

Lovett concert honors late songwriter

By Jane DuBose

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Nashville — In a city where benefit concerts are as commonplace as cowboy hats, Sunday's benefit for Walter Hyatt managed to stand out.

Singer-songwriter Hyatt, 46, died in the May 11 crash of ValuJet Flight 592 in the Florida Everglades. Hyatt, who had lived in Nashville for more than a decade, influenced the careers of dozens of artists with his blend of folk, jazz and swing music.

His friends returned the favor Sunday before about 2,000 fans in the historic Ryman Auditorium, the former home of the Grand Ole Opry radio show.

Headlining the three-hour show was Lyle Lovett, who helped organize the event, along with David Ball, Hal Ketchum, B.J. Thomas, Marshall Chapman and Townes Van Zandt. Ball performed with Hyatt in the 1970s in the Austin, Texas-based Uncle Walt's Band.

"What I got from him was how much he loved the songs and the music," Ball said.

Among the fans of Uncle

Walt's Band in the 1970s was a Texas cabinetmaker who aspired to perform. Hyatt let him join the band on stage occasionally. The cabinetmaker is now country performer Ketchum.

"[Hyatt] was so pure and clear about his art," Chapman said. "He never made music to fill any of the existing markets."

Chapman, who was a childhood friend of Hyatt's in Spartanburg, S.C., performed "Are We There Yet, Mama?" a song written and performed by Hyatt.

All of the artists performed for free.

"I didn't have to do any begging," said Bobby Cudd, the Nashville-based booking agent.

Lovett's set was limited to 30 minutes, and Cudd said he was concerned about "diluting" the impact of a Lovett concert. But, he said, "so many people were truly affected by Hyatt" that he expanded the line-up.

Lovett produced Hyatt's "King Tears" album and recognized the songwriter's influence on his own work. On

his new album, "The Road to Ensenada," he dedicated a song "That's Right (You're Not From Texas)" to Hyatt's memory.

Chapman, who stayed close to Hyatt after he moved to Nashville, said he likely did not achieve greater commercial success because "he was such a sweet, gentle person, and you've got to have a little killer instinct in this business."

Proceeds from the concert will go to Hyatt's widow, Heidi, and their 1- and 6-year-old children. In addition, the Second Presbyterian Church in Nashville, where the Hyatt family worshiped, has received money to benefit the family.

The Rev. Steve Hancock said Hyatt was "thoughtful, quiet. He really was a deeply spiritual person. It came through in his music."

Hancock, who officiated at Hyatt's funeral, says the tragedy has been particularly difficult for family and friends because the crash continues to dominate news coverage. Hyatt had been in Florida to perform and was returning home on the Miami-to-Atlanta flight.