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Lucinda Williams gets political, and takes it personally, on latest



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3 1/2 (out of 4)

Lucinda Williams opens her 11th studio album since 1979, "Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone" (Thirty Tigers), from a darkened corner, with a stark, acoustic reading of "Compassion." It's a poem written by her father, Miller Williams, and it compactly conveys the grace one needs to navigate a world without a lot of it.

It opens a double-album that unfolds over 110 minutes and 20 songs, a sprawling survey of how the personal becomes the political, with sides taken and winners declared. Williams says as much in the track that opens Disc 2, "Something Wicked This Way Comes," in which she describes a world without mercy.

As with just about everything Williams has recorded, the music fits under a big umbrella that the singer calls "country soul," as befits her deep roots in the South and various regional musical dialects, from blues to swamp rock. The vibe is loose, shaggy, with a cast of characters that includes Williams' excellent touring band and ringers such as jazz guitarist Bill Frisell and Faces keyboardist Ian McLagan. The rough edges remain intact, and sometimes Williams' voice frays. There are no attempts to prettify it with studio trickery, but her garbled drawl is a heavy weapon nonetheless — it shivers with purpose.

The almost desperate plea underlying "Compassion" returns on "When I Look at the World," with its shellshocked tone of beauty and wonder. It offers a hint of redemption in an album that often seethes. "Now you wanna come shake my hand?" Williams snarls on "East Side of Town," an incredulous citizen tired of hearing one too many glad-handing promises.

"East Side of Town" identifies with the marginalized, and though it was written and recorded months before the recent civil unrest in Ferguson, Mo., it might as well be a soundtrack for centuries of violence and misunderstanding in a country perpetually divided by race and economics. "West Memphis" is a loping blues about injustice. "They didn't like the music I listened to, they didn't like the way I dressed," she sings from the perspective of a falsely accused convict. She tosses off an explanation from the jailers that becomes a mocking hook: "That's just the way we do things."

This is tough-minded protest music that doesn't leave much gray area. But the directness of Williams' lyrics gains texture from her impassioned delivery and the grit in her storytelling. In "Foolishness," a chant becomes a fed-up purge. "Everything but the Truth" warns that there will be a reckoning, conjuring some of the fire-and-brimstone of the gospel-era Bob Dylan in a Louisiana swamp of blues and bile.

After all this heaviness, it's almost redemptive to hear it telescoped down to a straight-up country ballad, "This Old Heartache," that finds a lonely lover lamenting a loss.

Several tracks on "Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone" fall short of those peaks, and it's tempting to try to pare down a double-CD to a single album of its strongest songs. But the sprawl is by design, and even the seemingly leisurely cover of J.J. Cale's "Magnolia" that ends the album has a purpose. Over nearly 10 minutes, Williams and her band let the song slowly unfold until a little light creeps in. It's a beautiful grace note that rewards those who stay for the long haul.

'Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone'

Lucinda Williams