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NONFICTION

From Lucinda Williams, a Memoir as Flinty as Her Songs

In “Don’t Tell Anybody the Secrets I Told You,” the raw-voiced singer looks back on a contentious artistic life.



“There are times when I can bring an extra layer of unpredictable emotion to a situation that is already tough to begin with,” Lucinda Williams admits in her new memoir. **Danny Clinch**



By **Jon Pareles**

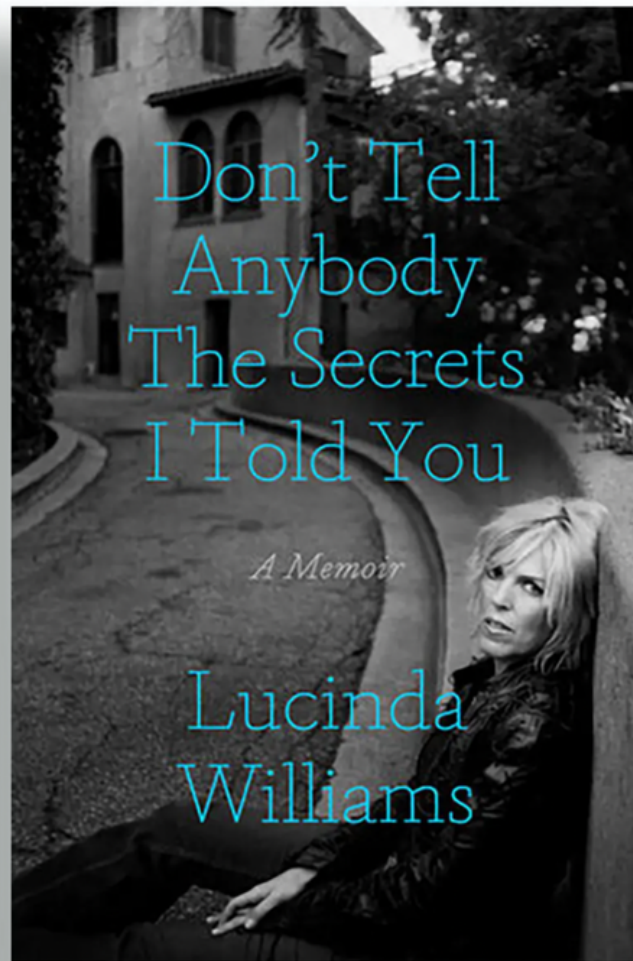
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Lucinda Williams, the Grammy-winning 70-year-old songwriter, was born in Lake Charles, La. Her grandfathers were both preachers; one was a civil rights advocate. Her father, Miller Williams, was an award-winning poet. Her mother loved music and played the piano. Williams grew up in Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, Utah, Chile and Mexico. On paper, it was an ideal upbringing for [the artist she became](#): a nomadic touring musician whose songs draw on deep Southern roots, using matter-of-fact imagery to conjure tempestuous emotions.

But her pedigree didn't make her life fall neatly into place, as Williams recalls in her memoir, "Don't Tell Anybody the Secrets I Told You." "I've held back from talking about my childhood over the decades of my life," she notes. "I've written songs about it instead."

Williams's mother was sexually abused as a child, she writes, and lived with schizophrenia and alcoholism. Her poet-professor father was a mentor and protector, but he also had a temper. Williams's parents divorced after her father took up with one of his teenage students.

In the title song of her best-selling album, ["Car Wheels on a Gravel Road,"](#) Williams sings about being a "Child in the back seat 'bout four or five years/Lookin' out the window, little bit of dirt mixed with tears." When her father first heard it, he told Williams that she was that crying little girl; until then, Williams hadn't realized she was writing about herself.



Williams's memoir is as flinty, earthy and plain-spoken as her songs. She reveals the autobiographical underpinnings of some of [her darkest lyrics](#), but she also tells a larger tale: of artistic determination battling personal insecurity; of misjudging and being misjudged by men and by the music business; and of steadfastly holding her own.

She doesn't give in: not on a trendy remix, not on her album cover photos, not on her instincts. She can handle being called difficult or "insane" even though, she admits, "There are times when I can bring an extra layer of unpredictable emotion to a situation that is already tough to begin with." The lasting results are in her songs.

Williams envisioned life as a musician soon after she picked up a guitar. She started performing folk songs in her teens. But even as she honed her own songwriting and built local reputations — in Texas and then in Los Angeles — she worked day jobs well into her 30s. Major labels rejected her, again and again, as being “too country for rock” but “too rock for country.”

From the beginning — two low-budget Folkways albums she made in 1979 and 1980 — Williams sang about elemental subjects: desire, sorrow, love, traveling, survival, death. Some of her songs are kiss-offs; some offer regrets; some are elegies; some are takedowns. They’re always grounded in homely details. In [“Hot Blood,”](#) a bluesy outpouring of female lust, she sings about feeling “a cold chill” as she watches a guy just “fixin’ your flat with a tire iron.”

It took an English punk label, Rough Trade, to release “Lucinda Williams,” her [1988 breakthrough album](#). A decade later, “Car Wheels on a Gravel Road” marked her commercial peak. But recording that album, she recalls in the memoir, was lengthy and fraught. Making records, she writes, “can test the limits and boundaries of everyone involved. I now understand that is normal.”

Getting the sound Williams wanted on “Car Wheels” led to the breakup of her longtime band and clashes with two producers. Then contractual tangles delayed the release of the finished album for two years. Williams also nixed a video concept from the director Paul Schrader, deciding, “He was just another guy trying to impose his vision on a female artist. ‘Car Wheels’ did fine without a video.”

Throughout her book, Williams recognizes her own appetites and mistakes. She writes about suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder and bouts of depression, and she recognizes her weakness for the kind of boyfriend she calls “a poet on a motorcycle,” guys who often turned out to be cheaters, addicts or worse.

She came through anyway. “That relationship was done, but I got [a good song out of it](#),” she writes about one romantic debacle.

Williams has been married since 2009 to her manager, producer and songwriting collaborator, Tom Overby.

Although Williams finished her book in 2022, it doesn’t mention her 2020 stroke; she can [no longer play guitar](#). But she returned to touring in 2021 and persists in writing songs; she’s releasing a [new album in June](#). Her memoir shows how deep that grit runs.