

# LUCETTE

STILL STRONG  
 BY KATIE CHOW



Lucette wants to tell you a story — hers. While her murder ballad-laden 2014 debut *Black Is The Color* established her as a country classicist, the singer and songwriter also known as Lauren Gillis is making a personal statement with *Deluxe Hotel Room* and a new, guitar-free sound that doesn't play by the rules.

"The *aha* moment was realizing I didn't want to make a country record in the traditional parameters of what that means," she describes. "Up until that point, I was like, 'Oh, I've always felt that a huge part of me is country music.' I realized that's so not for me, a huge part of me is also pop, and there are so many other influences in there."

The inspirations she shared with producer Sturgill Simpson included T. Rex, Bee Gees, and Prince, and the collaborators bonded heavily over their mutual love of Rihanna's album *ANTI*. While the pop mogul might not be the most obvious influence, the unapologetic directness that Rihanna sparks is unmistakable, culminating in the powerfully sensitive "Lover Don't Give Up On Me."

A few years after releasing *Black Is The Color*, the Edmonton, Alberta native was at a music industry boot camp for Canadian country artists when she realized that the traditional methods of success weren't going to work for her and started on the path that would lead her toward *Deluxe Hotel Room*.

"I'm not like a pariah or anti-country, I'm just saying that was my realization — I didn't think there was going to be a place for me within that world, close to my home," she says, noting that the development program singled out how difficult it was for women artists to

succeed. "I put so much pressure on myself to fit into that world, and I just said, 'Why am I doing this? This is really silly, I'm not this person. I'm a completely unique person outside of all these boundaries, so I'm just going to make the record that I want to make.'"

Gillis's quest to define herself on her own terms became a mission statement for *Deluxe Hotel Room*.

"Honestly, the first record is just not a great representation of me, and I'm looking at this record as a departure, almost a debut as to who or what Lucette is," she says of her onstage persona. "To me, maybe the first record is more Lucette, and this one's more Lauren. It's more a representation of who I am."

Over the course of two years, Gillis and Simpson laid the groundwork for *Deluxe Hotel Room* by swapping demos and YouTube videos of reference points. Once they hit the studio, recording took just four days.

"We both had a clear idea of what we wanted it to sound like," Gillis says. "It took the guesswork out of a lot of it, so that was really nice. I had this little vision in my head, it was really cool to see how he pulled that out and produced it. Even the choice of putting sax on the record, I mentioned that I wanted maybe some horns, and he said, 'Oh, I have this sax player in New Orleans who'll blow the roof off this record' and I was like, 'Eh, I don't know about saxophone' and then sure enough, he flies in, and it was like, 'Oh my God, this is amazing.'"

Simpson's instincts may have been surprising, but Brad Walker's saxophone gives tracks like "Out Of The Rain" and "Fly To Heaven" a timeless warmth, adding maxi-

malist flair to an album that's largely pared-back. *Deluxe Hotel Room*'s title track plays out against stark, simple piano, and its narration of "wishing I was home instead" is immediately familiar in a time when misdeeds committed behind closed doors are coming to light more and more.

"It talks about my life for the past five years and just what a lot of women have been through and what a lot of people go through on a daily basis," she says of the album opener. "'Deluxe hotel room,' when I think of just that as a statement, it brings about a story in itself. 'Deluxe hotel room' to one person might mean a bad experience, but 'deluxe hotel room' to another person might mean a honeymoon, or just something completely different."

As Gillis gets more personal, her fierce vulnerability is sure to resonate with listeners old and new as she confronts isolation and anxiety on "Out Of The Rain" and "Talk To Myself."

"It's kind of a tongue-in-cheek way of saying I'm not giving up on myself," she says of "Talk To Myself." "I might feel like I'm absolutely losing my mind, but I won't reach that point where I've given up. I feel like I've been there, and somehow I got past it and got through it."

Describing the voice behind *Black Is The Color* as a character, Gillis says she's done with putting on that act. Now, there's nothing left but her.

"There was a lot of hardship and emotional turmoil that went into making these songs and making this record, and I just wanted to come out on top of all of that and say, despite all of these things I have worked through, I'm still strong." ★