Frizzell, to tell a story of helping ensure that Frizzell's storied guitar made it into the hands of Merle Haggard. Such inside-the-music stories only drew the audience in closer. Stuart has that rare gift of being not only great, but authentic and inclusive.

He likewise doesn't shy from giving each member of his cherry-picked band—all exceptional singers and multi-instrumentalists in their own right—a turn in the spotlight. Scruggs picked up the guitar to play his own "Old Souls Like You and Me." Stinson came out from behind the kit to sing a blues tune, and Vaughn smoked "Country Music."

One of the best moments of an evening packed with great moments came when Stuart asked the audience if he and the Superlatives "could practice on you" to "run through" a song they'll do to help induct guitarist Grady Martin into the Country Music Hall of Fame later this year. "This one's a mountain," Stuart said and shook his head. Then he and his bandmates gathered around the mic for the Marty Robbins classic "El Paso," and conquered said mountain.