

# Lucinda Williams

The singer-songwriter on her Southern roots, her poet father, meeting Dylan, and hunting for bargains

**You live in Los Angeles, but you grew up in Louisiana and Mississippi. What's the most Southern thing about you?**

I was raised to be proud of where I was from. When I first came to New York, I met a Southerner who got rid of her accent so she could be in radio or film. I said, "That's fucked up. Don't you want to have an identity?"

I have a certain Southern Gothic sensibility. I related to Flannery O'Connor at a young age. My mother's father was a fire-and-brimstone Methodist preacher. I saw a lot of that kind of thing growing up, and I read about it in O'Connor. Her writing was really dark but also ironic and humorous. It informs a lot of my songs.

**Who are your heroes - musical, literary or otherwise?**

I always looked up to my father [the poet Miller Williams]. He taught creative writing, and it was almost like an apprenticeship growing up with him. I got some of the lines for [the 2014 song] "Temporary Nature (Of Any Precious Thing)" from a conversation with him. A friend had died, and I was real sad about it, and he said, "Honey, the saddest joys are the richest ones," and I immediately wrote it down. He would just come out with these profound statements. He died last year - on January 1st, just like Hank Williams.

**What advice would you give your younger self?**

There are good people in the music business, but there are a lot of horrible, stupid people, too. In 1984, I had just moved to L.A. I had a meeting with this guy at, I think, Columbia Records. He said, "You have a lot of potential, but you need to work on your songs. None of them have bridges." After the meeting, I got out my Bob Dylan and Neil Young albums. I said, "These songs don't have bridges either. So fuck that guy."

**What misperceptions did you have about the business?**

I used to think talent was all it took. But now I think it's 50 percent talent and 50 percent drive. I've seen people who were brilliant but don't want to tour or do whatever it takes. How many times do you read about an artist who had a record deal in the Seventies, and now they're working as a carpenter somewhere? They're all bitter and cynical: "Nobody understands my music anymore." No, it's because you fucked up your career!

**What's the most indulgent purchase you ever made?**

I was in New York about 15 years ago and I went on this

shopping spree with a friend who was vicariously shopping through me. I think I ended up spending around \$12,000. I bought these Dolce and Gabbana shoes - white patent leather with silver metal studs. Now, though, I just shop online. That doesn't sound very rock & roll, but it's safer that way. I get really good bargains.

**What do you wish you could do that you can't?**

Sometimes I want to wear sunglasses when I go on TV and [husband-manager] Tom says, "You can't." I want to be like Dylan in *Don't Look Back*; when he did press, he would just be fucking with them all the time. Tom says I shouldn't try to be cool.

**What music moves you the most?**

My dad was into Coltrane and Chet Baker, so it's got to be Coltrane's *Ballads* and *Baker's Holiday*, where he does Billie Holiday songs. I never get tired of Nick Drake. I love the Gregg Allman album *Laid Back*. His version of Jackson Browne's "These Days" knocks me out.

Dylan made such an impression on me. In 1965, one of my dad's students came over to the house and walked in with a copy of *Highway 61 Revisited*. While he met with my dad, I put the album on, and it blew my 12-year-old mind. In the Seventies, Dylan came into [New York club] Folk City, and I got up to sing a few songs with the band that was playing. The owner of the club introduced me to Bob. He said, "Keep in touch - we're gonna go on the road soon." It was like somebody back in the day meeting James Dean. It was so riveting.

**What are you reading right now?**

While I was touring Europe, I discovered the joy of reading a book on my iPad, and I finally read Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. I couldn't put it down. It does a good job of expressing that period of time. I really like [books] like that.

**What rule do you live by?**

Keep going and don't quit just because one or two things don't work out. I'm kind of an anomaly. I got discovered late. And here I am, at my age [62]. My writing is better than ever, and my voice is better than ever. There aren't many people doing this at this age, especially women. I *have* to do this. What else are you going to do, work at Walmart?

*Williams' new record, "The Ghosts of Highway 20," is out February 5th.*

INTERVIEW BY DAVID BROWNE

