

LOST HIGHWAY

Lyle Lovett

IT'S NOT BIG IT'S LARGE

Biography

What do you suppose would happen if we took the time to recognize the accomplishments of our beloved American musicians, their enormous talent while they were still at the height of their careers? Let's come out and say it: Lyle Lovett is one of the all-time great American singer/songwriters and should be recognized as such. His voice is unique, but his antecedents are recognizable. In his work two roads come together, the trail blazed by the great Texas storytellers of whom Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark are the best known, and the crooked highway navigated by sophisticated wise-asses such as Randy Newman and Tom Waits. Lovett's first gift was to combine these two potent strands of musical DNA into a new genome able to generate songs as brilliant and double-sided as "If I Had A Boat," "God Will," "If I Were the Man You Wanted," "Family Reserve" and "Her First Mistake." That would be plenty for any composer to base a career on, but Lovett was also capable of both flat-out humor ("That's Right (You're Not From Texas)", "Here I am," "Church") and heartbreakers that were poignant without ever descending into sentimentality ("She's Already Made Up Her Mind," "Nobody Knows Me," "The Road To Ensenada"). What emerged was a picture of a smart and complicated man, whose good humor and generosity of spirit were holding back a darker character. Out of such tensions, many artists are born.

Lovett also has a gift for big band arrangements that has no precedent among contemporary singer/songwriters, made all the more potent because of its somewhat surprising use. He also displays a literary talent that has made him part of the tradition of American ironists. This is probably the aspect of Lovett that interested director Robert Altman, who cast him in four films ("The Player," "Short Cuts," "Pret-a-Porter," "Cookie's Fortune") and had him score a fifth ("Dr. T and the Women").

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LYLE LOVETT BIO/2

While music should be and is open for interpretation by the listener, Lovett's new album, *IT'S NOT BIG IT'S LARGE*, suggests notions of mortality, loss and the fluidity of time. In many of the songs, the past intrudes on the present and the narrator finds strength to deal with the travails of today by putting them into historical perspective. That sounds like heavy-going, but it's Lovett's gift to make the deep thoughts slide down like honey.

IT'S NOT BIG IT'S LARGE opens with a swing fanfare out of Count Basie and then gets serious fast. The African-American voices that accompany Lovett on "I Will Rise Up" sound like America's conscience, demanding a better future while evoking a troubled history.

Lovett sings lines from the old prison work song "Ain't No More Cane" about trouble on the river lurking in the form of death. These are ancient lyrics and while it might be hard to hear them in 2007 without thinking of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Lovett does not hear it quite that way.

"It's not as specific to Katrina as it is to the overall uncertainty that's presented itself since 9/11," he says. "Not to be too topical, because events like those are just symptoms of life, whenever in history it happens. It's about hope through acceptance. It's about accepting who you are and being who you are in the face of life and all that comes with life, including death."

Toward the end of the album, Lovett performs "Ain't No More Cane," the old song he quotes in "I Will Rise Up." "I used 'Ain't No More Cane' in 'I Will Rise Up' because the verses kept rolling around in my head after making up the intro verse and chorus," he says. "Recording 'Ain't No More Cane' in the end was my wanting to explain the references plus, it's one of my favorites. Robert Keen and I learned it together on his old porch back in '77 or '78 from the Alan Lomax recording. I always liked that even though the song sounds plaintive and sincere, it was really an inside joke among the prisoners, a device to slow down the pace of the work and make fun of their guards, because sugar cane was never a crop on that part of the Brazos. It was and still is cotton."

Even the lighter songs on the album are of a piece with the big themes. "Up in Indiana" is a fast-picked tune about a man with "time to kill in a little town called Henryville," because he fell for a girl who "looked all of 22 a man could drown in eyes so blue." At first listen, it's a love song. At second listen it suggests some irony he may be regretting the result of his romance, presumably marriage. Either interpretation is fine and is as far as many listeners will care to go. However, close inspection suggests that the man is actually stuck in prison.

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LYLE LOVETT BIO/3

“My main character in ‘Up in Indiana’ is spending some time in Henryville, Indiana where there exists a correctional facility for non-violent offenders,” Lovett explains. “Just before our tour started last summer outside of Boise, I went to a wedding in Greensburg, Indiana. Driving south from the Indianapolis airport, down two-lane country roads in the beginning of July the corn looked to be at its peak height. The road was like a tunnel through the cornfields.

As I drove along and thought about how to arrange ‘I will Rise up’ for our upcoming shows, I started thinking ‘What if the corn were the bars of another kind of prison?’ I started thinking about the work gangs in ‘Ain’t No More Cane’ and went from there. If they chop cotton in Texas, they must cut corn in Indiana.”

“I was still working on ‘I Will Rise up’ and ‘Ain’t No More Cane,’ thinking of the prison theme and, not to be too corny, thinking of how it’s possible to look at life in a way that says we’re all imprisoned by something. The point is to live through it no matter what.”

For the last few years Lovett has been alternating tours with his own band with songwriter circles when he performs with John Hiatt, and fellow Texans Guy Clark and Joe Ely. “It’s always fun and inspiring to get to hang out with people you respect and admire, as I do these three,” Lovett says. “Sometimes touring can be an isolating experience. Being able to talk after a show, as we’re rolling down the road, is a similar experience to going out to the local breakfast joint after a gig in the early days.”

Hiatt and Ely are Lovett’s peers, but Guy Clark was an early hero. Lovett tapped Clark to sing an intro and outro on one of the key songs on the new album, “South Texas Girl.” That song moves back and forth between memories of driving around the Lone Star State with his parents as a child, singing old songs he did not understand, and the writer passing over the same roads today. “That’s where life is,” he says, “driving around with the person or people you love. It really doesn’t get any better than that.”

“The old cowboy song I reference is made up. Asking Guy to sing it is my attempt to make it seem like a real cowboy refrain. Plus, I love Guy and the idea of his singing something of mine was hard to resist.”

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There is a reference in the song to the childhood Lyle learning to pronounce Spanish Texas place names by listening to someone called Sid Lasher. Lovett explains, "Sid Lasher was one of Houston's weathermen when I was a child. The reference to Refugio and Palacios is about how the local weatherman talks about outlying towns and areas around the main city. It was my first geography lesson. It was how I first became aware of places I'd drive through with mom and dad on those car trips."

The passing and suspension of time, the notion that the past is never done with, returns in "The Alley Song," a companion piece to one of Lovett's first great tunes, "This Old Porch." The lyrics suggest that if the porch is the brightly lit spot at the front of the house where Lyle and his pals make up songs and meet new friends, the alley is the dark place out back where disappointments lurk, and where drunken and washed up songwriters might scare off a young contender with the awful advice that "When you're not the best, you hope no one can tell." Coming nearly twenty years after Lovett's first album, "The Alley Song" sounds like it could be any songwriters mid-life crisis, but Lyle explains that in fact he wrote the song back when he was starting out and kept it hidden until he was experienced enough to credibly sing it.

"The Alley Song' is actually old, 1979," he says. It's about leaving the security of young life and making the transition to being a grown-up. I made it before I'd gone anywhere or done anything, so I felt silly at the time singing, 'And you know, I went to California,' because I hadn't yet. And I always worried about admitting the insecurity we feel. 'Them laying in the alley,' is the death of the security of youth and familiar experience. 'I went to California' is taking that first determined step into the real world, like when Huck Finn says that he'll just go to hell then if that's what being friends with Jim means."

Another stand out track on the album is "Don't Cry a Tear." It's a perfect mix of humor and devotion, succinctness with a twist. It is also a pretty good example of the Lovett perspective. This is an artist who has been working at a very high level for twenty years now and while you can empty out a saloon by declaring any album his best, IT'S NOT BIG IT'S LARGE is certainly a stronger contender for that superlative.

Lyle Lovett does a lot of things very well, but one of his most important talents is his ability to make us aware of how much the past lives in us and how what we do today shapes how we will consider our lives later. The people in old songs, old photographs and even old TV shows were once just as alive and full of feelings as we are now. They were what we are; we will someday be as they are. That can be an intimidating thought, but Lovett also offers us consolation; when we sing their songs, when we remember them, they are alive again.

