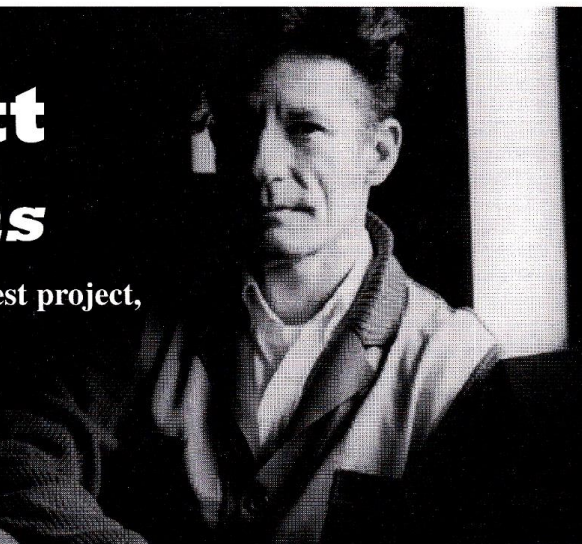


Lyle Lovett Connections

An analysis of the singer-songwriter's latest project,
Step Inside This House.



The 21 selections that stretch across the 80 minutes plus and two discs that make up Lyle Lovett's latest release, *Step Inside This House*, can best be described as one man's portrait of his Texas roots, the focus being on male songwriters of that great state.

Let's be clear, however, about the definition of 'Texas songwriter'. Of those included in the collection, Eric Taylor was born in Atlanta, Georgia, Willis Alan Ramsey first saw the light of day in Alabama (though raised in Dallas), while the late Walter Hyatt was a son of South Carolina.

Nevertheless, this trio of writers have all, at one time or another, called Texas home, although Taylor is the only current resident.

Like Lovett, though, Steven Fromholz, Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark, Vince Bell, David Rodriguez, Michael Martin Murphey and Robert Earl Keen can all claim citizenship of the Lone Star State.

As if to emphasise the rich wellspring all these writers have drawn upon, the collection includes two traditional Texas songs, *More Pretty Girls Than One* and *Texas River Song*. In truth, they form the foundation upon which Lovett has constructed this tribute. This is a story of connections.

Any self-respecting fan of Texas music should have read Jan Reid's 1974 book, *The Improbable Rise Of Redneck Rock*, many times over. There's little doubt that Lovett is familiar with it. Reid summed up Steven Fromholz's multi-part *Texas Trilogy* with the testament, "It was a masterwork of Texas songwriting."

One of the prime movers in what he often lampoons as "the early seventies cosmic cowboy country scare", Fromholz normally performs *Texas Trilogy* as a single continuous piece. Using his mother's birthplace of Koppel, Texas for inspiration, he captures perfectly the simplicity and honesty of a smalltown community.

A second Fromholz composition, the amusing *Bears*, also appears on the set. It first appeared on Steve's 1976 Capitol album, *A Rumor In My Own Time*, an ironic title considering that Fromholz, now an actor as well as performing musician, is barely known outside the boundaries of his native state.

During the early 1960s, Michael Martin Murphey and Steven Fromholz were contemporaries at North Texas State University in Denton, near Dallas. They were also members of the Dallas County Jug Band.

Murphey subsequently headed for the West Coast where he became a songwriter for Screen Gems and, in 1967, made his first

recording as a member of The Lewis And Clark Expedition. Travis Lewis was Murphey's assumed name, while Boomer Clarke was Owen Boomer Castleman. Their only, self-titled, album was released on the Colgems label whose roster included The Monkees.

Their song, *West Texas Highway*, which Lovett performs here, has never been recorded by Murphey. A version by Three Faces West featuring Ray Wylie Hubbard is the only known previous recording of the song. Hubbard told me, "It was kind of Kingston Trio stuff, only a little deeper than that. We cut an album by ourselves and pressed up about 5000 copies that we sold at our gigs. Our big thing was, Michael Murphey would give us his new songs."

West Texas Highway relates the tale of a rich man who dreams of swapping places with a drifter he picks up on the highway, and is a heartfelt pitch at those times when life throws you one of those loops where you're left thinking, "Why can't that have been me?"

Robert Earl Keen and Lyle Lovett were college contemporaries during the late 1970s when they attended Texas A&M University in College Station, Brazos County (the A&M stands for Agricultural and Mechanical). When Keen cut his 1984 debut album, *No Kinda Dancer*, Lyle's harmony could be heard on *Rollin' By*. The lyric recalls a rural lifestyle now committed to the pages of history.

While studying journalism and German at Texas A&M, Lyle wrote for *The Battalion*, the college newspaper. Among many performers he interviewed were Fromholz, Murphey, Eric Taylor and Willis Alan Ramsey. When I interviewed Lovett in 1988, he recalled, "I was directly influenced by people who I could go and see in clubs. People that were around and accessible. That's what started me writing my own songs."

For a time, Lyle booked performers for the campus coffee house. Among the acts were Houston based performers Nanci Griffith and Eric Taylor.

Although Taylor's two-decade long canon may only amount to three albums, the quality of his releases is perfection itself.

Taylor's words and the images they paint may not always be connected. Upon closer analysis, however, it is clear they draw from a common stem and root. Time, preferably lots of it, is an essential commodity when listening to and deciphering Eric's creations.

Memphis Midnight/Memphis Morning is a previously unrecorded Taylor composition. Lyrically, it is one of his more accessible works; two characters, one male, one female, meet before midnight and part by early morning.

Vince Bell and David Rodriguez were Houston based contemporaries of Taylor. Almost laid to rest following a 1982 car smash, Bell's recovery was a tough, decade long battle. *I've Had Enough* appeared on his 1994 Watermelon album, *Phoenix*, and featured Lovett on harmony. Lyle has said of Bell, "He writes songs about his life and, when I listen to Vince's songs, I want to know about the person singing the songs. I think that's what great songs do."

In his recently published autobiography, *One Man's Music*, Vince writes, "In Houston in the early '70s, David (Rodriguez) and I lived in the Montrose area. Being the 'bicycle royalty' that we were, we pedaled our way around the clubs and learned our music from Townes, Guy, Jerry Jeff, Kristofferson and others. Every morning there was a new play, a new dance, a new painting, or a new song that wasn't there the night before. Later, Steven (Fromholz) and I played all the way across Texas, from Wichita Falls to Laredo. Lyle and I met in Houston, at Anderson Fair. I moved to Austin in the mid-70s, and with David, Lyle and Walter played the same grab 'em, stab 'em bars and clubs around Texas."

The Snow Leopard And The Tanqueray Cowboy, penned by David Rodriguez, a lawyer by profession and a musician by preference, first appeared as *Ballad Of The Snow Leopard* on his 1990 self-released tape, *Man Against Beast*.

In terms of evolution as composers, Taylor, Bell and Rodriguez learned their trade from Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt, the acknowledged leaders of Houston's folk/country songwriting pack. Clark and Van Zandt, in turn, had been inspired by old blues players such as Mance Lipscomb and Lighnin' Hopkins. In the liner booklet of *Step Inside This House*, Lovett credits Eric Taylor with teaching him the only Guy Clark song in the collection, the title track.

It is claimed that *Step Inside This House* is the first song that Clark ever wrote. One written line goes "I found it on my way from Texas headed for LA" but Lyle sings it as "I was on my way through Houston and I was headed for LA."

During the late 60s, Eric Taylor was heading for the West Coast when he made a stopover in Houston. The lyric change is an obvious tipping of the hat to one of his closest friends.

When he was still with us, Van Zandt shared a similarly intense friendship with Guy Clark. The black and white photographs reproduced in the liner booklet confirm this. The quartet of Townes compositions covered by Lovett, *Lungs*, *Flying Shoes*, *Highway Kind* and *If I Needed You* are all well known.

Finally, Willis Alan Ramsey and Walter Hyatt.

Ramsey cut his self-titled debut (and, for that matter, only) recording for the Shelter label in 1972. Following its release, he settled in Austin and set about building his Hound Sound Recording Studio.

Featured in *The Improbable Rise Of Redneck Rock* as "The Boy from Alabama", Ramsey played author Reid a tape that the latter described as "backwoods country harmony that sounded like something out of *Deliverance*." Those backwoods sounds were made by Uncle Walt's Band, a trio consisting of Champ Hood, Walter Hyatt and David Ball.

After seeing them perform in a Nashville club, Willis Alan invited the trio to Austin with the intention of cutting an album on them. Soon after Hyatt perished in the Valujet Everglades plane crash in May 1996, I interviewed Walter's friend and former bandmate, Champ Hood. He vividly recalled helping Ramsey to fit out Hound Sound Studios.

After releasing four albums, Uncle Walt's band broke up in 1983, although they reunited for several one-off gigs.

In 1990, Lovett and Billy Williams, his co-producer on *Step Inside This House*, collaborated on the production of Walter's debut solo album, *King Tears*. The following year, Sugar Hill

reissued the four Uncle Walt recordings; Lyle's sleeve notes included the recommendation, "Walter Hyatt, David Ball and Champ Hood have been an inspiration to me ever since I heard them together."

Hyatt's *Teach Me About Love*, *Babes In The Wood*, *Lonely In Love* and *I'll Come Knockin'* are included on *Step Inside This House*, with Hood and Ball reuniting to supply harmony vocals on the last two tunes.

Before I forget, the Willis Alan Ramsey contribution, *Sleepwalking*, is a previously unrecorded original.

There are a number of other aspects to *Step Inside This House* that are worth considering.

The collection was recorded in California with support from Large Band players Matt Rollings (piano) and Viktor Krauss (bass) with occasional contributions from John Hagen (cello). Apart from Hood and Ball (the latter now resident in Nashville) the remaining session players amount to a collective of well known Los Angeles and Nashville names, plus vocal support from Viktor's famous sister, Alison.

If the project was recorded in California because it was felt there was an absence of quality players located in Texas, it was an extremely shortsighted view. Further, that there could have been a broader spectrum of male writers involved probably amounts to personal preference, but the lack of any material by female writers is a glaring omission. Should Lovett decide to revisit this project for a second volume, I'd relish the chance to furnish him with a list of female contenders.

However, let's close on a positive note. The bonus in the package is a 50-page booklet that contains the song lyrics. With the exception of Van Zandt, Hyatt and David Rodriguez (who now resides somewhere in Europe) it features recent photographs of Lyle taken alongside each of the featured writers. Included in the background of one photograph is Ramsey's Hound Sound studio sign that last appeared in Reid's book, while Susanna Clark's painting of Guy's shirt was last seen gracing the liner cover of her husband's 1975 RCA debut, *Old No. 1*.

It's worth noting that Lyle secured a recording contract through the good offices of Guy Clark. Lyle recalled, "Someone passed my tape to Guy. I'd never met Guy at this point. Unsolicited, he was going around playing the tape for people. Guy took (producer) Tony Brown out for lunch and gave him my tape. Having Guy's stamp of approval was a great source of credibility."

The two-album collection *Step Inside This House*, retailing for little more than the cost of a single CD, is a brave, magnanimous and truly fine creation. ■

