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Lucinda Williams to Release 'Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone'

The music maverick reflects on her new double album, 'Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone'

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Lucinda Williams *James Wilson*

Lucinda Williams has been writing so many songs, she recently put together a filing system to keep them organized.

The 61-year-old singer stores the songs in a hot pink leather tote she had planned to use as a suitcase. Now the bag is loaded with dozens of file folders alphabetized by working titles. The files are filled with lyrics on computer printouts or jotted on cocktail napkins. Words are circled for emphasis on some; on another, scrawled notes call for "tougher slide guitar" or "more bite."

A folder labeled "Ghosts of Highway 20," holds a map of a road running through the landmarks of her Southern childhood, such as Jackson and Vicksburg, Miss. The file also has Ms. Williams's notes from a phone call with an old friend detailing a story about a prison rodeo and a trailer park called the Pink Panther.

"I thought it sounded like a good blues song," Ms. Williams said of her friend's story, which might find its way into a lyric someday.

Lucinda Williams's Handwritten Lyrics



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A glimpse into Lucinda Williams's lyric-filing system.
John Jurgensen/The Wall Street Journal

The filing system is helping a songwriter who once second-guessed every detail of her work to pick up the pace. About a year ago, Ms. Williams went into a Los Angeles studio with her band and recorded 35 tracks in 21 days. The songs—snarling rockers, dusky ballads and even her first adaptation of a composition by her father, the poet Miller Williams—all fit the wide-ranging sound she calls "country soul." She put 20 of the songs into a double album, "Down Where the

Spirit Meets the Bone," set for release Tuesday. She saved the remaining recordings, featuring guitarist Bill Frisell, for a future album.

With the relevance of the album format in doubt, releasing a double album clocking in at more than 2½ hours is an act of defiance. Then again, Ms. Williams has been sailing into industry winds ever since she dropped out of the University of Arkansas to get a club gig on Bourbon Street in New Orleans.

Later, in Houston and Austin, Texas, she developed in a singer-songwriter scene that included Townes Van Zandt, Nanci Griffith and Lyle Lovett. In 1984, she moved to Los Angeles, seeking the then-necessary support of a record label. But back before "Americana" existed as a commercial category of music, labels struggled to market an artist who didn't neatly fit either the rock or country mold. An Americana movement was in full swing when her breakthrough album, "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road," came out in 1998. She was 45 years old.

For her recent prolific streak, the singer credits maturity and an artistic self-confidence earned over decades of writing and touring. But there's been added pressure to produce. She and her husband, Tom Overby, who is also her manager, have spent the past five years digging out from more than \$2 million in debt, she said. The crisis, which came to light shortly after their marriage in 2009, was caused by mismanagement by a former business associate.

Faced with missed mortgage payments on their Los Angeles home and a bank account in the red, the couple needed a quick infusion of cash. Ms. Williams sold her most valuable asset: the publishing rights to her song catalog. As owner of the songs, she had been collecting most of the royalties they earned. Selling them to music-publishing company Warner/Chappell, brought her a sum big enough to cover most of the couple's debt.



Before the sale, Warner/Chappell had served as administrator of Ms. Williams's song catalog and earned about 20% of the royalties.

After Warner/Chappell recoups the lump sum it paid her for the songs, the company's stake increases to 50% of the royalty revenue that her compositions generate from sales, airplay and licensing fees. Such arrangements are commonplace in the music industry. The deal spanned Ms. Williams's entire back catalog, nearly 100 songs, including her most recent

album, 2011's "Blessed." However, she retains full ownership of her new music, including the double album.

"We had to act fast, and my publishing was the only collateral I had. That was hard," she said.

Ms. Williams speaks in a raspy voice and has a quick, high-pitched chuckle. At home in Los Angeles last month, her blue eye shadow matched her scuffed cowboy boots—a pair of Old Gringos, her favorite brand. Her silver belt buckle read, "Get Right With God."

She and Mr. Overby live in a bright two-level house in the hills above Studio City. Posters from her concerts cover a wall near the kitchen, where she does much of her songwriting. The living room has blocky portraits of Howlin' Wolf, Guitar Slim and other musicians painted by folk artists such as Lamar Sorrento. Ms. Williams brought out a book by Birney Imes, whose photographs of juke joints in the South she used for the cover of "Car Wheels" and the graffiti-covered interior shots for "Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone."

Instead of another album cover with her face on it, "I just wanted something tough and visceral," she said.

Her songs that tell stories, such as "Drunken Angel" and "Lake Charles," both inspired by doomed friends, have become fan favorites. Lately, however, she has been working to capture more universal themes in her lyrics. For instance, with the new, up-tempo "Walk On," Ms. Williams said she wanted to deliver a message of "girl power" to young women (or perhaps a past version of herself) with such lines as, "You gotta make them understand that you're the lead singer in the band."

The effort to explore new artistic territory—and scare up new sources of income—also led her to try writing songs for other musicians, something she hadn't done before. In recent years she turned in songs for Faith Hill and Aerosmith, though neither track was recorded. For a collection of songs on the theme of the Lone Ranger, a Walt Disney project tied to the Johnny Depp film, she contributed a song called "Everything But the Truth."

Long identified with songs about heartbreak—and a string of stormy romances that inspired them—Ms. Williams once bought into the image of the suffering artist. But now she dismisses the notion that turmoil sparks inspiration. "People have this idea that to get a certain kind of song, you have to be brokenhearted, smoking a cigarette and drinking bourbon. And a lot of artists have helped create that myth," she said. "At some point I realized I couldn't live my life in chaos."

Being married and living a quieter life hasn't stifled her creativity. She said, "That was one of my tests of the relationship" with Mr. Overby, who is the first one to hear and weigh in on her work.

Ms. Williams also has a deep well of history to draw on, she said, such as her itinerant childhood (as the daughter of a poet who moved often among universities), and the mental illness of her mother, who died in 2004.

Her father, her writing mentor, is 84 years old and has Alzheimer's disease. Before he became ill, she would send him all her song lyrics before recording them. Something he once said on the phone inspired a title: "[Temporary Nature \(Of Any Precious Thing\)](#)." The resulting ballad dealt with the prospect of losing him.

Last month, Ms. Williams played a music festival in Fayetteville, Ark., near her father's home. He couldn't attend the concert, so his daughter performed in his home, singing and playing solo acoustic guitar for a dozen of his friends and family members. Miller Williams, who wrote and recited a poem for Bill Clinton's presidential inauguration, read one of his best-known works, "Compassion," about giving difficult people the benefit of the doubt.

Then Ms. Williams sang her version of the poem, her first time playing it for her father. Initially, she says, she struggled to reshape his lines into the quiet, unadorned song that leads off her album. The album's title comes from the poem's closing line: "You do not know what wars are going on down there where the spirit meets the bone."