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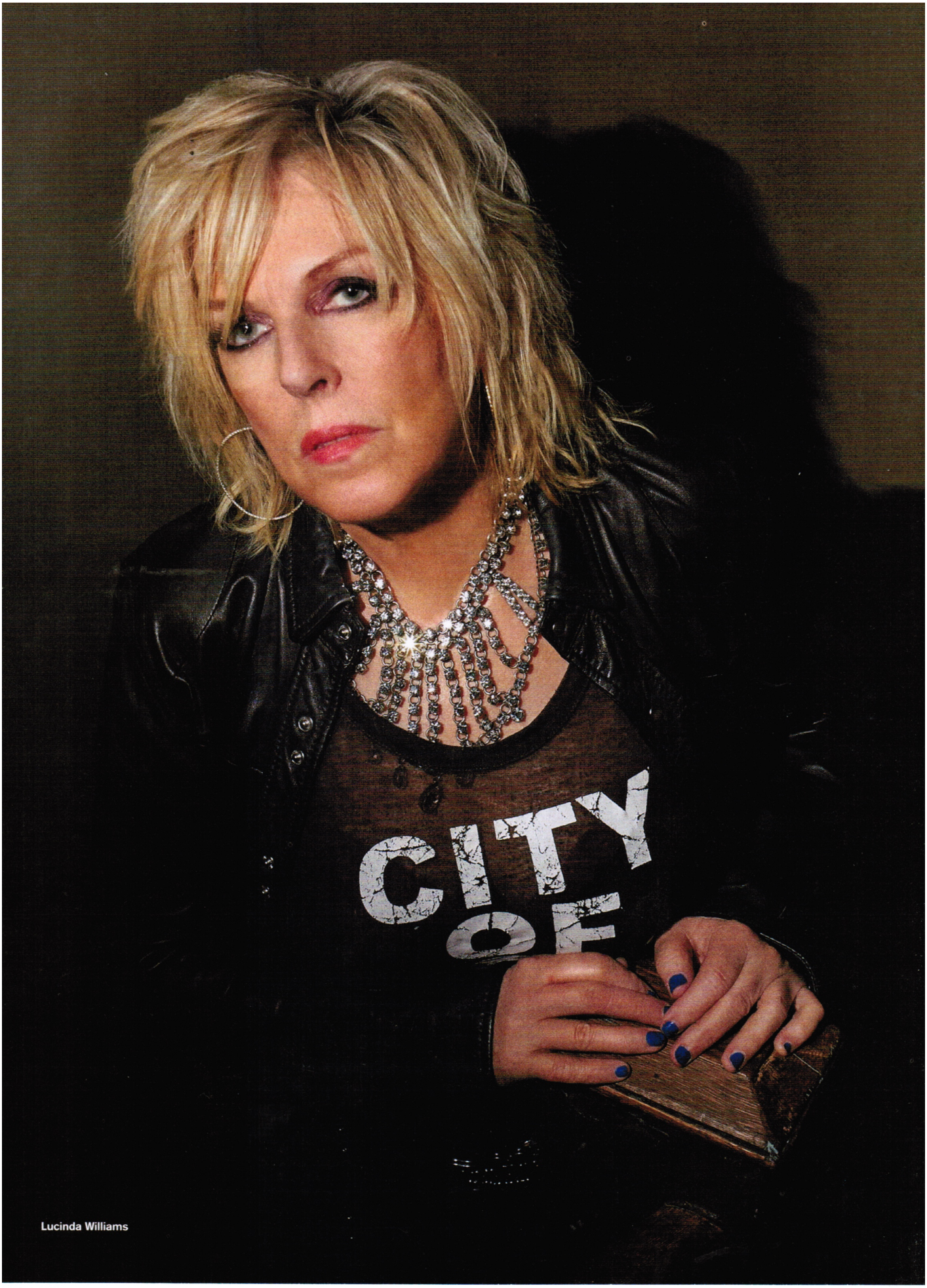


Lucinda Williams

BLUE HIGHWAYS

Inside the songwriting and guitar world of Lucinda Williams

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

One of the pivotal moments in the musical life of Lucinda Williams happened long before she started playing guitar. She was around six years old, living in Macon, Georgia, and her father took her downtown to hear a street musician he'd discovered—a blind preacher named Pearly Brown, who sang gospel blues songs with propulsive six- and 12-string guitar and bottleneck slide.

"I remember standing there and holding my dad's hand, listening to this guy sing, and just being in utter amazement and bewilderment," Williams recalled. "It was so primal."

Brown's music, heavily indebted to slide master Blind Willie Johnson, was Williams' gateway to the world of country blues. And that music has inspired and guided her ever since, over her more than 40-year career as a singer-songwriter.

Williams is often described as a progenitor of Americana, an artist who blended folk, country, and rock before there was a marketing label for that combo. And she's got the Grammy Awards to prove it: 1993 Best Country Song ("Passionate Kisses"), 1998 Best Contemporary Folk Album (*Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*), and 2001 Best Female Rock Vocal Performance ("Get Right with God"). But blues and gospel run deep in her songwriting, as you can hear throughout her discography, from the gutbucket one-chord blues "Joy" to the spooky "Pray the Devil Back to Hell" from her latest album, *Good Souls Better Angels*.

At 68, Williams is an icon of American songwriting, an inspiration to several generations of musicians for the way she's married the unvarnished sounds of roots music with a Southern literary sensibility. Through it all, she has developed a sturdy and distinctive rhythm guitar style, usually on a well-traveled Gibson J-45, that supports all of her songs, from brooding ballads to ragged rockers.

In May I connected with Williams by phone from her home in Nashville to learn more about her approach to songwriting and guitar, at what turned out to be strange time for an *Acoustic Guitar* interview. Not long before our conversation, she went public with the news that back in November 2020, she had a major stroke. Though her speaking and singing were unaffected, she was continuing to deal with arm and hand pain and struggling to relearn the guitar essentially from scratch. "I can make the chords, but I can't make my hand move between chords as quickly as it did before," she said. "I feel like when I first took guitar lessons."

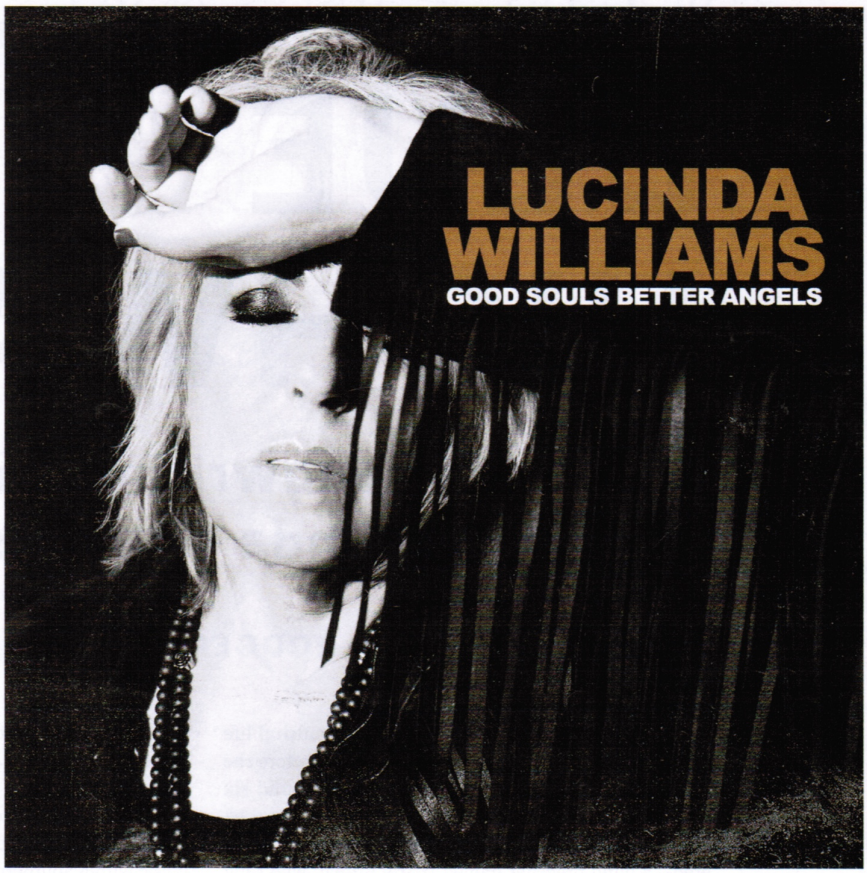
Despite this unfortunate context, Williams gamely shared thoughts on her musical inspirations and idiosyncratic guitar style. What follows is a tour of her music by way of some of her best-known songs, with tab examples demonstrating her rhythm playing.

FOLK ROOTS

Williams first got her hands on a guitar—a Silvertone from Sears—when she was 12 and living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Her father, the poet and creative writing teacher Miller Williams, found a local rock guitarist to give her lessons, and each week she learned a song, often drawn from the repertoires of '60s folk stars like Joan Baez, Gordon Lightfoot, and Peter, Paul and Mary. Along the way Williams picked up the basics of fingerstyle accompaniment, using a thumbpick and two fingerpicks. "One thing I'm really grateful about was learning those fingerpicking techniques, which I still use today," she said. "I actually don't know how to play with a flatpick."

Albums by Baez and others also introduced Williams to traditional ballads, which she dug into through songbooks like the John and Alan Lomax collection *Folk Song U.S.A.* One favorite trad song, she recalled, was the train-wreck ballad "The FFV" (recorded by the Carter Family as "Engine 143"). No doubt folk ballads helped prepare Williams to tackle tragic stories in her own songs, from the life and death of Texas songwriter Blaze Foley in "Drunken Angel" to the harrowing account of domestic abuse in "Wakin' Up."

"I really got into the ballads, the English and Irish murder ballads, like 'Banks of the Ohio' and 'Barbara Allen' and all that," she said. "Those are really good lessons in songwriting, 'cause they tell really interesting stories and they're kind of dark and graphic. You know, a guy takes his lover into the woods and stabs her, blood's running down her breast. . . . That stuff was really good to go through and learn."



BLUE NOTES

One of the most impactful discoveries of her early years, as with so many other guitarists of her generation, was Robert Johnson. When a friend in Fayetteville, Arkansas, played her the Columbia album *King of the Delta Blues Singers,* she said, "It just blew me out of the water, you know? I mean, I'd never heard anything like it. It had this dirty, guttural sound, and also his lyrics really got me—it was like blues poetry."

Williams put Johnson front and center when she made her recording debut with *Ramblin' on My Mind* (later shortened to *Ramblin'*), released by Folkways in 1979. Along with several songs she learned from Pearly Brown's record *Georgia Street Singer* ("You're Gonna Need That Pure Religion" and "Motherless Children"), Williams played three Johnson songs, picking a 12-string and doing the songs her way.

The 12-string was a reflection of her earliest public performances. "I was playing out at antiwar demonstrations and all that in the '60s," she said, "and then when I got old enough and traveled to different towns, I was doing a little bit of busking on the streets. The 12-string was good for that, 'cause it was so much louder, and I really liked the sound."

Example 1 shows the kind of rhythm pattern Williams used on "Ramblin' on My Mind." Unlike Johnson, who played slide on "Ramblin'" in an open tuning, Williams played in standard tuning, joined by John Grimaudo on six-string lead. Pick the down-stemmed notes with your thumb and the up-stemmed notes with your index and middle fingers. Williams uses a plastic thumbpick and metal fingerpicks, but you can adapt the basic pattern to however you play.

One of the hallmarks of Williams' style, evident in her earliest tracks, is a strong groove, which she traces to her country blues inspirations as well as electric blues-rock bands like Cream. Early on, she said, "I didn't have a band—that wasn't till much later. So I guess I was improvising and just trying to get a beat thing going without having bass and drums."

To create that kind of drive, strike the bass strings with your thumb or thumbpick forcefully enough to create a percussive slap, and add a little thump on or near the bridge with the heel of your picking hand.

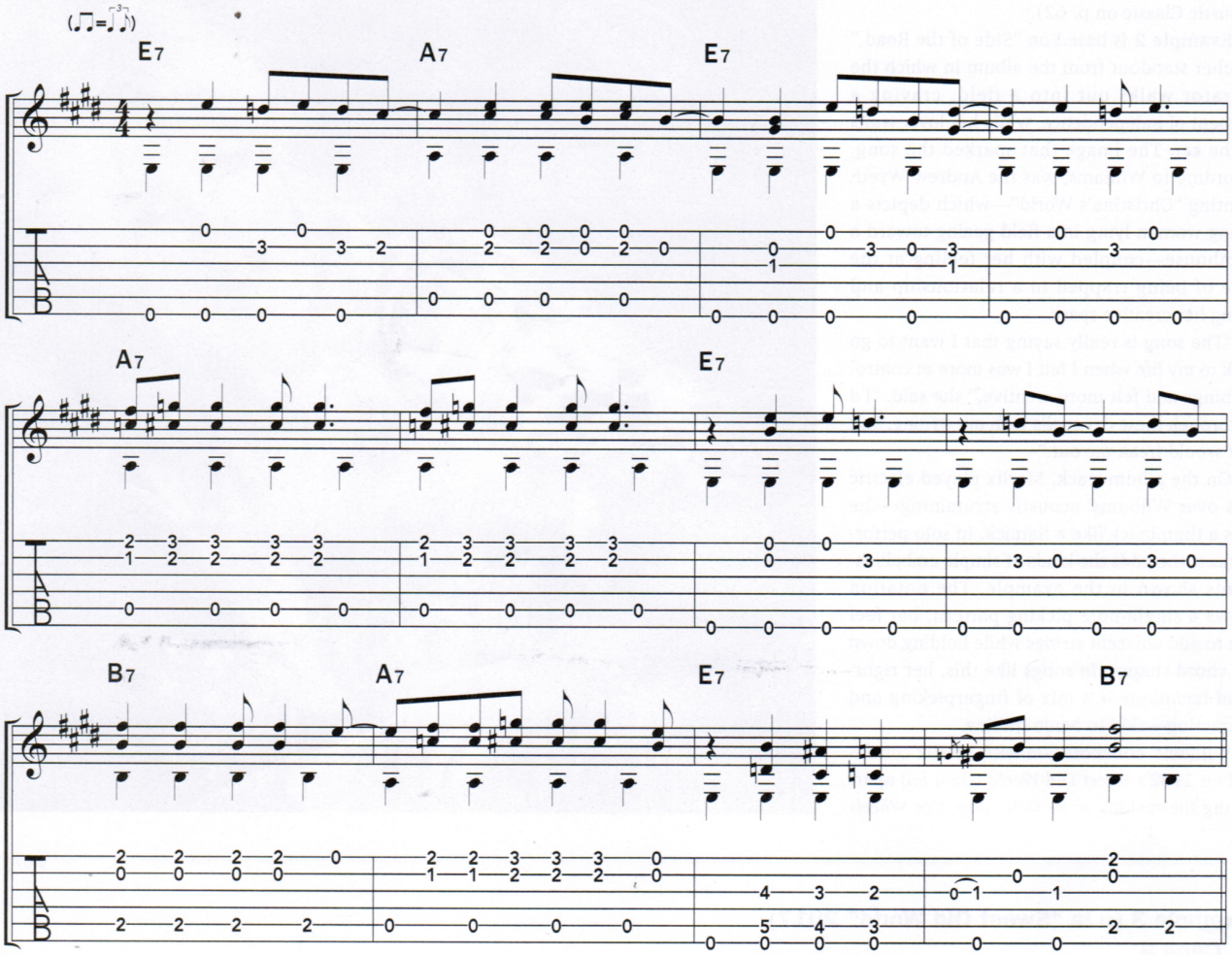
EMERGING AS A SONGWRITER

While her debut showcased Williams as a blues singer, at the same time she was coming into her own as a songwriter. While living in Texas in the '70s, she found a creative home at the storied Houston folk club Anderson Fair, which also nurtured such talents as Nanci Griffith, Lyle Lovett, and Townes Van Zandt.

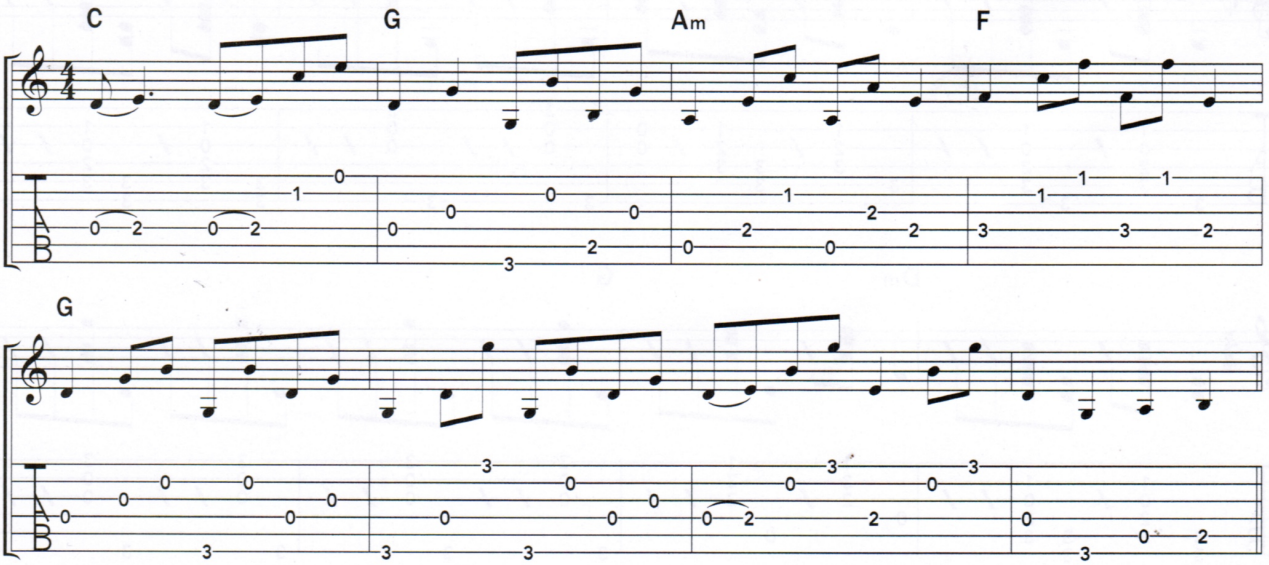
Williams introduced herself as a songwriter on the all-original *Happy Woman Blues* in 1980, which—contrary to what the title suggests—leaned mostly away from blues and toward country and especially Cajun sounds, with fiddle-heavy acoustic arrangements. But it wasn't until 1988's *Lucinda Williams,* produced by Gurf Morlix and Dusty Wakeman, that she hit her stride as a singer-songwriter and recording artist, with a core sound built around a combo of acoustic rhythm and electric lead guitars that she has relied on ever since.

Lucinda Williams featured such tracks as the two-chord rocker "Changed the Locks," later covered by Tom Petty, and the song that vaulted her career: "Passionate Kisses," a

Example 1 (à la "Ramblin' on My Mind")



Example 2 (à la "Side of the Road")
Capo IV



megahit for Mary Chapin Carpenter (see Acoustic Classic on p. 62).

Example 2 is based on "Side of the Road," another standout from the album in which the narrator walks out into a field, craving a moment of independence, while her lover waits in the car. The image that sparked the song, according to Williams, was the Andrew Wyeth painting "Christina's World"—which depicts a young woman lying in a field gazing toward a farmhouse—coupled with her feeling at the time of being trapped in a relationship and losing her creative spark.

"The song is really saying that I want to go back to my life when I felt I was more in control of things and felt more creative," she said. "I'd go through these dry spells with my writing, and that would freak me out."

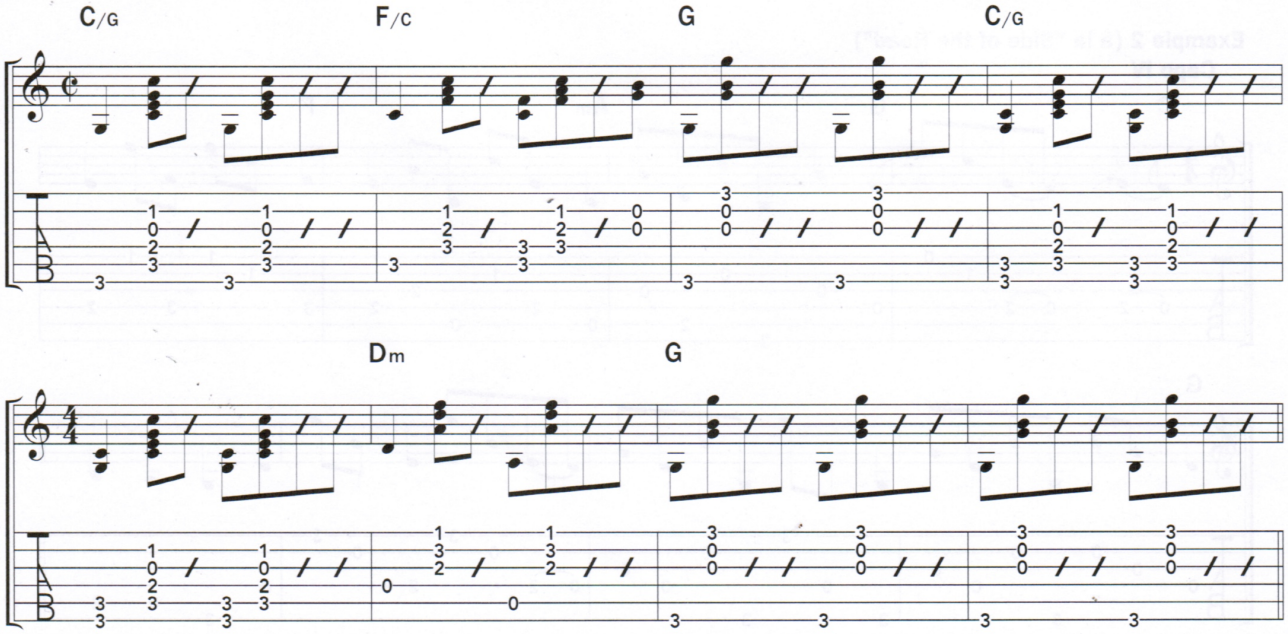
On the album track, Morlix played electric riffs over Williams' acoustic strumming—she uses a thumbpick like a flatpick. In solo performances, she adds the kinds of simple embellishments shown in the example. The notation shows a single-note picking pattern, but feel free to add adjacent strings while holding down the chord shapes. In songs like this, her right-hand technique is a mix of fingerpicking and strumming—akin to banjo frailing.

Williams' collaboration with Morlix continued on 1992's *Sweet Old World* (then fell apart during the making of its follow-up, *Car Wheels*

Lucinda Williams in 2003

DANNY CLINCH

Example 3 (à la "Sweet Old World" 2017)
Capo II



on a Gravel Road). The title track of *Sweet Old World* is one of Williams' best ballads, a meditation on the life experiences lost to suicide. Emmylou Harris, a longtime friend and champion of Williams, beautifully covered the song on her seminal album *Wrecking Ball*.

Williams herself remade the entire *Sweet Old World* album 25 years later and released the results as *This Sweet Old World*, and it's interesting to compare her renditions. **Example 3** is based on her 2017 redo; her acoustic is central, and she plays more slowly and a step lower than in the original—capo 2 rather than 4. (Over the years, she has lowered the capo position in many songs to match her voice.)

The example follows the first part of the verse progression. Play the C chords with a sixth-string G in the bass—her typical voicing for a C—and use an F/C as well. Often she strums the low strings together rather than playing single bass notes. At the end of measure 2, lift up the F shape and play the open second and third strings—this anticipates the G chord and also gives you a moment to change shapes. You'll find similar transitions in Example 5.

ON THE ROAD

For fans and critics alike, a high point of Williams' career is the Grammy-winning *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, from 1998, which last year cracked the top 100 in *Rolling Stone*'s list of the 500 greatest albums of all time. The process of making *Car Wheels* was notoriously long and convoluted (first tracked in Austin with Morlix, redone from scratch in Nashville with Ray Kennedy and Steve Earle, and finally completed in Los Angeles with Ray Bittan of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band), but the resulting tracks feel vital and visceral.

> **'Both of my grandfathers were Methodist ministers, so that preaching thing was in my blood already'**
> **–LUCINDA WILLIAMS**

In the title track, Williams evokes images of her Southern childhood—though she was unaware she was writing from her own experience until her father later pointed it out. Williams often doesn't know what she's tapping into when she writes. "I hate to sound like a cliché, but sometimes I feel like I'm a vehicle for the song coming through," she said. "I just go into that place, let it flow out, and write it down, and then I'll go back and edit—kind of fix it and turn it into something."

Example 4 is based on the flatpick-style intro for "Car Wheels." Toggle between D and Am shapes (capo 4), with some hammer-on embellishments, before landing on the I chord (G).

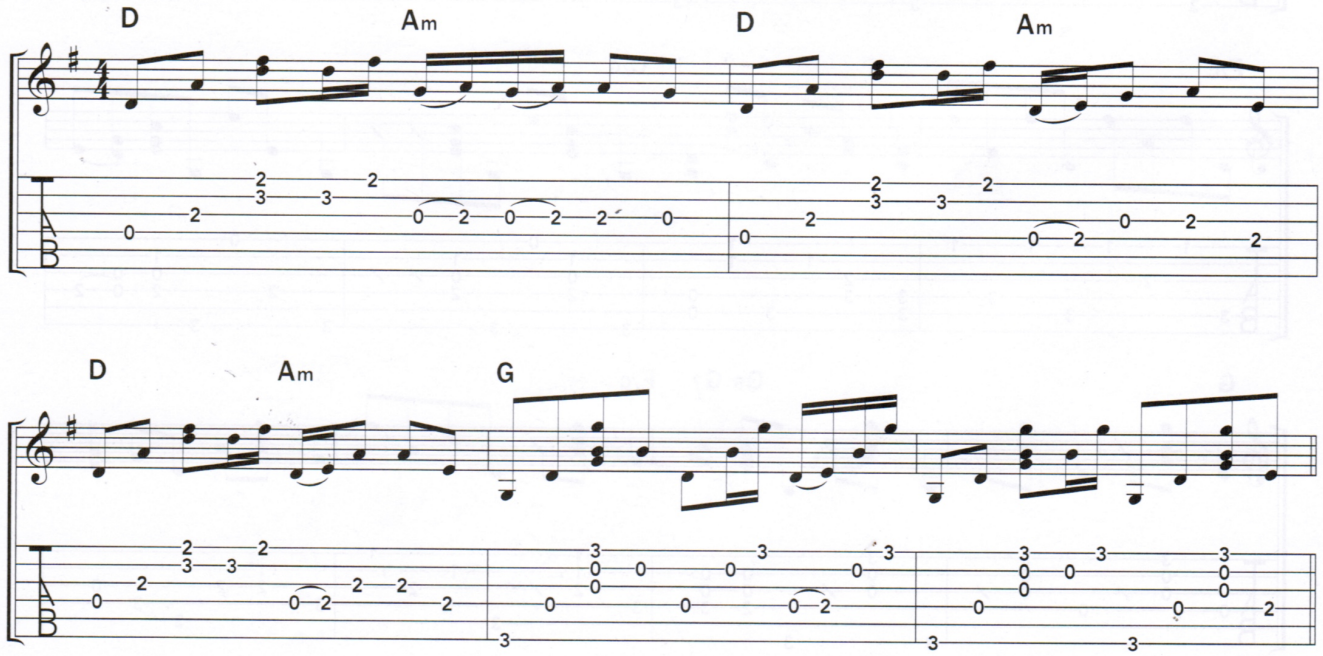
In "Jackson," another highlight of the *Car Wheels* album, she evokes the simplicity and directness of the folk songs she grew up on (and also tips her hat to the song with the same title made famous by Johnny Cash and June Carter). "Sometimes we have to get out of our own way as songwriters," she said. "Sometimes I'll think about the early folk songs and country songs and how simple they were in their chord structure and everything. I have to remind myself that it doesn't have to be real complex. I try to imagine, 'What would Woody Guthrie do?' and put myself back in that place."

Williams says she didn't play the fingerpicking part on "Jackson" on *Car Wheels* (she thinks it was Morlix or Earle). Instead, **Example 5** shows the type of pattern she uses live—a thumb/brush, with a bit of chord melody, reminiscent of the Maybelle Carter style. Capo at the third fret to play in the album key.

LEAD LINES

Throughout her music, Williams has partnered with top-notch lead guitarists who've helped shape her sound, including Morlix, Doug Pettibone, and, currently, Stuart Mathis. All have added signature riffs that became

Example 4 (à la "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road")
Capo IV



inseparable from her songs—as with Morlix's jangly riff on "Passionate Kisses" (transcribed on p. 63).

"After I've written the song, generally the process is I'll do an acoustic demo with just me and guitar, and then I'll send that to the guys in the band and let them listen to it for a while and soak it up," she said. "When we go in the studio, I just let them do what whatever comes to them. I don't ever tell them, 'Play these notes' or anything."

Example 6 shows the riff played by Pettibone that opens and anchors "Fruits of My Labor," released in 2003 on *World Without Tears*. Languid and haunting, the song is back in the spotlight this year thanks to a cover by the indie band Waxahatchee.

On *World Without Tears,* Williams strums "Fruits of My Labor" with a capo at the first fret, and Pettibone plays out of the same position on electric with heavy tremolo. For the harmonized lines on the first and third strings, play fingerstyle or use hybrid picking, grabbing the lower note with a flatpick and the upper note with your middle finger.

'One thing I'm really grateful about was learning those fingerpicking techniques, which I still use today.'
–LUCINDA WILLIAMS

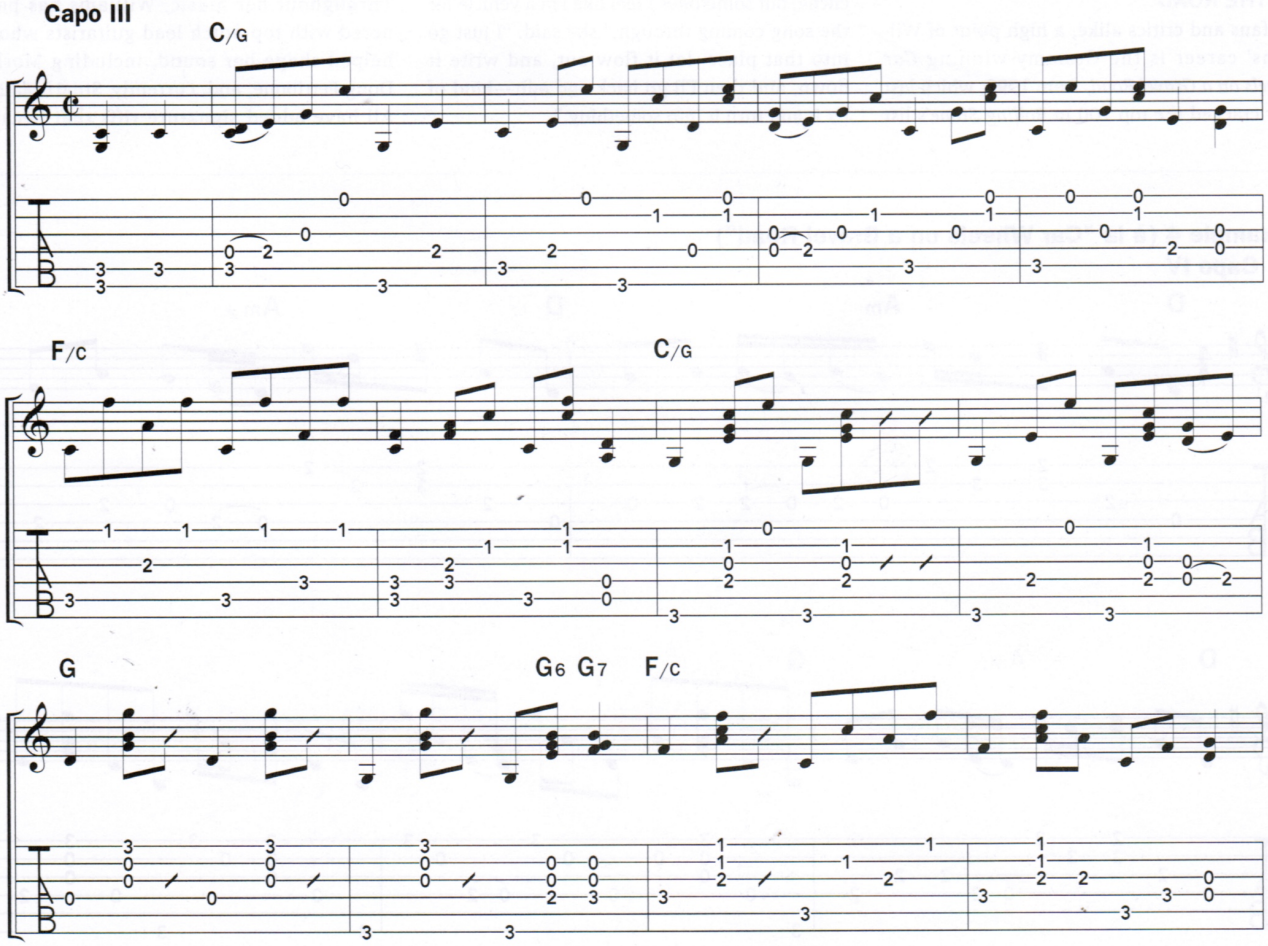
GHOST STORIES

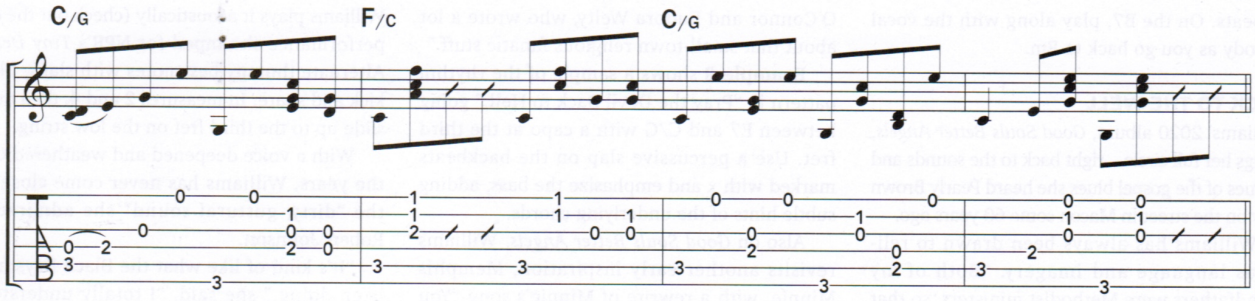
While Williams' records have gravitated toward a gritty acoustic-electric sound, her songwriting always retains a connection to the acoustic folk she cut her teeth on. One notable example is "The Ghosts of Highway 20," the title track from her acclaimed 2016 album, reminiscent of traditional ballads by way of Bob Dylan.

Williams said the idea behind the song first came when she played a show back in Macon, which she found surprisingly unchanged from how she remembered it in the '50s. Leaving the city on the tour bus, she began thinking about how much of her childhood was strung along Highway 20. "Sometimes memories are like ghosts," she said. "They hang around and you can't get rid of them, and they torture you sometimes. You could think of it this way too: The blues artists who lived in those areas and are buried around there, they're literally blues ghosts, you know?"

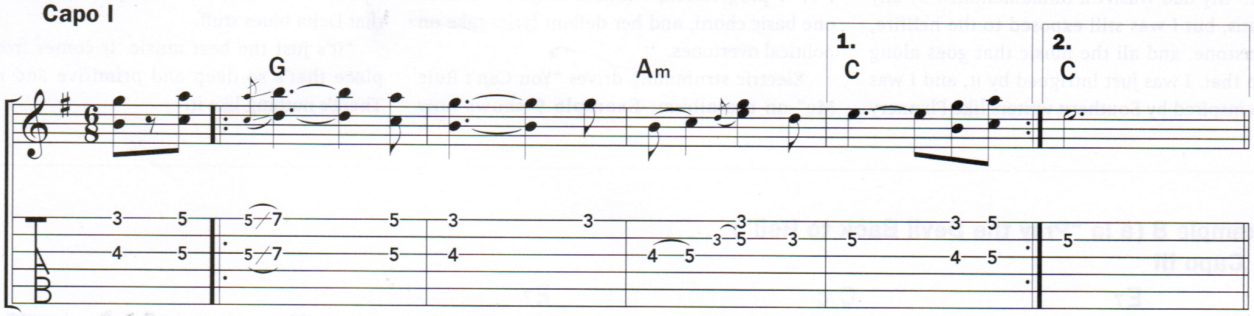
Example 7 is based on the verse pattern in "The Ghosts of Highway 20" as she performs it live, in E minor (the album version is in D minor). Play a steady alternating bass throughout, over Em, C/G, and B7 shapes. Add treble notes sparingly with your fingers on the

Example 5 (à la "Jackson")
Capo III

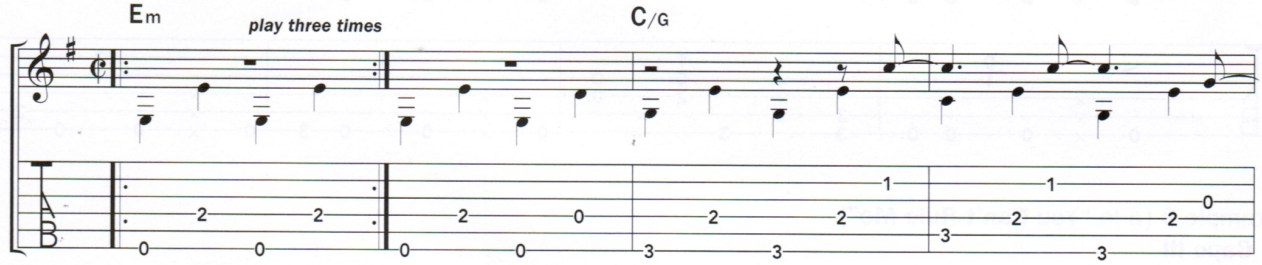


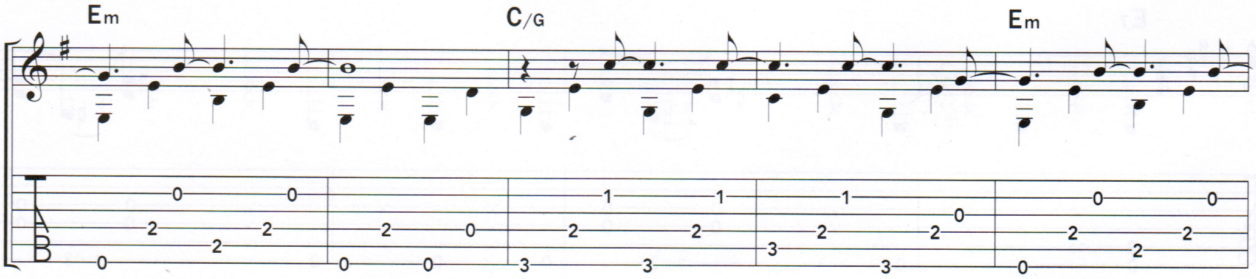


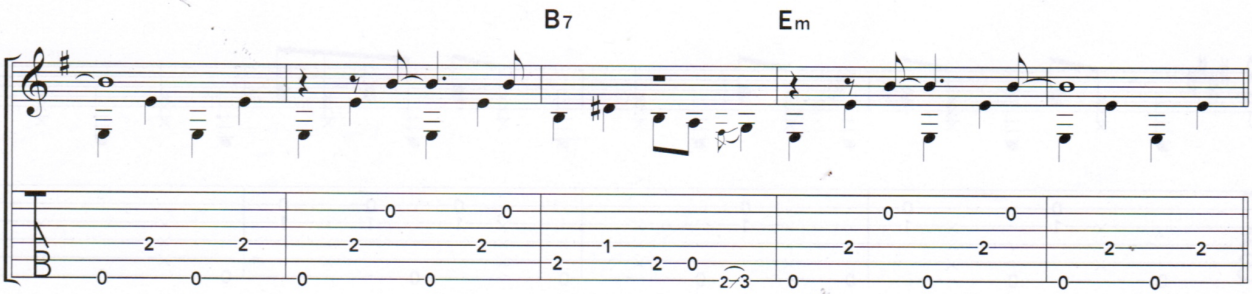
Example 6 (à la "Fruits of My Labor")
Capo I



Example 7 (à la "The Ghosts of Highway 20")
No capo







offbeats. On the B7, play along with the vocal melody as you go back to Em.

BACK TO THE WELL

Williams' 2020 album, *Good Souls Better Angels*, brings her full circle—right back to the sounds and themes of the gospel blues she heard Pearly Brown play on the street in Macon some 60 years ago.

Williams has always been drawn to religious language and imagery. "Both of my grandfathers were Methodist ministers, so that preaching thing was in my blood already," she said. "My dad wasn't a fundamentalist by any means, but I was still exposed to the hellfire, brimstone, and all the music that goes along with that. I was just intrigued by it, and I was also inspired by Southern writers like Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty, who wrote a lot about that small-town religious fanatic stuff."

Example 8 shows a sample of the rhythm pattern in "Pray the Devil Back to Hell," going between E7 and C/G with a capo at the third fret. Use a percussive slap on the backbeats marked with x and emphasize the bass, adding subtle hints of the underlying chords.

Also on *Good Souls Better Angels,* Williams revisits another early inspiration, Memphis Minnie, with a rewrite of Minnie's song "You Can't Rule Me." While the original song uses a I–IV–V progression, Williams strips it down to one basic chord, and her defiant lyrics take on political overtones.

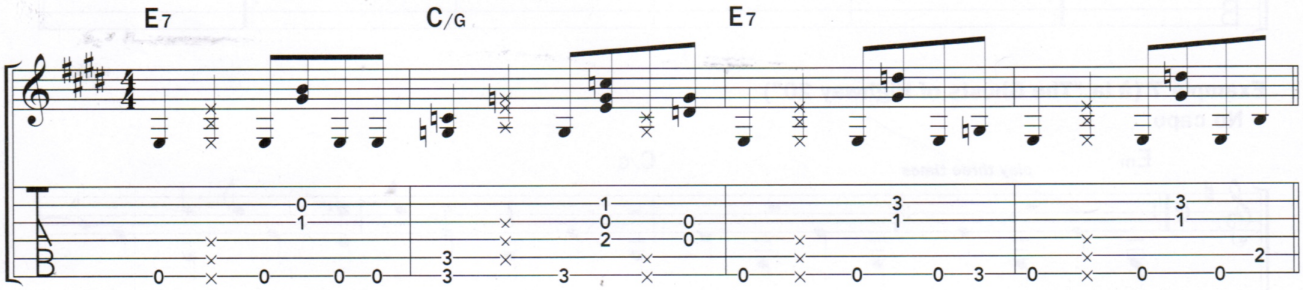
Electric strumming drives "You Can't Rule Me" on the album; **Example 9** shows how Williams plays it acoustically (check out the duo performance she taped for NPR's *Tiny Desk*). Alternate thumpy bass notes with slaps, like a kick and snare. In measures 2 and 4, do a quick slide up to the third fret on the low string.

With a voice deepened and weathered over the years, Williams has never come closer to the "dirty, guttural sound" she admired in Robert Johnson.

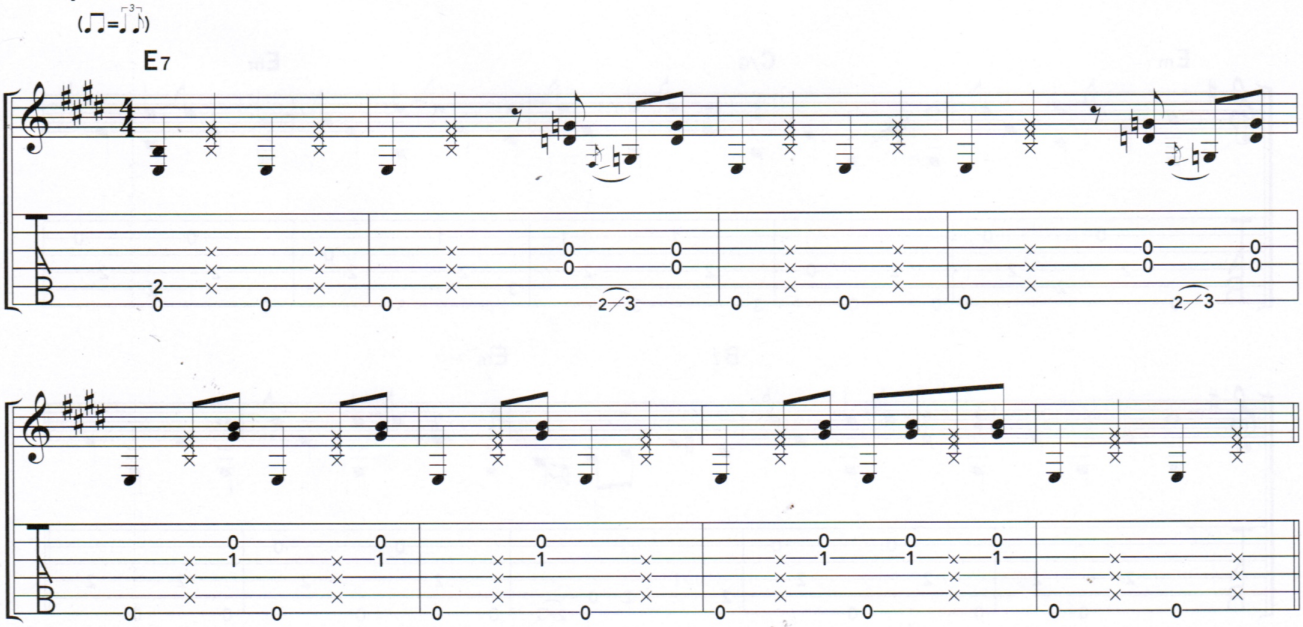
"It's kind of like what the Black Keys have been doing," she said. "I totally understood where they were coming from the first time I heard them, 'cause I knew they were channeling that Delta blues stuff.

"It's just the best music. It comes from a place that's so deep and primitive and raw. There's nothing like it." AG

Example 8 (à la "Pray the Devil Back to Hell")
Capo III



Example 9 (à la "You Can't Rule Me")
Capo III



WATCH LUCINDA WILLIAMS PLAY "PASSIONATE KISSES"
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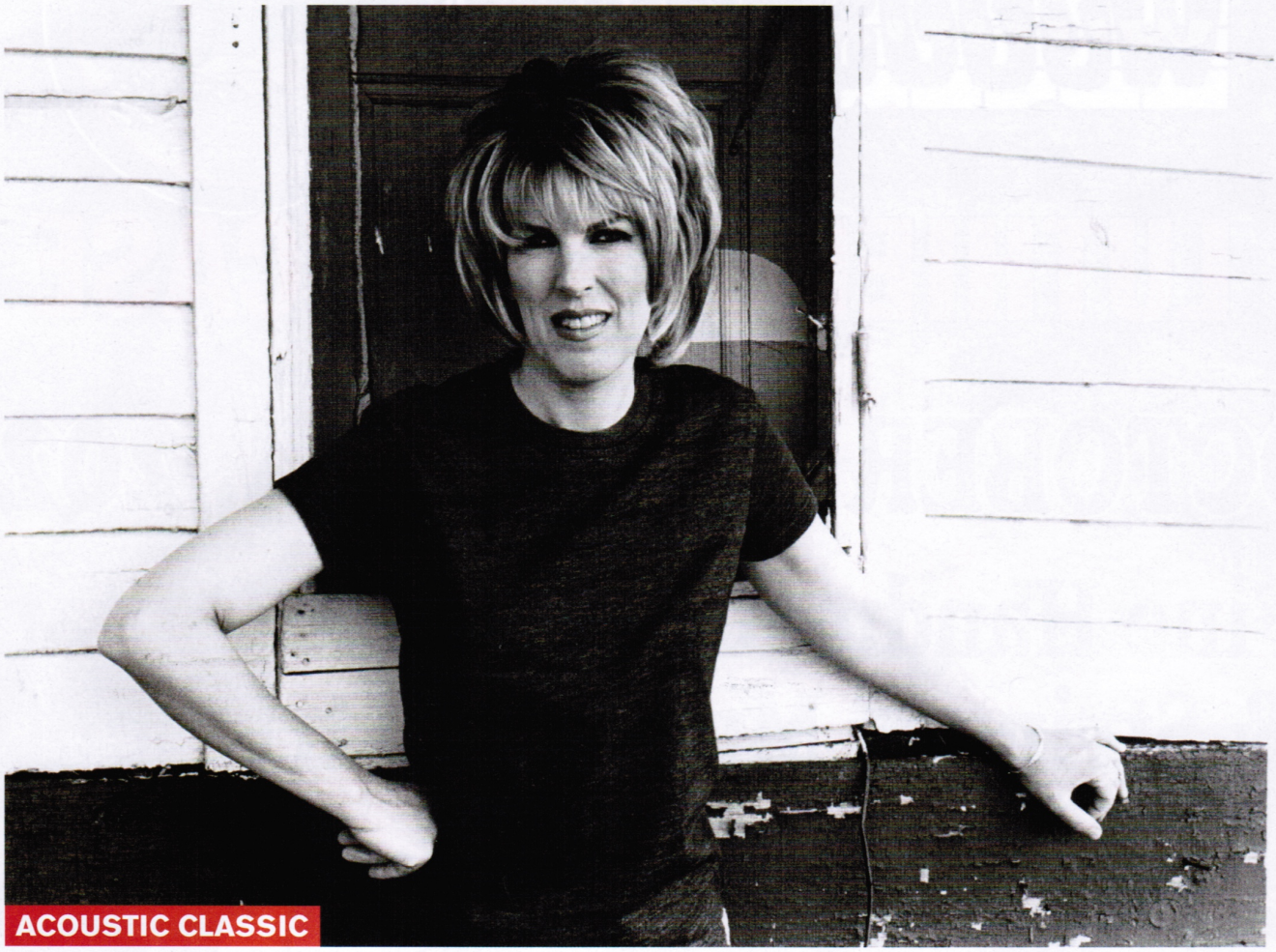

ACOUSTIC CLASSIC

SHELBY LEE ADAMS

Passionate Kisses

Lucinda Williams' breakthrough song, by way of Mary Chapin Carpenter

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

In 1991, Lucinda Williams was touring Australia with Mary Chapin Carpenter and Rosanne Cash, and Carpenter fell in love with Williams' song "Passionate Kisses," playing and harmonizing with it at every show. Carpenter wound up covering the song on her album *Come On Come On* and releasing it as a single. Although her label did not see hit potential, the public felt otherwise: "Passionate Kisses" climbed the charts and won Grammys in 1994 for both Best Country Song and Best Country Vocal Performance.

The song, Williams says, is "the classic story of being with someone who's traveling a lot. It's really about loneliness and feeling like you want it all—you want the passionate kisses and you want the security. In a way, it has a thing about creativity, too, because it says 'Pens that won't run out of ink/ And cool quiet and time to think.' So it's saying, I wish I had that in my life again instead of being in this tumultuous, crazy situation."

To play the rhythm part, capo at the fourth fret and use C shapes, which sound in the key of E major. The strum pattern shown is based on how Williams plays the song solo. She tends to play C as a C/G, and F as F/C, but for simplicity's sake, the chords are labeled simply as C and F.

On Williams' original record, Gurf Morlix played a ringing electric guitar hook that became so central to the song that Mary Chapin Carpenter's guitarist John Jennings reproduced it almost exactly (though in a different key). Morlix's hook is shown here, played without a capo and therefore notated in the sounding key of E. Start all the way up at the 16th fret and play a descending melody on the third string against the top two strings ringing open.

Beyond the guitar hook, Carpenter's cover of "Passionate Kisses" is remarkably similar in sound and feel to Williams' original. The only differences are that Carpenter lowered the key a step (to capo 2) and added a short instrumental bridge that's included in the chart. AG