



# LUCINDA WILLIAMS

COUNTS HER BLESSINGS

BY JEWLY HIGHT PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANNY CLINCH

At the time of this writing, Lucinda Williams is up for another Grammy, only she's nominated in a category she's never won before. This one has nothing to do with musical genre – Americana, folk, country or otherwise – and everything to do with where the songs in it have been used; that is, on the big screen or, in her case, on the small one.



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Her sensual, bewitched ballad “Kiss Like Your Kiss” is the twelfth and final track on her new album, *Blessed*. But it had its recorded debut a year ago – in a version shaded with Elvis Costello’s harmonies – during season three, episode eight of the blockbuster southern gothic vampire drama *True Blood*.

Williams may have passed the thirty-year mark in her recording career, but this is new territory for her. Valuing artistic control the way she does, she hasn’t been one to give use of her songs before she’s presented them to the world in the context of her albums, though songs from her albums have been licensed for dozens of films and T.V. shows. Plus, sticking to her guns the way she has for authenticity’s sake hasn’t always made for such a comfortable fit on television.

There was the time, in the early ‘90s, when she went on the perky country music chat show Crook & Chase prepared to perform a song from her then-new album *Sweet Old World*. “I was gonna do ‘Pineola,’” she remembers, her gripping country rock narrative about people mourning a suicide. “That was the song I chose to do. They didn’t want me to do it because it was too dark: ‘Please pick another song.’ Well, that just got my tail feathers *all* up in a ruffle, you know. And I complained. The producer of the show was real sweet. He said, ‘You know what? Go ahead. Do it.’”

So, she went ahead and did it. Then she sat down with the

show’s hosts and stood up for her song during the on-air interview.

“I said, ‘Everybody says it’s such a dark song, but my music was influenced by all those old Child ballads that were so dark. What about Johnny Cash’s version of “Long Black Veil”? Or [the murder ballad] “Barbara Allen”? Especially the ones where he [the almost always male murderer] takes her [the more often than not female victim] out to the middle of the woods and stabs her and blood runs down her breasts.’ They couldn’t really argue.”

As for Williams’ *True Blood* experience years later, there were no ruffled tail feathers on either side. The show’s music supervisor had used her song “Lake Charles” – from her 1998 breakthrough *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road* – in an earlier season, and he wanted something brand new from her pen.

“He picked that one, ‘Kiss Like Your Kiss,’ for obvious reasons – the vampire kisses,” she explains. “It kind of had this moody, smoky-sounding thing. We said, ‘Great.’”

It wasn’t a scripted vampire love scene that’d inspired the song, Williams reveals with evident satisfaction, but real-life romantic feelings for her husband and manager Tom Overby; she decided it’d be okay to lend a fresh work of personal expression – meant, potentially, for her next album – to a primetime soundtrack.

*True Blood* wasn’t the most unexpected song request to come her way of late; Faith Hill’s

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people also asked if she might be able to come up with a tune or two for the pop country diva.

Says Williams, “They were looking for kind of edgier stuff. So edgy equals Lucinda Williams, I guess. I said, ‘Well, you know I’ve never really known how to write for someone. But I’d like to learn.’”

“What I realized was,” she adds, amused by how this line of thinking must sound coming from her, “I don’t really have to worry about if I’m writing this for a particular person. I can just write a song like I would write a song normally, but just not record it yet. [Laughs.] That’s really the way to go. Because they don’t want a song once I’ve recorded it usually. They want to *think* that it’s for them. Which is fine with me. At first I was kind of like, ‘No, that’s weird. I don’t know her. How do I write a song for someone I don’t know?’”

It’s not that Williams has never had success with somebody else cutting her emotionally potent songs. In fact, that’s exactly how she won her first Grammy in 1993 – for Best Country Song of the Year. Mary Chapin Carpenter had covered an arresting declaration of desire from *Lucinda Williams* called “Passionate Kisses.” “God bless her,” says Williams. “She had to go to bat for that song. Her label didn’t think it was country.”

After that, Williams moved to Nashville for a time, in part to see if she might get lucky again. She had a few more songs covered – including two by Emmylou Harris – but a mainstream country songwriting career just didn’t seem to be in the cards.

Recalls Williams, “My manager at the time, Frank Callari, said, ‘Well, your songs are too personal. People just don’t know what to do with them.’ ...And then the only other ones I had, the only other brave person was Patty Loveless when she did ‘The Night’s Too Long.’ That just didn’t go anywhere, partly because of the label, her people. They were so conservative.”

A lot’s changed in the past couple of decades about how Williams views songwriting and the business, and how the business views

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her and her songwriting. She's come to occupy such an important place in the world of contemporary American roots music – she's the first one that many rising and aspiring Americana songwriters compare themselves to, and deservedly so – that any spooky, South-conjuring T.V. series worth its salt could hardly ignore her catalog.

Her songwriting process is still personal and from the gut, but it seems she's holding the finished products more loosely, entertaining different possibilities for where her songs might belong and saying things about all of it that you might not have caught her saying in earlier eras of her career.

Things like this:

"To me, who you write the song for is really neither here nor there anyway. By the time the song gets out and I'm done with it, it kind of goes off into the universe. Whoever wants to do whatever with it is fine with me."

She laughs, acknowledging this isn't entirely true. "Well, I wouldn't want to have it in certain commercials."

It's easier to be laidback about these things once you've established certain facts: that there is, unmistakably, such a thing as a Lucinda Williams song and that a good many people are drawn to them. It could be argued that she's at the height of both her career and her satisfaction with it; she's also got her war stories about how she reached this point, how she's kept at this singer-songwriter thing long enough to see a lot of her artistic instincts proven right.

There's a particular war story she's circled back to fairly often these past several years. *Essence*, the album that followed *Car Wheels*, represents a moment when she drew a line in the sand

for critics who preferred she stick to the sort of writing she'd been doing. With its narratives grounded in the southern towns of her childhood and its full-bodied alt-country sound, *Car Wheels* won a Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk Album (there wasn't yet an Americana category) and brought a heap of new listeners her way; even so, after that she pointedly reshaped her songwriting with a lyrically lean, groove-driven and decidedly different approach.

"It was taking me a long time to come up with a bunch of new songs," Williams says, "because it was like that sophomore jinx thing, it was the album following *Car Wheels* and I was terrified. I thought, 'I've got to write a bunch of new songs like "Car Wheels On A Gravel Road" and "Lake Charles" and all these really narrative songs. I'm not necessarily just going to come up with those songs again, or songs like that.' I just kind of went through this thing where I started writing and kind of allowed myself to open up."

And a decade later, she seems anything but closed.

*Blessed*, Williams' tenth studio album, is both a sure-handed distillation of some of her most salient songwriting impulses and something of an expansion of her range. It's not especially dark or happy (2008's *Little Honey* was pegged as her "happy" album by many, in part because it opened with a rocking love song), though it does contain three songs that deal with death – one of those about a suicide – and a pair of what she describes as "sweet love songs," the one that made it onto *True Blood* and a poetic ballad called, literally, "Sweet Love".

Williams might've linked her songs to traditional murder ballads on Crook & Chase and

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elsewhere, but there are important differences between the way she writes about death and the way it’s portrayed in those old songs. She makes you care about – not just fear for or pity – the protagonists who meet their untimely ends, and the people they leave behind; she actually dwells more on the good of life than on the grim inevitability of death. On the new album, a pair of slow-burning soul numbers – “Convince Me” and “To Be Loved” – illustrate a remarkable symmetry between desperately doubting and wholeheartedly believing in the worth of it all.

As for the three songs that deal with death directly, “Copenhagen” is an impressionistic, affectionate country meditation on the passing of Callari, her late manager. She wrote the bracing roots rock number “Seeing Black,” she says, after the indie rock singer-songwriter Vic Chesnutt took his own life; the lyrics arrive in the form of increasingly urgent questions wrestling with his life-and-death decision. And “Soldier’s Song” surreally juxtaposes battlefield deaths with cozy home life; love is the link between those two distant worlds.

“Seeing Black” is one of the new songs

that get to the heart of themes Williams has taken up in the past; here, as in “Sweet Old World,” she can’t take her mind off all that a person gives up with suicide. Then there’s “Don’t Know How You’re Living,” a troubled plea to a long lost loved one which continues a thread begun in “Are You Alright?” from *West*. As she puts it, “I wrote yet another song for my brother, prodigal brother.” And “Awakening” shares the caustic attack and cravings for transcendence of “Unsuffer Me” before it.

“It’s funny that you mention this,” Williams says when the subject of connections

between her songs comes up, “because now that I’m thinking about it, ‘Buttercup,’ for instance, is chapter two of ‘Jailhouse Tears.’ Like, I wrote that about the same guy.”

“The last few shows we did I was highlighting some of the new songs and I told the audience – talking about the songs on the new album – I said, ‘I’ve only got one bad boy song on the whole album.’ I still had a little bit left in my system and I had to get it out. So I think that squeezed the last little bit out of there.”

“Buttercup” – which opens *Blessed* – is the better of the two songs that guy inspired. It’s a sturdy, sarcasm-laced country rocker, while “Jailhouse Tears,” from an album back, is a sorta goofy honky-tonk duet with Costello. That Williams is playfully forecasting the end of her “bad boy” songs is no small thing, since bad boys – tough and troubled artistic types – have been favorite song subjects of hers and she has a striking way of calling out the pain they inflict.

“Soldier’s Song,” on the other hand, represents for Williams a revival of a certain kind of songwriting. “I’m actually really proud of that song,” she offers, “because it is very detailed narrative and I haven’t done

anything like that in a long time.” She’d never taken up a storytelling challenge quite like it, moving back and forth between two different vantage points, one a soldier, the other his wife and the mother of his child.

“I was struck by that Jimmy Webb classic, ‘By The Time I Get To Phoenix,’” she explains. “That one, where there are two different things going on at the same time in two different parts of the world. My dad wrote a poem like that.” (Her father is the poet Miller Williams, who was selected to read at Bill Clinton’s second presidential inauguration.)

Though war is a central feature of “Soldier’s Song,” it couldn’t rightfully be called a protest number; instead of voicing an outright indictment, it makes its impact through tangible, parallel narratives. “For me,” she says, “this is a statement about the whole general insanity of war, but just done in a different way.”

Williams has shifted some of her songwriterly attention from those ne’er-do-well heartbreakers to broader social topics, and she lightly suggests a reason. “Well, probably because I’m in a relationship now with Tom, so I had to find some other things to write

about. But actually it’s not been like a forceful thing. It’s actually very liberating to spread out and write about some different things.”

“I’ve been wanting to for years,” she continues. “I’ve struggled trying to write more of what used to be referred to as topical songs, like Bob Dylan.”

The title track of *Blessed* is an example of what she means. Beginning with purposeful strumming on acoustic guitar, she describes people that upend social norms – like a girl who sells flowers on the street setting an example of how to live – with a mixture of hope and romanticism and a simple, repetitive folk melody.

She’d scribbled that particular image down on a napkin. “There was this young girl who used to come in and sell roses in this Mexican restaurant we go in. She’s not just some girl selling roses. She has a family. She has a life.”

Not only is *Blessed* one of the most balanced collections of songs Williams has released, it may well be her best-sounding album. At a time when just about everybody else’s recording budgets seem to be shrinking, she cut the final album in her contract with

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Williams' last album, *Little Honey*, was produced by Overby and her longtime engineer Eric Liljestrand. This time they brought in Don Was, after Williams hit it off with him back stage at a Neil Young tribute show. Was is as busy a roots music producer as they come these days, but the most telling reference point for what he achieved with Williams on *Blessed* is the string of terrific blues-pop albums he made with Bonnie Raitt during the late '80s and early '90s; he helped Raitt take substantial songs and make them widely and immediately accessible.

Was, Williams and company recorded at Capitol Studio B in Hollywood, "the former recording home of Frank Sinatra," she points out. Unlike *West*, with its electronic and orchestral flourishes, there's nothing experimental about the playing on the album. Nor does it have the rough, live feel of *Little Honey*.

It's crisp, dynamic and, yes, accessible. You can hear every last jabbing guitar lick, every melancholic arc of steel guitar, every seductive groan of her one-of-a-kind wind-chapped drawl clearer than ever before, and for good reason; Was passed the album along to

two of his buddies, Bob Clearmountain and Ted Jensen, two of the world's premiere mixing and mastering engineers, respectively.

"That's the great thing about bringing Don in – he brought in this whole new circle of people we hadn't worked with before, we weren't able to work with," Williams says, clearly excited about the results. "I wouldn't have been able to afford Bob Clearmountain. [Laughs.] But he cut us a good deal. And plus, I've never had someone just mix the record. Like, that's all he does is mix. That adds a whole other nice, shiny element to it."

It just so happens that the most polished album in Williams' oeuvre also comes in a deluxe edition that pulls back the veil on her songwriting process in a way no release of hers has before. (Acoustic demos of *Essence* exist, she says, but they've yet to make it out there in any official form). A bonus disc – dubbed *The Kitchen Tapes* after her writing spot of choice – contains no-frills guitar-vocal demos of all the songs on *Blessed*.

If Williams has grown more comfortable with sharing her work in its barest form, technology – her new Zoom recorder, specifically – was also a real motivator. "Oh my god, it's amazing!" she says. "I just set it on the kitchen

table, get my guitar, sit here and record a song on it, and this is something I never had before that changed the process by which – well, just the entire writing process. Because I was able to get instant gratification. I would put it down, take the Zoom up to Tom's office, he would hook it up to his computer, burn a disc, and we'd play it back and it would sound amazing. So we ended up with all these songs that we could listen back to like that."

The fact that Williams *had* all those songs to capture at the kitchen table is hardly insignificant. In her younger years, the songs didn't always come that easily.

So what's changed? "I think I just give myself more permission," she muses. "I'm just better at what I do now. It's as simple as that. It's just the more you do it the better you get, or at least that's how I feel in my case. I think it's a combination of confidence and just having done it this long and just learning. I'm always learning. I'm still honing my craft."

It may, indeed, seem as simple as that. But it's not every thirty-two-year veteran who can pull off what Williams is doing – finding new ways to loosen up, even about the business stuff, without losing her edge. ♣



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