

Lyle Lovett is keen to show Australian audiences he is more than a country singer. **Ara Jansen** reports.

He's the long tall Texan who can pen a whip-smart song and refuses to be categorised simply as a country artist.

Lyle Lovett is one of the Texas music outlaws — artists who live and breathe the Lone Star State — and he has refused to conform to what Nashville, New York or Los Angeles determine is country music.

Lovett belongs to a rare and respected cadre of artists — including the likes of Guy Clarke, Steve Earle and Billy Joe Shaver — who, he says, are different because of their dedication to playing for the audience, not the industry.

"We do and always have played to satisfy our audience," Lovett says. "There's a different sort of ambition which goes along with playing to play and that's one reason why the music that comes from here is a little different from what's geared to be commercial. That's what I like about it and what I grew up listening to."

Together, their variations on country music stretch into blues, folk, Texas swing, two-step, gospel, jazz and really just about any style which fits the song.

For his part, the 52-year-old singer, songwriter and guitarist, who was briefly married to Julia Roberts in the early 90s, owns a wry and sharp sense of humour which has led to songs about never stealing a Texan's hat, how to spot Texans by the length of their pants and why penguins are so sensitive.

On his recently released album *Natural Forces*, he's shared how "you just can't stop the US male" and miraculously managed to work "the melons of Verona" and "the sausage of Gdansk" into a song.

The latter reference from the album's first single *Pantry* has drawn much comment and Lovett says it's all in the timing. Even good friend comedian and actor Paul Reiser — Lovett guest starred on his sitcom



Coming to Perth: American signer Lyle Lovett is doing his first Australian tour.

Mad About You — called a few weeks ago just to congratulate him about that same line and Lovett says he "felt so proud" to have got the compliment.

Lovett balances his wit with a sensitive side which is intimately observational, sometimes so much so that you feel as a listener he's being way too open with you.

Since 1986, he's released 10 studio albums and sold around four million albums as well as making forays into acting in the late Robert Altman's *The Player*, *Short Cuts*, *Pret-a-Porter* and *Cookie's Fortune*. He's scored *Dr T* and the *Women* and also appeared in TV's *Mad*

About You and *Brothers and Sisters* as well as being an avid motorcyclist and horse lover.

That the four-time Grammy winner is finally coming to Australia next month is no small miracle for fans. A decade ago, the singer was all set to tour but the passing of his father meant Lovett didn't want to be away from home. It's taken all that time to get schedules aligned to make this Australian tour happen.

"I didn't feel right about leaving," Lovett says. "It was my fault but I'm glad to be getting the opportunity 10 years later to have another chance."

Australia is new territory for the songwriter, even with a decades-long

career under his buckle belt. He says every place he and his band play for the first time is a new experience and that's when he feels so lucky to be making music.

"That's why two days never feel the same and it's always interesting," he says. "To me there is always something new going on, something new to think about or pursue."

"Really, I have the best job and I can't imagine ever doing something else — to be able to think about music as a legitimate thing and call it my job when sometimes I just feel like I'm goofing off."

As talented a songwriter as Lovett is, he always makes sure there is

room on his albums to cover songs by the men he grew up listening to, performing with and emulating. *Natural Forces* includes Townes Van Zandt (Loretta), his university roommate Robert Earl Keen (*It's Rock and Roll*), Eric Taylor (*Whooping Crane*) and Vince Bell (*Sun and Moon and Stars*).

"The idea for *Natural Forces* was to record a few new songs that I had written in the last couple of years and songs from my favourite singer-songwriters that I thought complemented what I had written," he says.

"The really fun part was to pick some of my heroes from around Houston. They have all been part of my music since I first started playing."

"It's like the songs from the (1998) album *Step Inside This House*, which were all songs I learnt how to play guitar with. These songs are where my music comes from, the songs which helped teach me what a song is."

Lovett's music has always had a strong sense of home and place influenced by his deep Texan roots and *Natural Forces* holds even stronger and closer to that.

The singer loves being at home and around his family, choosing largely to keep away from red carpet crawling and the glare of publicity.

"People have called me shy," he says. "I don't think of myself as shy but I'm not overly loud or outgoing. I don't enjoy being on the spot in that way and would rather be checking out what's going on. I just do much better to be around people in an intimate setting."

Lyle Lovett plays the Perth Concert Hall on March 22, supported by Kasey Chambers. Tickets from Ticketek. The show has shifted from the original venue and date of the Riverside Theatre on March 23. *Natural Forces* is out now.

Women lead the Amp pack

SIMON COLLINS
MUSIC EDITOR

Four female singer-songwriters lead the charge for the 2009 Australian Music Prize — a marked change for the award, which has gone to male rock bands every year since launching five years ago.

The shortlist for the \$30,000 prize was announced in St Kilda yesterday with former Australian Idol also-ran Lisa Mitchell's debut *Wonder* a surprise nominee.

The Amp recognises the best home-grown album of the year as judged by a 23-strong panel of musicians, critics and music industry insiders.

The other female artists in line for Australia's answer to Britain's Mercury Music Prize are Sydney's Bertie Blackman (for *Secrets and Lies*), virtually unknown Victorian country songwriter Lucie Thorne (*Black Across the Field*) and platinum-selling early favourite Sarah Blasko (*As Day Follows Night*).

After winning in 2007, the Mess Hall have scored another nomination with *For the Birds*. The Sydney-based rock duo is joined in the 2009 shortlist by three Melbourne outfits — young pop-rock band Oh Mercy (nominated for *Privileged Woes*), cousin duo Kid Sam (*Kid Sam LP*) and the experimental Black Cab (*Call Signs*). Rounding out the nine nominees is Sydney hip-hopper Tim Levinson, aka Urthboy, whose album *Spitshine* has earned his second nod in the Amp.

The Amp winner for 2009 will be announced in Sydney on March 12.

• Simon Collins is a judge for the Amp.

Smooth as silk for the tuxedo shuffle

CONCERT

The Leeuwin Concert — Michael McDonald and Boz Scaggs
Leeuwin Estate Winery
Review: Simon Collins

Donning a tuxedo that had mysteriously shrunk since it was last worn several years ago, we joined the top end of town at the annual Leeuwin Concert down in picturesque Margaret River for some fine wine, baby boomer bonhomie and smooth tunes.

And they don't come much smoother than Michael McDonald and Boz Scaggs; two American gents with voices silkier than vintage champagne and barely a hit between them since Leeuwin launched its concert series in 1985.

So, it was back to the 70s for the 6500 attending, a time when blue-eyed soul was all the rage and those penguin suits sat more comfortably across the mid-section.

With his white hair making him look like Colonel Sanders, former Steely Dan and Doobie Brothers singer-keyboardist Michael McDonald mixed Motown classics among his old hits.

The Doobies' *It Keeps You Running* was an early favourite, along with the super smooth *I Keep Forgettin'* (Every Time You're Near) and the 1985 Ingram collaboration *Yah Mo B There*.

The old Ray Charles easy-listening classic *You Don't Know Me* was delivered in understated style, apart from McDonald's Farnham-esque molesting of vowels, before he unveiled an apt cover of *I Heard it Through the Grapevine*. Another welcome Motown cover, even though incredibly bleached, was *Ain't No Mountain High Enough*.

A trio of late 70s Doobie Brothers classics broke through the chardonnay barrier,



Heard it through the grapevines: Boz Scaggs performs at Leeuwin. Picture: Michael Wilson.

starting with *Minute by Minute* with the Grammy award-winning *What a Fool Believes* (written with 80s soundtrack king Kenny Loggins) prompting the first dance of the evening. *Takin' it to the Streets* brought it all home, although most probably knew the 1976 hit from the bit on *The Footy Show* where Sam Newman makes fun of bogans. McDonald's yacht rock was appealing, not least for the work from guitarist Bernie Chiaravalle and singer-drummer Yvette "Baby Girl" Preyer.

Back to remind us that *Silk Degrees* aren't something you earn from Fashion University, Boz Scaggs didn't so much hit the Leeuwin stage as slide on with mellow offerings such as Allen Toussaint's *Hercules* and his own *Slow Dancer* — both released back in 1974.

The 65-year-old, who owns a winery in California's Napa County, delivered Georgia

and the R&B favourite *Lowdown* in his syrupy voice, the guitar lines barely cutting through the cheesy arrangement.

The biggest reaction from the crowd came when singer Ms Monet took over to unleash her soulful wail on *Until You Come Back to Me*, made famous by Aretha Franklin. Then it was back to mellow, with Scaggs' New Orleans-flavoured set barely registering with the fans until the finale of his 1976 hit *Lido Shuffle*.

By mixing Motown classics with his own lengthy back catalogue, McDonald overshadowed Scaggs, whose show seemed better suited to a cruise ship.

But with eucalypts towering over the stage, vino flowing and pleasant company, they could have put on the Mormon Tabernacle Choir covering Metallica and it would have been an agreeable evening — notwithstanding the tuxedo shuffle.



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