New Releases

Lyle Lovett
"Step Inside This House"
MCA Records
Grade: B-

With his Kramer-esque hair and crooked grin, you would expect Lyle Lovett to have a voice reminiscent of Anthony Michael-Hall.

Instead, he has the kind of crooning, dripping voice that makes a girl weak in the knees.

It's no surprise that his albums tend to emphasize his vocal talents and startling lyrics.

Lovett's new album, "Step Inside This House," is no exception. However, this time around, the lyrics aren't Lovett's.

"Step Inside This House" is Lovett's tribute to his favorite artists and songwriters from his home state of Texas. Lovett considers these artists the most influential in the formation of his music style. The double CD collection features writers like Townes Van Zant, Michael Martin Murphy, Stephen Fromholtz and Guy Clark.

The homage is a sweet thought, but the lack of Lovett's own work belabors the album. Lovett, who generally glides from rock to blues to country with subtle grace, seems confined by these songs. Most lack the sardonic lilt characteristic of his work, and only a few wry gems manage to sparkle out of the 21 tracks.

The album opens with the subtle, folk-oriented "Bear." A commentary on people's perceptions of civilization, the song capitalizes on Lovett's modest delivery. Somehow, when Lovett accuses you of being a bear on the inside, it doesn't seem so bad.

"Lungs," one of the few songs where the instruments are given equal prominence as Lovett's vocals, immediately follows. With its intense, driving guitar lines and furious lyrics, "Lungs" leaves the listener gasping for breath. The song is one of the few contrasts you'll hear on the album.

Next up: "Step Inside This House." This track is perhaps most reflective of Lovett's attitude toward life. This simple, lyrical song also benefits from Lovett's unembellished performance. Backed by the soft piano harmony, Lovett sings of life's simple treasures.

"Teach Me About Love" returns to more traditional honky-tonk roots. Over the tinkling piano and skipping fiddle, Lovett begs his darlin' to quit teaching him about leavin' and start teaching him about lovin'.

The best song of the album, however, is "Sleepwalking." Lovett seductively plods and pleads on this bluesy, little tune about a man arrested for sleepwalking in his underwear. The source of the man's pain, of course, is his "baby," who left him for reasons he can't quite grasp.

"And I sure don't remember nothing ya'll/About that blown-up rubber doll."

The man finds his panacea in a teddy bear who keeps him company while he sleeps.

The song, with its dry and sometimes silly humor, is quintessential Lovett. The listener can hear and see the pacing of this confused, bewildered man and find laughter in his pain.

The album dies down after that. Evidently, the waters of Texas music talent don't run too deep. The second disc fades away into a series of bland, cookie-cutter, over-serious, sentimental tunes about life in the Lone Star State.
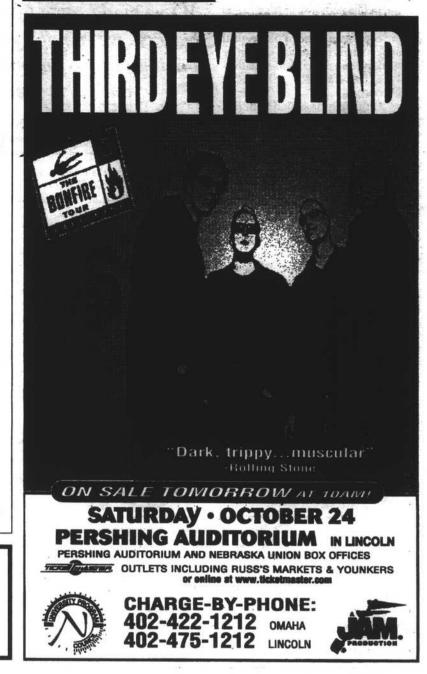
Lovett's influences just aren't as good as he is. At best, they're slightly better than average musicians. Lovett saves the album, himself, with his personality and voice. The listener can forget the rather mundane music and become lost in Lovett's wistful tones.

New Lovett fans should stick to his past endeavors. "Road to Ensenada" and "Joshua Judges Ruth" are a lot more Lovett to love.

– Liza Holtmeier

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