Tribute bands popular with fans

By Mel Shields, Sacramento Bee

One of the major movements in live entertainment over the past decade has been the rise of tribute bands.

The advocates and critics of such groups seem about as divided as House Republicans and Democrats, or as staunch as defenders of the Beatles or the Rolling Stones as the better band.

The Spazmatics play March 8
at Red Hawk Casino.

Jackson Rancheria in Jackson presents the latter onstage Saturday with a “shootout” between the two (Beatles portrayed by the band Abbey Road, Rolling Stones portrayed by the band Jumping Jack Flash).

“Beatles vs. Stones” features two groups that seem dedicated to as much authenticity as possible. There’s a blacked-out tooth on the Keith Richards impersonator and a Brian Jones Vox Teardrop guitar. The Beatles, of course, sporting mop-tops and the music even includes flubs like Ringo’s chorus beat in the wrong place in “All My Lovin’.”

Audience reactions have been very positive for this show, like at Harrah’s Lake Tahoe just last week, and so far no soccer-

style brawls have broken out. Maybe the fans are just too old.

Those who hate tribute bands might strongly despise a more recent trend – the brand band. The Spazmatics, who appear at Red Hawk Casino tonight and Saturday, are a perfect example. There are many editions of them, all of whom present the 1980s complete with horn-rimmed glasses, skinny ties, and a-ha songs.

Critics find it all too merchandised, but audiences don't much care. Their party atmosphere is terrific and the evening is reliably great fun. Besides, where else can you hear a live version of the theme from "Fresh Prince of Bel-Air"?

Few entertainers can trace much of their popularity to covers, but Jose Feliciano, who performs a rare date Saturday at Harrah's Tahoe, took on the Doors' "Light My Fire" and redefined it, doing the same later with Tommy Tucker's "Hi-Heel Sneakers."

One cover made him briefly notorious – that was of "The Star-Spangled Banner" in 1968 at a World Series game. Now, 45 years later, its decidedly Latin twist may be considered prescient.

Of course, the Puerto Rican guitarist and singer has scored on his own terms. "Felice Navidad" anyone?

Feliciano, once a staple of casino showrooms, has been rare over the past decade. Gordon Lightfoot also is one of the few entertainers who can transform a giant performing space into a coffeehouse with songs like "If You Could Read My Mind" and his consummate ballading of "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald." He's at Cache Creek in Brooks on Saturday.