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Steve Martin's commitment to the banjo is funny to much of the pop culture landscape.

But Martin is as serious as a blue moon in Kentucky. About 10 years ago, he put a banjo in every room of his house.

"Living room, bedroom," Martin said in a recent interview from Los Angeles. "So wherever I was, it was there. I didn't have to be in the mood to play and say, 'Oh, who wants to go back to the bedroom to pick it up?' I started playing more. "The music world is very strict. You got to be good. When you start a song, it lasts three minutes. And a joke lasts six seconds. In some ways, you have to almost rise higher."

Martin will appear with the Steep Canyon Rangers bluegrass band in Chicago. They will be playing songs from Martin's debut album, "The Crow: New Songs for the Five-String Banjo" (Rounder Records), in what is billed as an evening of bluegrass and banjo.

No "Hee-Haw" here.

"It's not really a comedy show," Martin said. "It's a banjo show. I haven't heard any complaints he had done six gigs at the time of the interview. People seem happy and they know it's a music show. And then I can get away with doing some jokes. If they thought it was a comedy show and I played nine banjo songs, they might be upset."

Martin is intense about his musical career. Five-string banjo is not an easy thing to pick up. He plays "clawhammer"-style, where the strings of the instrument are pushed down by fingernails instead of being pulled up by picks. Martin will bring three different banjos to his Chicago gig. He composed 14 of the 15 songs on "The Crow," which features respected guests such as Dolly Parton, Vince Gill and Martin's bluegrass mentor, Earl Scruggs.

The Steep Canyon Rangers are a quintet (guitar, banjo, mandolin, bass and fiddle with harmony vocals) from Asheville, N.C. In 2006, they were named Emerging Artist of the Year by the International Bluegrass Music Association. Martin met the acoustic group through his wife, Anne Stringfield, 37, a former staffer for New Yorker magazine who heard them in North Carolina. This year, the IBMA nominated Martin for six awards, including "Banjo Player of the Year" and two for "Recording Event of the Year."

"Winning that would be better than an Oscar," Martin said in early September.

When the 20th Annual IBMA awards were announced earlier this month, Martin won "Best Liner Notes," which he composed, and "Best Graphic Design."

Martin, 64, began playing banjo in the backyard of his home on Dewey Drive in Los Angeles. He picked at Knott's Berry Farm and after work would jam with John McEuen of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band (the producer of "The Crow") at McEuen's house.

Martin found empathy in the banjo's lonesome sound. He wrote about feeling ostracized by his father while growing up in his 2007 memoir, *Born Standing Up*. Martin incorporated banjo in the nascent stages of his stand-up act. He wrote and performed banjo instrumentals and novelty songs like "Ramblin' Guy." The audience laughed when they weren't supposed to.

But the transition from stand-up to concert performance wasn't difficult for Martin.

"I haven't performed comedy live for over 30 years," he explained. "I just got done with stand-up. You get fried on it. I'd been playing these songs my whole life, and in the last five years I wrote another 10 songs. And I'm a guy who likes to see things in a slot on a shelf, meaning I wanted to get these songs done and polished. I was merging into the banjo world again because I did some interviews for bluegrass magazines and started meeting people. It was a whole kind of life opening up for me; one that's music-centric rather than comedy centric, and it's really, really nice."

Martin takes a different approach to his audience when playing music as opposed to telling jokes.

During a comedy routine, his mind would race back and forth, telling him what is clicking and what is missing. Martin's sense of wonder is also apparent as a playwright and novelist.

"But you can actually feel in the middle of a song a connection to the audience," he explained. "And it's funny how it can arise all of a sudden because I'm playing these songs that most people have never heard. It's hard to say why that happens because in comedy you're always thinking what's next. And in music you know what's next -- or pretty much know what's next."

"It's thrilling when it happens because it's new for me."

Martin kicked his bluegrass career into high gear in 2001 when he appeared on the "Earl Scruggs and Friends" all-star compilation. Martin played "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" with Scruggs and dobro master Jerry Douglas. Elton John also sang on a bluegrass version of "Country Comfort" and fellow actor Billy Bob Thornton covered "Ring of Fire" with Scruggs. A founding member of the Foggy Mountain

Boys, Scruggs pioneered blues and jazz licks with three fingers on the five-string banjo. He also introduced the electric banjo into his Earl Scruggs Revue.

"I started practicing 'Foggy Mountain Breakdown,'" Martin recalled. "Then in 2005, the New Yorker asked me to host a banjo evening. They had Earl Scruggs and all these favorite players of mine including Pete Wernick of Hot Rize, who appears on 'The Crow'." The group included Wernick's son Will. The group billed themselves as "Men With Banjos (Who Know How To Use Them)."

"The night before the festival, we played on the Letterman show," Martin said. "I played with Earl and Vince Gill, and I started thinking about recording the songs because I was getting up to speed again."

In 2007, the Martin tune "The Crow" became a hit single off of the Tony Trischka album "Double Banjo Bluegrass Spectacular." Martin performed the song with progressive five-string banjo player Trischka and it became Martin's first hit since 1978's "King Tut."

But Martin is still getting his feet wet in bluegrass. Before Martin and the Steep Canyon Rangers played at the IBMA awards show in Nashville, Pete Wernick quipped, "Here's a man who needs an introduction."

Martin has clear focus. He plays with minimalism and taste. His keen sense of melody is celebrated in his "Clawhammer Medley." Multi-instrumentalist David Amram appeared on "The Crow" sessions and said, "We marveled at the complexity as well as the subtlety of how his pieces were structured."

Martin's creative juices accelerate when he shares the spotlight.

"It's nice to be in a group of five people and hear everybody operating without ego, saying, 'You take a break there, you'll take a break there and then we all come together here.'"

"When I was onstage, I was alone doing comedy," he explained. "Here, I've got five other people. It's less pressure. I just had some friends over last night and we played until 2:30 in the morning. I couldn't believe it. I've never been up that late in 10 years."