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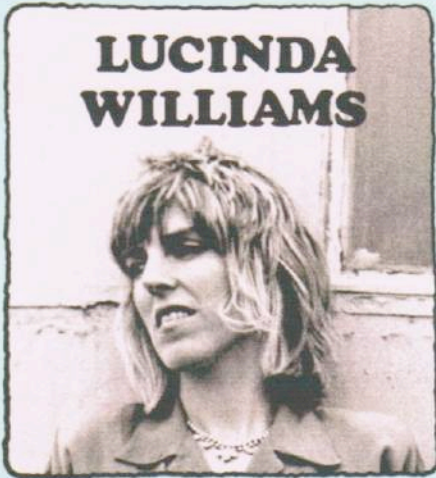
THE

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PITCHFORK REVIEW

(ALMOST)
No Trolls

**LUCINDA
WILLIAMS**



HAPPY WOMAN BLUES

CLARA ROSSIGNOLI
first!



ENTERTAINMENT

“
All I care about
is trying to express
reality, which is a
really different
modus operandi
for a pop musician.
”

The Passion of
**ANTONY
HEGARTY**

Happy Woman Blues

For four decades, Lucinda Williams played and lost games with major labels and major romance. Now, at 62, she has self-released a masterpiece.

BY GRAYSON HAVER CURRIN



When Lucinda Williams was introduced at the Carolina Theatre in Durham, North Carolina, on the night of her 62nd birthday, a brief and awkward pause followed her name.

The seated crowd first looked on stage, of course, but she didn't appear. Audience members shifted their bodies in their padded wooden seats and turned toward the exits, scanning the aisles for a glimpse of one of the sharpest songwriters ever to come from the American South, in hopes she might saunter past them. The throng stared for a second at a woman about Williams' height and age who happened to be returning from the lobby. She ducked quickly into a row, as if embarrassed by not being the star of the show.

Onstage, Robert Milazzo, the director of the Modern School of Film, paused, laughed, and called out for Tom Overby—Williams' husband of five years and manager for just a bit longer. Overby signaled from an alcove that it would be a few moments; the attendees laughed, a trace of anxiety evident in the ripple. Williams was in town not for a concert but instead for a screening of and conversation about *Wise Blood*, a quizzical and dated adaptation of Flannery O'Connor's first novel.

The room was ready to hear from the singer, whether or not she sang any songs.

"She is here," Milazzo offered after a few more minutes, his smile growing more angular. "I promise."

Williams finally walked out onto the stage wearing dark grey jeans and a black jacket, clutching a celebratory glass of wine and taking her time to ease into her chair. The tension vanished. She talked about *Wise Blood*, sure, but mostly she discussed her life and worldview—about her poet father Miller Williams, who took a young Lucinda to meet O'Connor and see her peacocks; about Bob Dylan and Van Morrison, former tour-mates who taught her how *not* to lead a band through their own bad examples; about her three Grammys, and how she was disappointed when her 2014 offering, *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone*, didn't earn a nomination.

She took questions from the crowd, eased her way through a few acoustic numbers, and indulged the pandering Milazzo. When he asked about religion, her answer alone made the wait worthwhile.

"None of my songs mention Jesus. It's all God. It's non-denominational, so anyone can join," she said.

Williams speaks a little like she sings, leaving considerate pauses between short sentences delivered in the low, scratched twang that helped make her famous.

She's thinking, but it feels as if she's allowing you time to process what she has just said.

"The Bible," she concluded wryly, "is great fodder for songs."

Williams has been making good on running late for most of her life. In fact, in 2014 at the age of 61, she countered any assumption of obsolescence with *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone*, one of the most audacious efforts of her career. The double album possesses both a youthful verve and a mature nerve, as Williams doles out wisdom in her rutted, red-clay drawl over the rippling arrangements of a great rock band. When she cut those records, she made enough music for a third disc, due out later this year. Maybe it's too much to say that Williams is in the prime of her career, but at 62 she commands powers of observation and delivery that most singers and songwriters will never reach.

Again, she has taken her time getting here: Booted from high school, she would subsequently drop out of a cultural anthropology program at the University of Arkansas and spend her teenage years in the '70s pinballing between Austin, Houston, and New Orleans. She wrote some songs and performed them alongside deep Delta blues covers—first on street corners and, eventually, in Houston's folk clubs or most anywhere that would have her.

Williams released her first album, a collection of fierce acoustic standards and obscurities called *Ramblin'*, in 1979 at the age of 26. But the next two decades were rife with fits and starts, as she bounced between record labels and failed deals. Despite a critically lauded self-titled disc in the late '80s and a 1994 Grammy for writing Mary Chapin Carpenter's country-radio hit "Passionate Kisses," Williams didn't gain widespread acclaim or much in the way of financial reward until 1998. That's when *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road* pushed her into *Time* magazine, near the top of most every critic's year-end list, and, with her short shock of black hair and leather vest suggesting a honky-tonk Joan Jett, onto *Saturday Night Live*.

She was 45, singing a song about being dumped and becoming apoplectic in the process. "Feels like I been shot," she hollered during the biggest, shortest set of her life, "and I didn't fall down." Those tortured feelings served as the necessary bait for Williams' eventual ascent. A year before the *Saturday Night Live*

stop, the *New York Times* titled its piece about the laborious, fraught, and much-delayed process of making *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, “Lucinda Williams Is in Pain.” And in his tangential 11,000-word *New Yorker* ode to Williams, her South, and her existential complications, Bill Buford wrote, “[Her songs] are unforgiving because they are so relentlessly about pain or longing or can’t-get-it-out-of-your-head sexual desire, but most often they’re about loss, and usually about losing some impossible fuckup of a man.”

Buford detailed the boyfriends who had died or been dismissed, and another who hung precariously in the balance only to, by article’s end, join the swollen ranks of Williams’ exes. Those bust-ups fueled many of the songs that became standards, like “Side of the Road,” the self-reliance proclamation where Williams just needs to feel alive by being alone for a while.

A day after the Carolina Theatre screening, sitting in the bar of Durham’s most genteel hotel, Williams revisits the topic. “When I was younger, I would just get lost in these relationships, and my writing would be the first thing to go out the window,” she says. “I would feel stuck. I would feel uninspired. That would be my test: If I can’t write *in* a relationship, it’s the wrong relationship.”

Songs would follow in the wake of the breakup. Or, as Buford concluded, “That happiness thing, who needs it?” Turns out, just maybe, Lucinda Williams at least *wants* it: During the last decade, she has entered a new phase of her life and career, the sort of settling-down and settling-in mode that most tend to have before they’ve passed the half-century mark or before they’ve buried a dozen friends.

In the past, Williams says, she’s never had a steady relationship that not only allowed her to write but even encouraged her to do so; Overby is her first and, perhaps not coincidentally, the longest commitment of her life. She now has more songs in the works than at any other time in her career, even though she wrote her first number (a precious ballad about autumn called “The Wind Blows”) when she was 13. Overby helps her screen new demos and has even begun digging through boxes of abandoned archives, rediscovering songs she long ago forsook.

She speaks about the dynamic with a mix of adoration and admiration, regarding Overby as much as a life partner as a lover. In Williams’ songs, relationships are lascivious and vicious things; when she talks about Overby, you get the sense that the concept of nurtur-

ing remains a new one for her. These days, she’s writing real-life love songs.

“When people found out Tom and I were engaged, everybody asked, ‘Are you still going to be able to write songs?’ It just drove me crazy,” she says, pounding an open hand on the dark wooden table. “People are so stuck in the idea that you have to suffer to create, and that’s true, but we all suffer. Just because I’m married doesn’t mean I’m always going to be happy. From the moment of birth, the doctor slaps you, and you cry. That’s what life is.”

A week later, at her home in Los Angeles, she tries to explain why it’s taken her so long to get places—to a record deal, to success, to stability, to a marriage that integrates all of it. Every few words her voice peaks, as if searching the horizon for an easy answer, the same solution for which she’s been looking for four decades.

“People say, ‘You’re 62, and you’re still writing like this?’ I’m an anomaly. I should just be retired at this point,” she says. “But I’m still growing. I don’t know why that is. Some people get old and some people don’t. I can’t even believe I’m sitting here talking about being old.”

Three weeks before Lucinda Williams finally stepped on the stage of the Carolina Theatre last January, she received some news she’d been expecting: On New Year’s Day, her father, Miller, had died in Fayetteville, Arkansas, just months after being moved to a nursing home for people with dementia. He was 84.

Williams’ parents divorced when she was a child, though they continued living together for several years. When she left high school, Miller homeschooled her by prescribing a list of mandatory reading. When she got into music, he nurtured the interest. When she talks about him now, she talks about his mind—how sharp and bright it was, how analytical he tended to be, how defiant he remained. She makes him sound like a saint.

Yet when he died, she admits, she cried less than she thought she would have. Williams had shed most of her tears months before, during one of her final visits with her father in Fayetteville. She sat on the sun porch that day, her father’s arm around her neck and a glass of wine in her hand as the sun began to set in the late afternoon. He told her that he was getting weaker and that, in his advanced age, he could no longer write poetry.

“I cried like a baby,” Williams says of that day. “That was the hardest thing. That part of him was gone.”



During a subsequent visit late last year, she played a show in Fayetteville, but he was too frail to attend. She played a private set for him and some old friends at home. She sang "Compassion," the acoustic number based on his poem of the same name that opens *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone*. In turn, he read the poem. "You don't know what kind of wars are going on / Down where the spirit meets the bone," she sang and he recited. Overby recorded it so that she would never forget.

His poetry—"that part," as she puts it—is perhaps the biggest unifying influence on Williams' output as a Southern songwriter and her attitude as a defiant survivalist, if not in terms of language or aesthetics. Their views on writing, Williams concedes, could be diametric; Miller hated the Beats, for instance, though she liked their romance and adventurousness. His methodical approach to scenes and sentiments applies little to the emotional battlegrounds of her songs. But for both Miller and Lucinda Williams, writing became a rite of life, a necessity akin to breathing, no matter how futile the results could seem.

"My dad said once that poets didn't start getting respected until they were in their 50s or 60s," she says. "With my dad and his writer friends in that world, age wasn't part of the equation."

Miller Williams eventually earned tenure as a professor at his alma mater, the University of Arkansas. In 1990 he won the Poet's Prize, one of America's premier awards for writers, and he read "Of History and Hope" at Bill Clinton's second presidential inauguration seven years later. However, the path to that prestige was circuitous and trying.

As a teenager, he'd been told he had a mathematical mind and that he should pursue science instead of the arts. He studied biology and eventually taught biochemistry; Lucinda remembers how he'd bring home lab rats and anatomical models to show the kids. Miller's politically defiant viewpoints clashed with the entrenched conservatism of the 1950s and '60s Deep South, and he bounced from school to school, his family living like that of a circuit preacher. At one, his review of an Anne Sexton poem about masturbation—"I am spread out. I crucify / My little plum is what you said / At night, alone, I marry the bed."—put him at odds with administrators. He soon quit.

"When you're just starting out as a professor, you teach for a year or two here or a year or two there—at least that's the way it was always explained to me," she

says. "But when he achieved tenure at the University of Arkansas, he was there from that moment on."

When Lucinda tries to recount everywhere she lived as a child, she starts and stops, rewinds and resumes, counts backward from the years her two siblings were born and forward from when she began school.

Lake Charles, Louisiana; Vicksburg, Mississippi; Jackson, Mississippi; Atlanta, Georgia; Macon, Georgia; Iowa, Louisiana; Santiago, Chile; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; New Orleans, Louisiana; Mexico City, Mexico; and, at last, Fayetteville, Arkansas. Lying down in the bunk of her tour bus, several weeks into a run up and down the West Coast, it takes about seven minutes.

Miller's movements offered his daughter a veritable tour of the American South. She met the pantheon of the best Southern writers and fell in love with the region's idiosyncrasies and obstinacy. Although the experience sometimes felt like living in a foreign country locked inside America, she embraced that identity, just like her father had.

"He didn't wave the rebel flag around, but my dad was very proud of where he was from. He wanted the world to know, 'I'm a Southern poet, by god,'" she remembers. "I was raised that way, and I like being thought of as a Southerner. It's a pride thing."

What's more, those travels made her comfortable with the kind of constant change that would go on to define much of her life and many of her songs. Her discography is a mercurial, beautiful, and damaged landscape of lovers who enter and exit, places that come in through the windshield and exit through the rearview, feelings that flood and then evaporate. On her second album, 1980's *Happy Woman Blues*, she sang, "I think I lost it, let me know if you come across it / Let me know if I let it fall along a back road somewhere." It's unclear whether she's singing of a love or perhaps satisfaction itself.

The theme winds through her catalog, from 1988's "Passionate Kisses" to 1992's "Sidewalks of the City," from 2001's "Out of Touch" to 2008's "If Wishes Were Horses." When she reprised "I Lost It" for her 1998 breakthrough, *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*—the album that canonized her within the upper echelon of American songwriters—the move felt less like an attempt to retread a great song and more like a proclamation of continuity: Lucinda Williams songs have forever been seesaws of happiness and sadness, sex and desire, and they probably always will be.

There's an earned toughness there, too. Like her

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—*Lucinda Williams*

father, Williams initially encountered skepticism about her career choice. She started taking piano lessons before she was a teenager “with this little old guy” whose house was decorated with pink wallpaper and tchotchkes; it was uncomfortable, and she wasn’t patient enough for piano, anyway. Miller noticed her interest and, as was the case with so many musicians of her generation, a Silvertone from the Sears catalog became her first guitar. She took lessons with a teacher who showed her how to pick “Puff the Magic Dragon.” She began writing; in a family where the written word was sacrosanct, her enthusiasm was nursed along.

Still, during her abbreviated stint at the University of Arkansas, a Spanish teacher told her she should rethink her musical ambitions. Williams never understood why: “Just like when my dad was going to college, there’s always that advice they give you, I guess,” she deadpans.

Decades later, that same teacher came backstage at a show in Ohio and confessed that she’d been wrong. That admission represented the redemption of another quarter-century struggle for Williams.

Three months shy of his 70th birthday, Tom Southwick admits that his memory is beginning to fade, but he still vividly recalls his first encounter with Williams, as she stood and sang on the back of a flatbed truck in Houston, Texas, a few days after he’d heard her play a few songs on a local radio station. He was recently divorced, living in a furnished two-room apartment (“about as low as you could go without living in a box by the road”), and was looking for some excitement. He decided to go see her.

“It was November 15, 1975. She was playing a 12-string guitar and singing the Mississippi Delta blues, which was unusual on a 12-string,” he remembers. “She was on a truck in the parking lot behind a bookstore. I had never seen anything quite like it: She was an average-sized woman with this big ol’ guitar, belting out blues that were 99 percent performed by men. She was playing against the type, and she sang strong and steady. It wasn’t a chirpy voice with perfect pitch. She understood the form innately.”

Williams had recently relocated from Austin to

Houston after a stint in New Orleans, where she'd sat on a stool in a bar and played four-hour acoustic shifts while sharing an apartment with a topless dancer. Anchored around the legendary venue Anderson Fair, Houston's thriving folk scene offered more opportunities to be heard than Austin or New Orleans. Southwick became a fan, going to almost all of her Houston shows and steadily becoming her confidant.

As Williams began to build area attention, Southwick's own plight also began to improve. He was a single guy and a computer programmer, so he had money to spare. They were both looking for stable housing in Houston, so he invited Williams to live in his large one-bedroom apartment. She took the rectangular laundry room with a window at either end, adding the little desk where she started to write. Southwick refused to let her split the rent.

"I kept saying, 'I need to get a job,' and Tom would say, 'No, don't worry about it. Go play your music. I just want to see you do well,'" Williams says. "He was just a big music fan with no ulterior motives whatsoever."

They lived together for 14 months, a period that proved to be pivotal in both of their lives. At one point, a college friend of Williams', Carol Hunter, visited the pair in Houston. She and Southwick fell for one another, got married, had twins, and later moved to New Jersey together, eventually divorcing in 2005. Williams kept working on new numbers in her little laundry-room apartment, delivering them most anywhere that would have her.

One night she played at a student union building at the University of Houston. The room was crowded, but hardly anyone paid attention. The humbling lack of momentum, in spite of her best efforts, slowly enraged her. At another bar, she played Dylan's epic "Desolation Row" in its entirety. Southwick listened, but few others did. Exasperated, she ran into the rain and yelled, "I hate Houston!"

"I could hardly blame her. I didn't think much of it myself at that point, either," Southwick says. "She wasn't someone who could just sing quietly. She wasn't like a piano player in a restaurant; she had songs to sing, stories to tell. She never felt like she had a choice. This is what she had to do with her life."

Williams had built a reputation in the city's active folk scene, but her constant writing, playing, and socializing took its toll. She developed nodes on her throat and started losing her voice. She eventually returned to Arkansas, moving back in with her father and commu-

nicating for six weeks only by written notes. When she started playing again, she heard from an old friend, a songwriter named Jeff Ampolsk, who told her to reach out to Folkways Records in New York. They'd issued a collection of his jumpy, slight acoustic numbers called *Gods, Guts & Guns*, and he told Williams that they'd put out most anything.

Folkways didn't let her down: They sent her \$250, the budget for recording her first album, *Ramblin'*. She cut it in a day in a studio in Jackson, Mississippi, with the help of one of her father's longtime friends. She was still poor, but she had managed to make a record. She decided to follow Ampolsk's other encouragement and make the jump to New York's Greenwich Village, where so many of her heroes, particularly Bob Dylan, had found opportunity.

Back in Houston, Southwick and a consortium of early Williams believers who called themselves G.L.O.H., or Get Lucinda Out of Houston, cobbled together the cash to help her make the trip. In New York, she met Dylan at Gerde's Folk City, and Moses Asch—the legendary and aging founder of her label—in his office. But she despised the city, and after eight months she retreated back to Houston.

Folkways sent her \$500 to record her second album, *Happy Woman Blues*. Her father and Southwick pitched in to finance the rest of the recording, done at night and under the radar at a professional studio back in Houston. It wasn't a commercial or critical breakthrough, but those 11 tracks were an epiphany and victory for Williams.

Upon recording her debut, she had assumed that Folkways wasn't interested in some young white woman's thoughts, so she cut a blues disc. "I wasn't really known as a songwriter then, so I was going by what I thought they would want," Williams explains. "I didn't know how many of my songs were good at that time."

But when it came time to record *Happy Woman Blues*, her confidence had blossomed. She had a band and several songs she liked. The record of originals represented the first of Williams' many triumphs over her own assumptions about the music industry and its assumptions about her. *Happy Woman Blues* also signaled the launch of a sad, sweet Southern stylist.

Still, for the better part of the next decade, the music industry spurned Williams. Her talent seemed clear, but no one knew how to market it. Exactly what lured Southwick to her music—this beautiful young woman

singing this gritty, stylized mix of old country, rock, and blues as though it was all she knew how to do—confounded record executives. After she moved to Los Angeles in the mid-'80s, major labels started showing up for her sets. She worked shifts in record and book stores; the last day job she remembers is a stint heating up samples of gourmet sausages on a griddle and doling them out to grocery shoppers. She lasted one day.

In 1984, CBS Records gave her a development deal and advanced her a six-month living stipend to write what they hoped would become an album. They passed on the demo, which eventually landed at Rough Trade Records, who weren't concerned about Williams' marketability.

"For big labels, I fell in the cracks between country and rock. There was no Americana back then," she says with a sigh. "Rough Trade were European, they didn't care about that crap."

The Rough Trade album created a buzz that her first two records hadn't; by self-titling it, too, Williams fostered the feeling that she was only now emerging, not reemerging after a decade of relative failure. Major-label interest returned; Bob Buziak, the head of RCA, wanted to sign her. She was reluctant to leave Rough Trade, which had taken a chance on her, but Buziak's "independent spirit" appealed to her. She said yes.

Buziak was soon fired, and Williams was left working with people who didn't know what to do with her. They wanted something they could put on the radio. They wanted big bass and drums and slight vocals, not singer-driven country-rock. Her new label representative began shipping off early recordings for the album that became *Sweet Old World* to be remixed. Each time RCA would get a new track back, she'd walk the six blocks to the office to hear the results.

"I hated it. The A&R guy's jumping up and down in his Gucci shoes, going, 'It's a record! It's a record!'" Williams says. "I didn't want to be there anymore, but they wouldn't let me go."

So Williams, who had become a critical favorite after the Rough Trade album, decided to voice her unhappiness to the industry at large. During a South by Southwest panel about the crossroads of creativity and capitalism, she railroaded RCA, explaining the shuffle of executives who had tried to bend her sound and their unwillingness to let her manage her own musical risks. Word of her unhappiness spread.

"The next day, I get a call from my manager: 'You're

dropped.' He was pissed off, but I just said, 'Yes!'" she remembers. "I was so passionate about artist independence. It just took me a long time to find the right people to work with in the studio, men who didn't boss me around and tell me what to do."

Again, the lessons of her father applied: He'd been turned down for several jobs, she says, because he was a "Southern poet," a stigma that implied a certain slowness and provinciality. Her backwater Southern sensibilities presented a roadblock for label executives who wanted a polished product. She wanted everything to have the wild edge of an O'Connor short story or of Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited*. She had to find others who agreed.

In 1992, Williams finally issued *Sweet Old World* through eclectic indie label Chameleon. Six years later, after a distended and near-disastrous recording process, Mercury released her landmark, *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*. For its follow-up, 2001's *Essence*, she moved to Lost Highway, a new Americana branch of Universal. It was a comfortable fit and the platform by which Williams became a legitimate roots-music star.

It's hard to imagine what might have happened to Williams had she stuck with RCA and the recordings she has sometimes disparaged as "disco." Maybe she would have become a one-hit wonder, squashing the credibility that she'd spent nearly a quarter-century developing. But she seems too hardscrabble for that fate, too tough to be denied the chance to share her blues. Southwick, the one who helped finance her life in Houston, calls it "her indestructible kind of determination."

After all, Williams emphasizes that at no point did she consider that she might be something *besides* a songwriter, despite all the rejections and strife.

"Something inside me kept pushing me forward. I never had this attitude like, 'I haven't made it yet,'" she says. "I just knew I had this *thing*."

Tom Overby had been in the record business long enough to know that his wife would soon be, once again, without a label. In 2003, Overby moved to Los Angeles to help establish Fontana, the arm of Universal Music Group that distributes titles from independent labels. He'd worked for years as a high-level music buyer at Best Buy before moving on to artist development and marketing at a record label in Nashville. He un-

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—Lucinda Williams

derstood how Music City worked, and, by 2011, he was beginning to understand that Lost Highway, where Williams had been for a decade, had become a lost cause.

Before Williams’ fifth album with the label, *Blessed*, could be finished, the layoffs began. Artists began not renewing their contracts. Founder Luke Lewis told Overby and Williams that he would do his best to keep her on the label and to keep the label alive, but if they wanted to pursue other options, he wouldn’t begrudge the decision.

Lost Highway released its last record in April 2012, a year after *Blessed* became the fourth consecutive Williams LP to crack the Billboard Top 20. Again, at 60, Williams was an unsigned artist.

Williams tends to talk about the music business like an old friend she stopped liking long ago but to whom, for reasons of necessity, she remains close. “I had no idea where we were going to end up.” She and Overby had long toyed with the idea of launching their own imprint, in part to help issue music by old friends who had also been waylaid by a changing industry. As they approached labels with their talks of new music, they made that intention clear. They wanted to start their own home for Williams’ music and, if the time was right, put out a record by someone else, too.

Thirty Tigers, a Nashville company in part responsible for the solo rise of former Drive-By Trucker Jason Isbell and the ascendance of Sturgill Simpson, agreed. Williams would retain her own masters and publishing rights, meaning that her takeaway pay could be much

higher. They called the label Highway 20 after the interstate that cuts from Texas through Louisiana, Mississippi, and Georgia—“where I grew up,” says Williams.

She and Overby got back to work, meeting with multiple producers, weighing costs and timetables. In the end, they decided to keep the affair cheap, relaxed, and close to their Los Angeles home. They recorded at an old but updated studio named Dave’s Home, run by veteran engineer David Bianco. It was a small, intimate room in a working-class section of North Hollywood. The short drive allowed Williams, who sleeps into the early afternoon unless business forces her up earlier, to wake at her leisure. When she arrived each day, the band would be waiting and ready.

Williams notoriously recorded *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road* at least three times before she was satisfied enough to release it. Shortly after Overby first met her, he sat in on her early sessions for *West*. He was stunned when she scrapped the lot of it, electing only to keep her vocals. For *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone*, she reversed the perfectionist curse, filling three albums with material in the time she’d allotted for just one record. The bandleader who’d previously been painted as a petulant tyrant who fired people on a whim now calls the group “her little family.”

“I was able to get there in the late afternoon. We’d cut a song, take a break and have dinner, cut another song,” she says. They took their time, even going on short tours during the sessions so they could work the songs in front of an audience. “It was the best recording

experience I've ever had."

Williams had been entertaining the idea of releasing a double album for years, but at *Lost Highway*, Lewis always led her to reconsider, warning that the cost for fans would simply be too high. Now on her own, she decided to go for it. *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone* clocks in at 20 tracks and 100 minutes. The plan paid off, as it is perhaps the broadest and best representation of Williams' talents yet.

It's not all heartbreak, either; she roots for solidarity and social concerns, always taking shots from the position of the underdog. The sashaying "West Memphis," for instance, is a convict ballad turned sociopolitical send-up, where a native Southerner lampoons the same systems from which she rose. During "Everything But the Truth," Williams sprints and stutters through proclamations of self-empowerment and self-improvement over the cocky organ runs of Ian McLagan, in some of the late keyboardist's final sessions.

The coruscating, slow soul number "One More Day" reprises Williams' past as the poet laureate of bad breakups. Alongside weeping horns and moping guitars, she pleads, "Give me one more day / To spend a couple bucks / And place my bet / And win back your love." It's a stunning, subtle rejoinder for those who wondered if she could write sad songs while happily married. Her voice pocked by experience, Williams makes the hurt feel real, like it's her life at that moment, not her life reflected in a moment.

But the actual magic of *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone* arrives in its songs of strength and resolve. The crackling "Walk On" is a call for confidence when battling apparently long odds. "Come on, girl, walk on," Williams offers in the refrain, an elder unveiling earned wisdom. She wrote it for her sole goddaughter, the daughter of her long-term boyfriend prior to Overby. She's a good kid, Williams says, a former homecoming queen now going to college outside of Nashville. Williams likes to think she's had a positive impact on her life; at the very least, she wants to offer the kind of encouragement and empowerment that she once found in people like Southwick and her father.

"I don't know how she came out of that situation like she did. She's one of those kids who doesn't want to make the same mistakes her parents made," Williams says. "She hasn't gotten into drugs or drinking. She hasn't gotten pregnant."

During "Protection," which follows Williams' open-

ing rendition of her father's poem, snarling guitars speak to each other in stereo. She packs six decades of experience into five perspicacious minutes: "Well, I've seen some things in life, as God as my witness / I've cried and cried, and nobody could help." By song's end, though, she has emerged as her own biggest champion and defender, employing an economy of words and rhythms that recalls, in passing, her father the poet: "My burden is lifted when I stand up / And use the gift I was given for not givin' up." The band goes quiet during that last line; that's *her* mantra.

Williams laughs when she talks about her life and career and how long it's taken her to reach certain points—a stable marriage, a relationship with a man who inspires her to write, a reputation that no longer requires the imprimatur or aegis of a large corporation.

"It's just worked out that way. It certainly wasn't a conscious effort on my part for things to take that long," Williams says, her warm raspy chuckle coming so hard, quick, and loud that she has to pause for several seconds. "My career has certainly had a mind of its own. It's a little bit of a mystery, I guess—how I ended up where I am, at my age."

In a way, Williams' good humor recalls what she said about her father, how she'd already shed her tears for him by the time he died. Between the deceased lovers and the failed romances, the broken label deals and the divorced friends, the little laundry room bedsit and the dismissed bands, Williams has had plenty to cry about since she wrote "The Wind Blows" on her Silvertone as a teenager. But what's the point of mourning lost time if it helped mold you?

"The fact that it took longer has been better for me. When I was first starting out, I wasn't very advanced as a writer or a singer," she says. "People get it in their heads that, 'If I haven't done *this* by *this* age, I'm just going to quit.' Maybe the difference is that I just went with it. There are no plans. You just have to hang on and ride it out, you know?"

Maybe, then, Lucinda Williams has never been late, even when a crowd of people inside an anxious auditorium wait for her to walk down the aisle. It's just that she is, and has always been, on her own time. ☺

PHOTO BY GREG ALLEN

