

Lyle Lovett's 'Release Me' - Texas icon offers great songs and a few surprises

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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When Lyle Lovett releases a new record, two things are certain: You're going to hear some great songs and you're going to be surprised at least once.

The great songs on "Release Me," Lovett's final record for Curb Records, include the title cut that features a duet with kd lang, a quirky duet with Austin-based jazz artist Kat Edmonson on "Baby, It's Cold Outside" and a Martin Luther hymn.

Stuart Duncan's sweet fiddle leads Lovett and lang on "Release Me." Neither artist has a "mainstream" sound, but together they make it work. Paul Franklin's steel guitar work lends the perfect honky tonk feel to the ballad Ray Price made famous in 1954.

"Baby, It's Cold Outside" takes you back to the great duets of Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme. It's flirty, festive and fun. If you like this cut, you might want to try one of her records, "Take it to the Sky" (2009) or "Way Down Low" (2012). She sounds just a little like Eartha Kitt (1927-2008).

The surprises here come from songwriters Michael Franks, Jesse Winchester, Eric Taylor and Townes Van Zandt.

"White Boy Lost in the Blues," with soaring backup by tenor Arnold McCuller, will transport you straight to the Mississippi Delta. McCuller's been with Lovett for years. Their styles blends seamlessly. Lovett provides a solid place for McCuller to land from his vocal flights. Grab a beer, a piece of fried chicken and sit a spell. For three minutes and thirty-four seconds, you're the one lost in the blues.

Lovett's cover of Winchester's "Isn't That So," makes use of the entire Large Band, including luscious backups by vocalists McCuller, Sweet Pea Atkinson, Harry Bowens and Willie Greene Jr. As one critic says, "Greene's voice knows no bottom and is as smooth as silk." His bass lines are not to be ignored. Lovett knows a good thing when he hears it, and usually lets Greene run loose during at least one show-topping moment when the band is on tour.

Lovett tapped Eric Taylor's "Understand You" for a lovely, intimate look at the beginning of a relationship. Taylor writes a pristine lyric ("Memphis Midnight - Memphis Morning" and "Whooping Crane").

*What a pretty mystery you
You suddenly turned out to be
I've never held you gently
But I want to*

*Well, I'll watch your friends come through the door
And I slide my feet across the floor
There are things I might ask*

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I don't need to

Can't you tell I'm telling you

That I want to

Understand you, oh

Lovett pares the tune down to the bare necessities, using an acoustic guitar, bass, drums and a few soft moments of electric guitar. He gets inside a lyric better than most any artist in the world. He does Taylor's words proud.

The large band goes to town on Van Zandt's "White Freightliner Blues." In the version that was recorded live at Austin City Limits, available on YouTube, Luke Bulla replaces Duncan on fiddle. Bulla's there for harmony and lead vocals on verse three, and he does a fine job. On the record, Duncan is given fiddle credit ... the beginning sounds like a steam engine gearing up. Matt Rollings handles a lightning-fast keyboard break. Keith Sewell burns up the neck of his acoustic guitar on another, while Duncan sets the world on fire with his fiddle. Can't wait to hear this one live.

Tossed in the mix are "Garfield's Blackberry Blossom," an instrumental written by Jim Cox, Bulla, Sewell and Lovett. It's pure country and will make a great "show off" number in the live set list. They dial back to acoustics again with Chuck Berry's "Brown Eyed Handsome Man" and the traditional "One Way Girl," but bring it back up with the upbeat, completely Lovett cover of the traditional "Keep It Clean," a tongue-in-cheek ditty reminiscent of "Keep It In the Pantry," from 2009's record, "Natural Forces."



Before he wraps things up, Lovett takes us to church with a resonant, reverent cover of the beautiful Lutheran hymn, "Keep Us Steadfast." Rollins and Lovett lead out with simple keyboards and melody. Rollins, Duncan, along with long-time Large Band members John Hagen (cello) and Viktor Krauss (upright bass) bring it home with their sweet, simple playing. Amen.

Lovett's coming to the Cowan Center in Tyler on Thursday, Sept. 6. If past concerts hold true, he'll be showcasing a lot of the new songs. He doesn't strut the stage or bust any moves – in fact, he hardly breaks a sweat. I've seen him a dozen times in the past 20 years, and there really is no one that can hold a candle to Lyle Lovett live.

Tickets for the Tyler show are on sale now at the UT Tyler Cowan Center box office. Call 903-566-7424 or online at www.cowancenter.org for more information. Box office hours are 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Lovett and the band will also be in concert on Friday, Sept. 7 at the Majestic Theater in Dallas. Proceeds from this show benefit City Square, an organization dedicated that "feeds the hungry, heals the sick, houses the homeless and renews hope in the heart of our city." Tickets range from \$80 to \$150. Call 214-880-0202 for details.