

Art rock band Buttercup's magically mysterious tour

By Hector Saldana, San Antonio Express-News, May 29, 2016

Buttercup's stock-in-trade is intimacy.

The kooky, art-pop band — Erik Sanden, Joe Reyes and Odie — has shown it time and again, whether playing at 7 a.m. at a gay dive bar, celebrating the late Elliott Smith at a retro furniture store or performing novel gigs at the now-defunct art space known as the Wiggle Room, where it really began for them.

Buttercup took its brand of madness up several notches Thursday with an ambitious and highly entertaining audience-participation show/tour, which began at the Charline McCombs Empire Theatre and ended at the Majestic Theatre, utilizing downstairs, backstage spaces connecting the downtown venues and offering cameos by several musicians.

To say it was a success — only 100 tickets were allowed to be sold, which added to the giddy feeling of exclusivity, not to mention keeping things safe — would be an understatement.

The audience was allowed a rare treat: seeing performers in off-limits areas, coming up onstage at both venues, wandering around and being ambushed by unplugged, sometimes cacophonous performances by Azul Barrientos, Travis Buffkin, Madlaw (Chris Maddin and Libby Wardlaw Maddin), Matthew Rose and others.

One wrong turn, and one was face-to-face with musician Danny Reisch ironing a shirt in the Majestic's laundry room.

And, depending on where one was standing within this movable feast of sights and sounds — in narrow backstage hallways or climbing a maze of stairs — Madlaw's plaintive "God Only Knows" crashing into Rose's raucous send-up of Cheap Trick's "Surrender" (which became a shoulder-to-shoulder singalong) sometimes sounded like two radios playing at once.

This was Sanden's baby, naturally, born of years of after-hour giggles over wine. He imagined and touted the gig as something of an Andy Kaufman-style affair.

It wasn't. It was pure Buttercup.

Kaufman was a confrontational performance-artist/comic who never broke character with audiences of strangers.

Sanden is a beat poet-cum-rock frontman, playing on this night, as on most nights, to loyal Buttercup fans known on a first-name basis.

"Tonight, we make our own history together," said Sanden, who played tour guide while speaking through a bullhorn.

There's a lesson there.

Keeping things fresh, fun and outside comfort zones has kept Buttercup a vital and relevant act.

One vivid example was when Odie, the band's bassist, sang alone with acoustic guitar virtually in the dark on the Majestic stage. He performed with no microphone to show the audience (then gathered in the upper reaches of the balcony) just how wonderfully tuned for vocals the historic venue really is.

Sure, Tony Bennett does it at his shows here when he asks for the microphone to be turned off, but Odie sounded like an unlikely Caruso.

Even the grandeur of the setting didn't change Buttercup's basic relationship with intimacy. The grand finale on the Majestic stage found the band, plugged in and electrified and playing songs off its upcoming album "The Battle of Flowers," turned away from the house seats and playing to fans seated in a makeshift onstage lounge. Somehow, the band made the cavernous hall feel tiny.

They're not the only ones in town who've mastered this.

Jim Cullum's Tuesday night jazz residency at Tucker's Kozy Korner is as intimate as they come, and Ray Wylie Hubbard's weekly "Roots and Branches of Americana" live radio show from Tavern in the Gruene in New Braunfels is compelling in its unpredictability.

Nina Diaz, Nick Long and Michael Martin have that quality to draw an audience in.

But it's fair to say only Sanden and company have brought its audience up onstage with them, christened it with a temporary band name (Crowd Source), had the Majestic curtains drawn, thrown them all into the blinding spotlights, and had a handful of their musician friends waiting, sitting in the near-empty theater heckling them and yelling out, "You suck!"

How does one rate such madcap silliness? Just ask the pied piper.

"It couldn't be weirder or cooler," Sanden said midway through the show. He hadn't changed his mind afterward.

— Hector Saldaña

[Here](#) is a link to the original article



photos courtesy Billy Calzada/San Antonio Express News. Buttercup performs on the stage of the majestic, after a long journey throughout the theater



Erik Sanden leads crowd through the basement of the Majestic Theater where Chris Maddin and Libby Wardlaw perform "God Only Knows" by the Beach Boys, in front of Brian Wilson's signature



Reyes, odie. and Sanden prepare moments before beginning the performance



Azul plays a traditional foklorico song, out on a balcony overlooking Houston Street