

Rolling Stone COUNTRY

Lucinda Williams Had a Stroke Last Year. She's Ready to Sing Again

Americana songwriter opens up about a frightening health episode in November that affected the left side of her body

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By **JOSEPH HUDAK** 



Lucinda Williams photographed in New York prior to the release of 'Good Souls Better Angels.' The songwriter opens up about a stroke she suffered in November 2020.

Danny Clinch*

A few days before Thanksgiving last year, **Lucinda Williams** was in the bathroom of her Nashville home getting ready to take a shower when she began to have trouble keeping her balance. She stumbled a bit and couldn't stand up straight. Even more frightening, Williams couldn't walk. She called out to her husband, Tom Overby, who happened to be on the phone with their primary care physician. When he relayed Williams' symptoms to their doctor, he was told to quickly get her to a hospital.

The Americana singer-songwriter, 67 at the time, was having a stroke.

"An ambulance came and got me and we told them not to put the big siren on. We didn't want to alarm the neighbors or anything," Williams tells *Rolling Stone* in her first interview since suffering the stroke on November 17th. "But they put the siren on."

Williams was rushed to Nashville's Vanderbilt Medical Center, where she spent a week in the intensive care unit undergoing a barrage of tests. Doctors discovered a blood clot on the right side of her brain, which affected the left side of her body. Williams was transferred to a rehabilitation center at Vanderbilt to begin a monthlong treatment of therapy. Finally, five weeks after the episode, on December 21st, she was discharged and returned home.

The health scare comes amid a career renaissance for the roots-music icon, who has influenced artists from Jason Isbell and Miranda Lambert to Gillian Welch and **Waxahatchee**. Her 2020 album ***Good Souls Better Angels*** was released to critical raves and earned her a pair of Grammy nominations. She spent a good portion of the pandemic performing covers and her own material in the livestream series *Lu's Jukebox* (recorded before the stroke) and talked about her watershed album *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road* as part of *Rolling Stone's RS500 Greatest Albums* podcast.

For the past six months, Williams, who turned 68 in January, has been working with therapists to fix the damage done by the stroke. She walks with a cane, has lingering pain in her left arm and leg, and is unable to play guitar. But according to Overby, her prognosis is a 100 percent recovery, as doctors saw no signs of brain damage.

“What happens is your brain gets all... the wires get all crossed and you have to retrain your brain basically, to tell your arm to do whatever it is you're trying to do,” Williams says. “So that's the biggest challenge.”

Williams didn't suffer speech aphasia from the stroke and she's typically droll in describing her regimen of treatment from the aides and therapists who swarm her home.

“It feels like we're in somebody else's house,” she says. “I do, like, walking, with the cane and they watch me and see how well I'm doing. And then I have to do hand and arm exercises. It's really about regaining my strength and mobility, and range of motion. That's what they work with me on.”

As her condition began to improve, she and Overby slowly started to tell friends and peers what had happened. She says some acquaintances still don't know.

“I thought about going to Facebook, but I didn't want to make it a big, alarming thing. Because you know how Facebook is — everybody's like, ‘We're praying for you and everything,’ you know? I didn't want people to overreact,” she says. “I kind of felt like going off the grid a little bit.”

Williams was scheduled to perform at this weekend's Mile 0 Festival in Key West, Florida, but canceled the appearance in late April. She has little doubt about performing live in the future and is targeting mid-summer for a return to the stage.

“I feel good and positive about playing again. We've got some shows scheduled with Jason Isbell for late July and we're planning on doing those,” Williams says. “I don't know if I'll stand up and sing or I'll sit down like an old blues person. But we'll figure it out.”

In the meantime, Williams says she's been writing (“I've got a bunch of lyrics, but I don't have the music because it's been hard to sit and play”) and recently traveled to her producer Ray Kennedy's Nashville studio to attempt vocals for an upcoming project by her friend Chrissie Hynde.

“It's actually the Rolling Stones song ‘Sway,’” Williams says. “She wanted me to try singing and we went in the studio and I did a vocal. That felt good.”

Overall, Williams seems unperturbed by the whole affair. She's matter of fact in recounting the details and wonders only what caused the stroke. “A lot of times it could be stress and all that, but [the doctors] didn't know for sure,” she says. To her knowledge, no one in her family had ever had one. “You hear about these things all the time. Usually, it's somebody much older. That's what I was surprised about, you know?”

When asked if she has a message for her fans, Williams pauses before reassuring them not to worry.

“The main thing is I can still sing. I’m singing my ass off, so that hasn’t been affected,” Williams says.

“Can’t keep me down for too long.”