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SONWRITER

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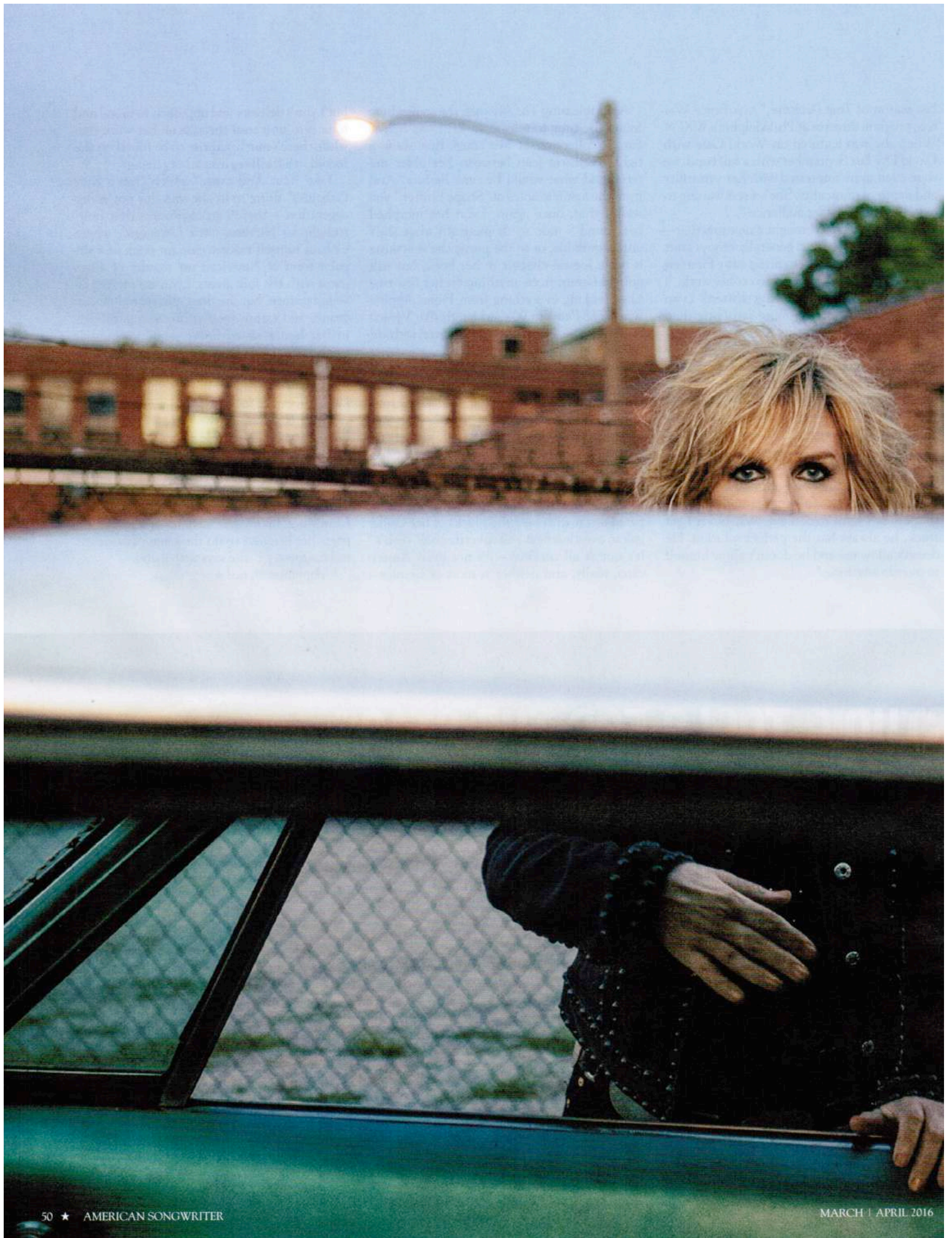
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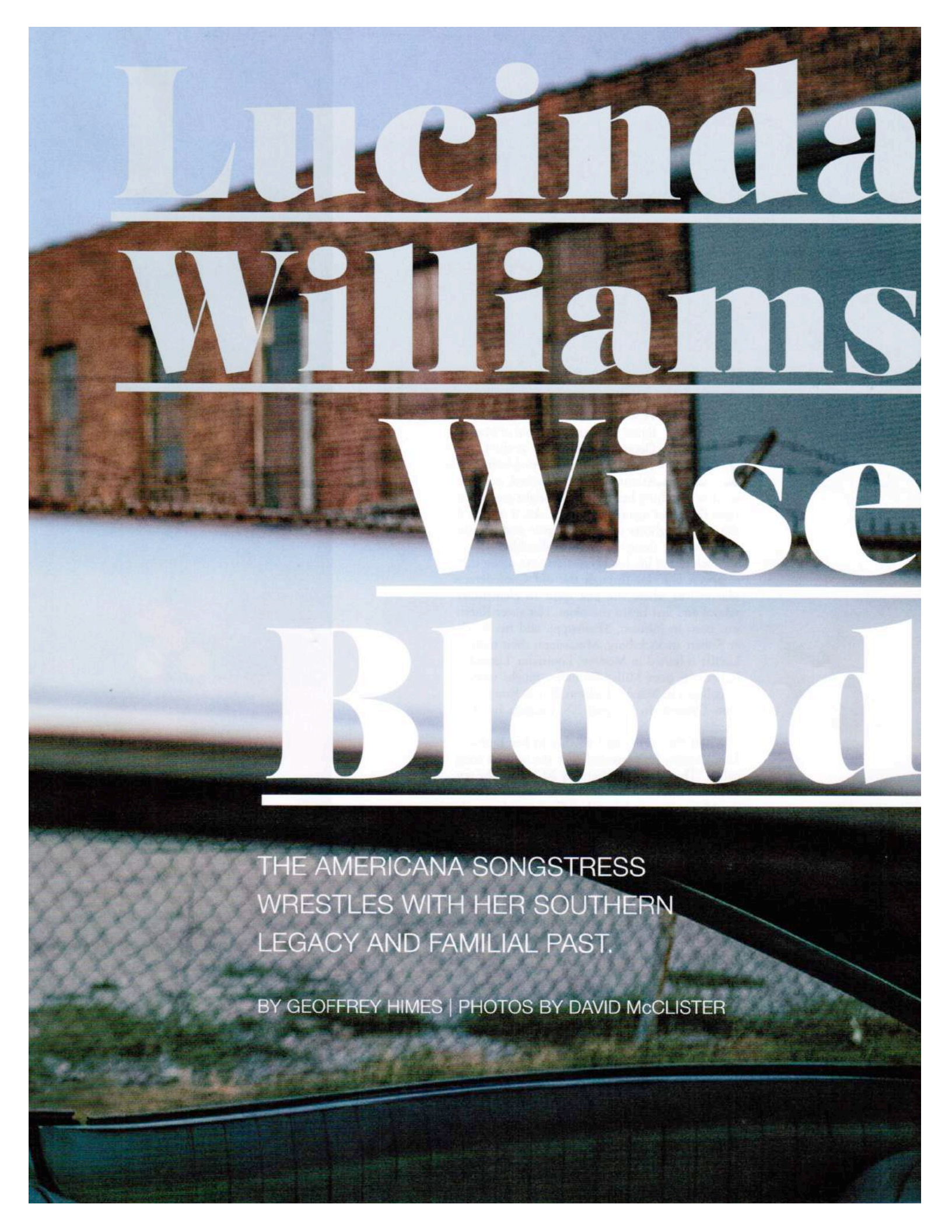
**Lucinda
Williams**

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Lucinda Williams

Wise Blood

THE AMERICANA SONGSTRESS
WRESTLES WITH HER SOUTHERN
LEGACY AND FAMILIAL PAST.

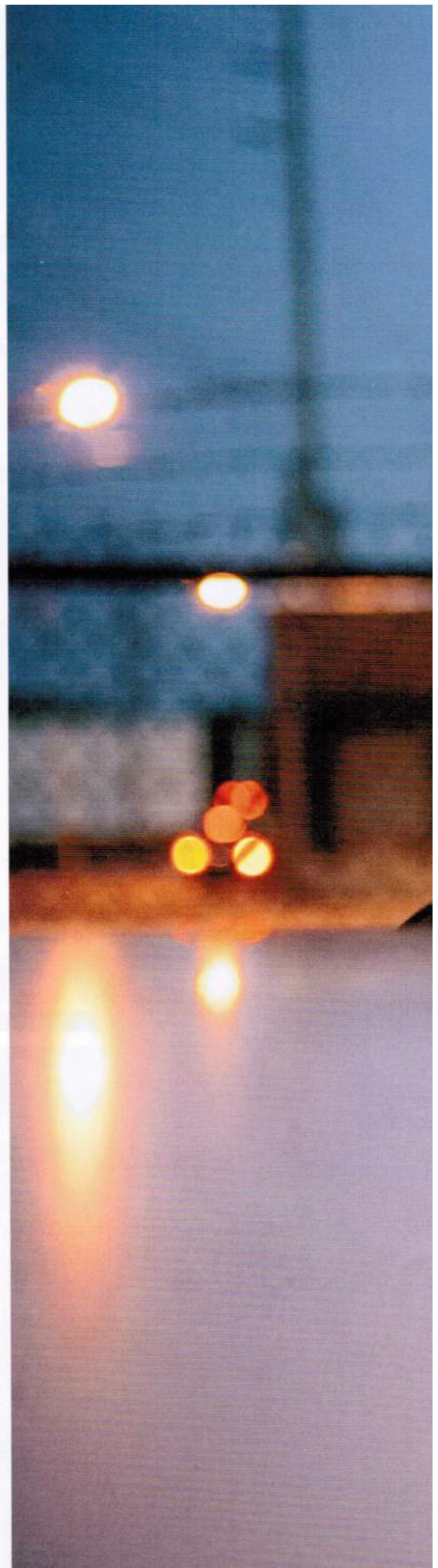
BY GEOFFREY HIMES | PHOTOS BY DAVID McCLISTER

A FEW YEARS AGO Lucinda Williams' tour bus pulled out of Macon, Georgia, after a show at the Cobb Theatre and then turned west from Atlanta. As she looked out the window watching Interstate 20's bright green exit signs flash past against the black sky, it was as if she saw the ghosts of her past, pale and translucent, walking along the highway shoulder.

Much of her life has been strung out along that east-west corridor through the old Confederacy. Macon was where she first went to elementary school and first heard the blues. Her sister Karyn was born in Jackson, Mississippi, and her brother Robert in Vicksburg, Mississippi; their mother Lucille is buried in Monroe, Louisiana. Lucinda's father, the poet Miller Williams, taught writing at colleges in Macon, Jackson, Baton Rouge and New Orleans. In her mid-20s, Lucinda lived in Austin.

When she mentioned all this to her husband Tom Overby, he suggested that she write a song called "The Ghosts of Highway 20." Until she got her arms around those ghosts, he suggested, they would continue to haunt her. Ever so reluctantly she agreed. "Writing to assignment is really hard," she says, "but it's good discipline, so I'm trying to do it more. Finally something clicked and I said, 'Okay, I've got it.'"

The result became the title song of her new album, *The Ghosts Of Highway 20*, her second consecutive two-CD set, following 2014's *Down Where The Spirit Meets The Bone*. "I know this road like the back of my hand," Williams sings in a raspy alto in the wake of a shimmering graveyard







chord from guitarist Greg Leisz, “same with the stations on the FM band, farms and truck stops, firework stands ... run-down motels and faded billboards, used cars for sale, rusty junkyards.”

Here is the sharply focused visual imagery of her early songwriting, something she downplayed in the terse, secular hymns of her middle career. In this song, the listener can easily picture those truck stops and junkyards where she “went to hell when I was younger,” as she sings, “deep in the well to feed my hunger.” She has left behind parents, lovers and friends, she adds, but now it’s time “to wrestle with the ghosts of Highway 20.” These wraiths are Southerners and they would have to be grappled with on Southern ground.

“I’m a Southerner too,” she says over the phone from her home in Nashville. “I grew up in the South. All the great music really started in the South. You hear people say that we love to talk and tell stories; I’m not sure that’s a Southern thing so much as a rural thing. My grandfather on my dad’s side was involved in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, the struggle to get sharecroppers a better life, one of the first biracial movements. The songs came out of that struggle, often from black people and poor whites; there was a connection between them.”

“Going out to the bars on Saturday night and to church on Sunday morning: that does seem to have its roots in the South. You see that in the writings of Flannery O’Connor; the spiritual and the carnal come closer together in the South than maybe anywhere else. To me, the epitome of that is her book *Wise Blood* and the movie by John Huston. That whole thing about spirituality, guilt and sex is all in there. Hazel Motes basically loses his mind at the end of the movie. He puts glass in his shoes and wraps himself in barbed wire.”

On her sprawling new album, Lucinda explores these repeated collisions of Saturday night carnality and Sunday morning spirituality in a series of alternating blues and gospel numbers. Because she’s skeptical of conventional gender roles,

her blues look past drunken, one-night stands to long-term consequences. Because she’s wary of organized religion, the hymns are short on doctrinal answers and long on difficult questions.

Because the songs are trying to unlock the past and reveal its secrets, they are sung at a distance from the action. The songs’ narrators are not in the midst of a drinking crowd nor a testifying congregation but rather alone on a tour bus, in the post-midnight dark, interrogating the ghosts on the other side of the window. The music has a reluctant, spectral quality, given a shadowy film-noir atmosphere by guitarists Leisz and Bill Frisell.

In many ways, Lucinda’s career began, like her fateful bus ride, in Macon. “That was where I learned to read and write,” she says, “and as soon as I did, I began to write little stories. When I was five, my dad took me to Milledgeville to visit Flannery O’Connor, who was his favorite writer and his mentor. She lived in this big Southern farmhouse, and she had a black woman who helped take care of her.

“When we got there, her aide came to the door and said, ‘Miss Flannery isn’t ready to receive you yet, because she’s still writing.’ She had a schedule where she wrote from eight in the morning till three in the afternoon. We waited on the front porch till she came out on her crutches, because she was already struggling with her illness. My dad went inside, and I chased the peacocks around the yard.”

A year later Williams encountered Blind Pearly Brown, a street singer who strolled the streets of downtown Macon with his black suspenders, beat-up acoustic guitar and a sign that read, “I am a blind preacher. Please help me, thank you.” He often sang hymns from his mentor, the legendary bluesman

Blind Willie Johnson, and 6-year-old Lucinda was entranced. In a sense, her career has been an attempt to combine the power of O’Connor’s literary fiction with the power of Johnson’s gospel blues, as passed on through their acolytes Miller Williams and Blind Pearly Brown.

To do that, she has had to marry the violent passions and controlled economy of O’Connor’s language to the matching qualities of Johnson’s music. Williams has often managed that alchemy, but on *Down Where The Spirit Meets The Bone* and *The Ghosts Of Highway 20*, she does

it more consistently than she has since the brilliant 1988-98 trilogy of *Lucinda Williams*, *Sweet Old World* and *Car Wheels On A Gravel Road*. Those three albums established her reputation after her first two records in 1978 and 1980 had been more or less ignored.

She recaptures that old mojo by allowing the songs’ themes to rise naturally from the imagery and storytelling rather than drawing the conclusions for the listener. She does it by collaborating with two master guitarists, Frisell and Leisz, who also appear on jazz master Charles Lloyd’s new album. And she does it by remembering her father’s lessons.

“One of my favorite sounds in the world was hearing my dad on the typewriter,” Lucinda recalls. “He was very into the craft of writing, of working on the poem after you get the idea — to not just throw a lot of words out there, but to refine it. He always talked about the economics of writing, of using as few words as possible. When I told him I took lines from one song to use in another, he said, ‘We call that cannibalization.’ He had a word for everything.

“Rather than just saying, ‘A picture of a woman in a dress,’ he’d tell me, ‘say a woman in a sad blue dress.’ That’s what I learned from him: the importance of

“I never took a writing course, but I had my dad as a teacher.”

painting a picture and imagining yourself as the listener. When I was working on 'Drunken Angel,' it was pretty much finished, and I had this line, 'blood flows out of a hole in his heart.' He said, I think it would be better if it was 'the hole in his heart.' I never took a writing course, but I had him as a teacher."

Lucinda not only took the title for *Down Where The Spirit Meets The Bone* from her father's poem "Compassion," but also set the poem to music and made it the album's opening track. Recorded as a slow blues with just her acoustic guitar and world-weary voice, the song asks us to have sympathy for everyone, even those who are conceited, ill-mannered or cynical because no one knows "what wars are going on down there where the spirit meets the bone."

That admonition to give people a break applies not just to strangers but also to one's own family. Perhaps the key song on *The Ghosts Of Highway 20* is "Louisiana," a frankly autobiographical song about Lucinda's fraught childhood there. Once again the sad, wistful guitars of Frisell and Leisz set the mood, while the singer's imagery paints a picture: "Swatting at a fly, hearing the neighbors talk, it's so hot you could fry an egg on the sidewalk."

But this is not sentimental nostalgia; she's determined to recapture both the "sweetness" and the "rough" of life with her mother Lucille, who would make her kids "sweet coffee milk" on a good day and scream about the smallest infraction on a bad. But taking the advice of her father's poem "Compassion," Lucinda strives to understand the roots of her mother's suffering in the harsh discipline Lucille received from her own father, a fundamentalist preacher.

"That was my life growing up in Louisiana," she says. "My mother suffered from pretty severe mental illness. My father took the kids when they split up; that gives you some idea. In the song, I'm giving you some of what she experienced growing up. Her dad was a fire-and-brimstone preacher, while my dad's dad was very liberal. All that stuff about not sparing the rod and the blood, that was her family."

Lucinda had a hard time with the song; she worked on it for a long time before she was willing to let it go. And when it came time to record it, she had trouble getting through a take without breaking down.

"I wasn't sure I should be so bold with it," she confesses. "It's so dark. But in the end I'm a writer like my dad. One of the things he always

said was, 'Never censor yourself.' It bothers some people, but that's what art is supposed to do. I remember when I was in Nashville once, sitting in the back room of Tootsie's. This kid asked me about how to become a songwriter, and I said, 'You can't be afraid to reach down deep and show what's down there.' He said, 'Oh, I could never do that.' It was one of the saddest things I'd ever heard."

Lucille died in 2004, and Miller died on January 1, 2015, the same date, Lucinda points out, that Hank Williams died 62 years earlier. "I'm still grieving," she adds. "Maybe it never stops." She started writing "Death Came" right after her mother's death, but she couldn't wrestle it into final shape until last year.

Inspired, she says, by Ralph Stanley's "Oh Death" and Mississippi Fred McDowell's "Death Came A-Creepin'" (aka "Soon One Morning"), it was an effort to come to terms with mortality by confronting it directly. "I tasted the fruit from the tree of knowledge," she sings, but she was "not satisfied, until I carved my name in the bark." The companion piece is "Doors To Heaven," written right after Miller died.

"That's also a hard one to get through," she admits. "I broke down and cried when we tried

FIVE CLASSIC LUCINDA TUNES

to record it. It just came to me in that traditional form, like an old hymn. It's not saying there is a heaven; it's wondering if there is a heaven. Even people who go, 'I'm an atheist,' must question if there's something else out there. Struggling with my dad being gone, I wondered about that myself. The sense of him being gone is still so raw. It's something that a lot of people have dealt with, losing a loved one, that eternal question."

The final third of "Doors To Heaven" is an instrumental duet between Frisell and Leisz that takes Lucinda's unanswerable questions into territory where words can't go. After she has repeatedly sung, "Open up the doors of heaven, let me in," Frisell's chiming high notes suggest what might lie beyond those pearly gates, while Leisz's bluesy slide guitar suggests someone banging on the front door, demanding entrance.

"I just love a guitar-sounding record," she says. "I've always been drawn to those bands like the Allman Brothers or Z.Z. Top, where the guitar is the main thing. Different guitar players bring out different things in me."

Frisell and Leisz have pulled from her a renewed commitment to the visualization of past worlds and traumatic scenes recaptured in words as well as amplifier dreamscapes. Frisell is a major figure in the jazz world, not only from his more than 30 solo albums but also from his collaborations with Joe Lovano, Cassandra Wilson, McCoy Tyner, Jim Hall, Ron Carter and more. But in the second half of his career, Frisell has made repeated forays into the Americana world, recording with Elvis Costello, Paul Simon, Buddy Miller, Jerry Douglas, Carrie Rodriguez, Bonnie Raitt, Norah Jones and Laura Veirs.

Like a lot of folks, Frisell first discovered Lucinda through 1998's *Car Wheels On A Gravel Road*, but he first heard her live when he learned that his former Denver guitar student Kenny

Vaughan had grown up to become her lead guitarist. Frisell was captivated by the show. He met Lucinda in Nashville and added overdubs to her 2007 album, *West*, which was co-produced by Hal Willner, a previous Frisell collaborator. Then at a show in Seattle, he agreed to join her band onstage for one song, only to be caught off-guard when she insisted that he do the entire show.

"I played the whole set, mostly songs I'd never played," Frisell remembers. "I thought, 'Wow, this is the real shit, that trust and that willingness to live on the edge.' Those guys were so open and her attitude was so positive that I felt like I could do no wrong. I could feel the effect of what I was playing on how she sang. I wasn't just backing her up; there was a real interaction."

"Bill is so ethereal," Lucinda adds. "He can play anything. I just love how he doesn't just play your classic rock guitar; it's so emotional and fluid. The tones he gets; it almost doesn't sound like a guitar. Besides that, he's an amazingly sweet and humble person. He's so quiet and kind of shy, not a big talker. Then he starts playing, and you go, 'Wha?'"

"Then she asked me to play on this record," Frisell continues. "Now we were really in it from the ground up. We all learned the songs together in that moment. She has this big briefcase filled with stuff she'd written, and she'd just pull stuff out. It wasn't even fully formed yet. That's the most amazing feeling: to be in the studio and watch the songs come to life and record it right in that moment."

This is especially obvious on a song like "I Know All About It," a slow, slow blues about an old friend down on her luck, too embarrassed to acknowledge the narrator when their paths cross. Once again there are arresting visual images: the scuffed leather of the friend's boots, the tattered lace of her blouse, the lonely apartment

"Crescent City"

Anyone who ever grew up in a straitlaced small town along the Gulf Coast knew that if you wanted to get inspired or get in trouble, you should head straight for New Orleans. Williams lived in Louisiana between the crucial ages of 12 and 16, and this song from 1988's *Lucinda Williams* captures that coming-of-age experience better than any other. When Williams sings of crossing the long, long causeway across Lake Pontchartrain, you can hear her voice melt a bit with joyous anticipation. The syncopated dance rhythms of Cajun fiddle and zydeco accordion (from southwest Louisiana, not New Orleans, but who cares?) can make you want to head for that causeway too. Emmylou Harris, who has recorded two Williams songs, cut this one for her 1993 album, *Cowgirl's Prayer*.

"Passionate Kisses"

This is not only Williams' most successful song, but it's probably her best as well. As the third single from Mary Chapin Carpenter's 1992 album, *Come On, Come On*, the song became a top-five country hit in 1993. It then won a Grammy Award for Best Country Song in 1994. Williams' lyrics address the common dilemma of balancing an artistic career with a personal life. "Is it too much to ask?" Carpenter sings, "I want a comfortable bed ... warm clothes and all that stuff." The folk-rock verses shift to an anthemic march on the chorus: "Shouldn't I have all of this and passionate kisses ... from you?" If Carpenter seems quite confident of getting it all on the hit single, Williams seems more doubtful on the 1988 album *Lucinda Williams* — and is all the more compelling as a result.

"Something About What Happens When We Talk"

This is the rare love song that chalks up romantic affinity not to physical attraction but to in-

tellectual stimulation. "Conversation with you was like a drug," Williams sings over her slow-blues melody. "It wasn't your face so much as it was your words." An R&B organ figure, followed by Gurf Morlix's unforgettable guitar hook, sets the stage for a wonderfully wistful vocal on Williams' 1992 album *Sweet Old World*. In 1998, a 22-year-old Kasey Chambers recorded the song for the album *Hopeville*, credited to Australia's Dead Ringer Band. Chambers later acknowledged her discovery of Williams as the spark for her subsequent solo career.

"Joy"

This trance-blues stomper is a howl of protest that all the joy has gone from the singer's life. She goes looking for it in every Southern city she's ever visited: from West Memphis, Arkansas, to Slidell, Louisiana. The original version on the 1998 album *Car Wheels On A Gravel Road* was given the Mississippi juke-joint treatment with slashing slide guitar and rumbling drums. The song was re-recorded in an amped-up, hard-rock arrangement on the soundtrack for the 2013 documentary film about unjustly imprisoned teenagers, *West Memphis Three: Voices Of Justice*. The legendary soul singer Bettye LaVette gave the song a very funky gospel-soul reading on her Joe-Henry-produced 2005 album, *I've Got My Own Hell To Raise*.

"Overtime"

This song boasts an elegantly simple lyric about hoping to recover from an ex-lover and his "sexy, crooked teeth" over time (or, as the song's clever pun suggests, by working overtime). This melancholy ballad's melody, though, is probably Williams' best, a gently swinging country lament so captivating that it was perhaps inevitable that she would sing it as a lovely duet with Willie Nelson and his brilliant band on the 2004 album, *Outlaws & Angels*. Williams debuted the song on her 2003 album *World Without Tears*.

with the peeling paint, the pain “in her back pocket like a sharp-edged knife.” With knowing sorrow, the narrator keeps telling the evasive friend, “I know all about the pain,” and those wounds are evoked by several spooky, wee-hours guitar duets.

“When Lucinda wanted space,” Leisz says, “she just wouldn’t sing, and Bill and I would fill up that space. We’d be looking at lyric sheets and listening to the words, but we’re also hearing the spaces between the words. There was very little talking about what we were going to do; we just did it. You don’t get a lot of chances; it’s like catching lightning in a bottle. It’s only when you listen back to it that you hear a connection between the lyric and what you were playing that you didn’t know you were creating.”

“We have so much in common,” Frisell says of his partnership with Leisz. “We’re practically the same age; our first guitars were both Fender Mustangs. We grew up hearing the same songs on the radio. We each took different paths: he fell in love with Hank Wil-

liams while I was falling in love with Thelonus Monk. Almost 20 years ago we met, and I felt a super-strong connection. When I’m playing with Greg, so much goes unsaid; it’s like a code.”

**“I’ve
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myself.”**

in her band but I was friends with the guys in her band and I would occasionally play with

Leisz, the former steel guitarist for Dave Alvin and k.d. lang, has worked with Frisell since the latter’s 1999 jazz-Americana album, *Good Dog, Happy Man*. They collaborated on 2014’s *Guitar In The Space Age*, an album that reimagined songs by the Beach Boys, Kinks, Byrds, Duane Eddy and Merle Travis as jazz instrumentals. But Leisz’s relationship with Lucinda goes back much further than that.

“We were playing in the same little clubs in L.A. in the mid-’80s and moving around in the same circles,” he recalls. “I wasn’t

her. I worked with her in the studio on some stuff that was never released. The quality of her songwriting impressed me even then. Everyone was writing songs, but hers and Dave Alvin’s stood out from everybody else — up to the level of anyone writing songs at the time.”

Lucinda called in Leisz to work on 2011’s *Blessed*. Not only did he play a lot of the guitar parts, but he was the one who hung around afterwards to massage the spontaneous performances into finished tracks. When he did the same thing on the sessions for *Down Where The Spirit Meets The Bone*, Lucinda and her husband decided it was only right that Leisz be listed as a co-producer. To help out, he brought in his old friend Frisell.

So much music was recorded during those sessions that it was decided to divide it into two albums. “We decided early on that there was something going on with the stuff that Bill and I recorded,” Leisz explains, “that needed to be separated out as its own thing.” They decided to hold 10 of the dozen tracks with Frisell for the album that would become *Ghosts Of Highway 20*. Only four newly written songs (“Dust,” “If There’s A Heaven” “If My Love Could Kill” and the title track, the latter two with Lucinda’s road guitarist Vince McCallum

replacing Frisell) were added to those 10.

The new album opens with Lucinda once again adapting one of her father’s poems to music. Over the rumbling momentum of her longtime rhythm section, drummer Butch Norton and bassist David Sutton, Lucinda draws her father’s vivid description of a depression so deep that “you don’t have to try to keep the tears back,” because “even your thoughts are dust.” She repeats each line in the poem multiple times, as if chanting a prayer, while Frisell and Leisz tease out the implications of the chords behind her.

That’s followed by “House Of Earth,” a set of Woody Guthrie lyrics that Lucinda adapted to new music, following the example of Billy Bragg and Wilco on the *Mermaid Avenue* albums. The lyrics have a prostitute in a Southwestern adobe home telling her client how grateful his wife should be when he brings home all the bedroom tricks the narrator’s going to teach him. Lucinda sings it in a low, husky voice full of proud knowledge and world-weary fate while the two guitarists suggest the prickly fear and excitement of the man being addressed.

“My dad’s text was a poem,” she says, “while Woody’s was meant to be a song, even if the

music never survived, so that was somewhat easier, because the words were written that way. I had to come up with the melody and the phrasing, and I did move some words around. Woody’s daughter Nora sent me that one. I had played this music festival in Germany run by Nora’s husband; the four of us sat around discussing socialism and drinking red wine. She felt that if anyone would be able to do that song, maybe I could.”

The album ends with the nearly 13-minute-long “Faith & Grace,” another happy accident. Overby had invited two reggae percussionists into the studio, just to see what would happen. One, Carlton Santa Davis, was wounded when his bandleader Peter Tosh was shot and killed; the other, Ras Michael, leads a Rastafarian church in Los Angeles. Lucinda refused to do the obvious thing and sing a Bob Marley song; instead Overby suggested they do “A Little More Faith” from a gospel album by one of Lucinda’s biggest heroes: Mississippi Fred McDowell.

The band gathered around to hear the nasal alto of McDowell’s wife Annie Mae lead the call-and-response, “Just a little more faith and grace is all that I need.” Each listener put his or her own spin on the original: the drummers

adding Jamaican syncopation, Frisell adding the sound of Miles Davis’s muted trumpet on guitar, Sutton adding minimalist Nashville bass and Lucinda adding the ghosts of Highway 20. On and on the song goes, with long, patient guitar solos interspersed with raspy cries of desperation. Faith and grace may be obvious goals, the performance suggests, but they aren’t easily grasped.

“It’s not a jam so much as a mantra,” Lucinda says; “it reminded me of John Coltrane’s ‘Love Supreme.’ I don’t really consider myself a Christian. I don’t want to separate one kind of spirituality from other kinds. Both of my grandfathers were Methodist ministers, and I’ve absorbed some of it, but I don’t agree with all of it. I love the music that comes out of it, and the bonding that results from it.

“I don’t go to church, but spirituality is important to me; it always has been. I’ve always been searching for a connection to something beyond myself, to animals, the world. When I’m singing sometime and it all connects with the audience, that’s a certain kind of spirituality. I’ve experienced feelings of a connection with the universe, and that’s what I call God.”

It’s as if God too were just one more ghost tramping down a Georgia highway. ★