

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.