

## **Review: Lyle Lovett at the Long Center**

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The last time Lyle Lovett played the Long Center, in March, it was as one element in a grand-opening gala that included Willie Nelson and Asleep At the Wheel. The last time he played Austin, in May, it was as part of a songwriters' circle that included John Hiatt, Joe Ely and Guy Clark.

Tuesday night, however, Lovett was back in town in the incarnation that fans know best: the wry, deadpan ringleader of the aptly named Large Band.

It's possible to argue that the 15-piece aggregation (augmented on this night by a nine-piece gospel choir from San Antonio) offers the only forum large enough to encompass Lovett's eclectic takes on folk, bluegrass, gospel, big band ensemble work, R&B, jazz and country. But it's equally possible to make the observation that Lovett set out to create the musical sandbox of his dreams, and invited all the neighborhood kids to come play.

Over and over on Tuesday, Lovett stepped out of the spotlight, figuratively speaking, and became just another fan as one or another of his musicians strutted his stuff. The Large Band cast was augmented on this night by mandolin maestro Sam Bush (sitting in on the second of eight dates) and longtime sideman vocalist Arnold McCuller, fresh off James Taylor's summer tour.

This year's edition of the Large Band was typically top-heavy with talented veterans, boasting as it did A-list session drummer Russ Kunkel, the float-and-sting guitars of Ray Herndon and Austin's Mitch Watkins, fiddler Gene Elders (usually on the road with George Strait) and guitarist/vocalist Keith Sewell. Cellist John Hagen, a perennial crowd favorite, stole the show with his Charlie Watts-style poker-face asides, which managed to out-laconic even his boss.

After an instrumental fanfare, "Opening Credits," Lovett meandered on stage and set out on a roundabout, two-and-a-half hour tour of his 20-year catalog. Members of the band ebbed and flowed on and off the stage, depending on whether Lovett wanted the full gospel fanfare for "Church" and "I Will Rise Up/Ain't No More Cane," the small bluegrass ensemble that delivered "Keep It In Your Pantry," the jazz combo that rendered "(I Could Have Been Your) Best Friend" in muted colors, or the grinding R&B outfit that romped through "My Baby Don't Tolerate."

It's a funny thing; Lovett's songs are finely wrought, small-scale cameos of human caprice, but he presents them on the biggest, Frederic Remington-size canvas he can get his hands on. It's an ongoing contradiction, and one that neither he nor his audience seemingly have any interest in reconciling. In the meantime everyone, band and audience alike, went home happy.