THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



# 'Don't Tell Anybody the Secrets I Told You' Review: Lucinda Williams's Long Road

Channeling the literary and folk-music in luences of her childhood, the singer- songwriter charted a determined, highly personal path to stardom.

Lucinda Williams performing in Chattanooga, Tenn., in 1992. PHOTO: CHATTANOOGA TIMES FREE PRESS

*By Elizabeth Nelson*

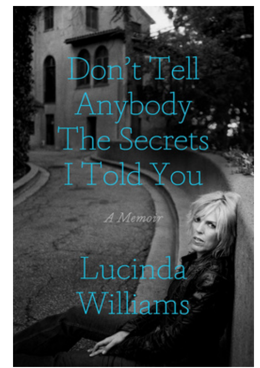
April 14, 2023 11 45 am ET

Lucinda Williams was being fussy. As the Louisiana-born singer-songwriter attempted to put the finishing touches on what would become her career-making 1998 album "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road," she kept insisting on re-recording vocals long past the point at which everybody else involved in the session—her band, her management, co-producer Steve Earle—agreed that they couldn't be improved upon. And yet, there was something ineffable she was seeking: "I am very deliberate and I don't like to be rushed," Ms. Williams writes in her captivating new memoir. "If I want to redo a vocal, I just want to redo a vocal. No questions asked."

By Lucinda Williams

Crown

272 pages




When Springsteen did it he was a workaholic. When Brian Wilson did it, he was a celebrated eccentric wandering the capacious estate of his overgrown genius. When Lucinda Williams was slow moving—perhaps to a fault—the music business buzzed that she was "insane." That epithet stuck even after "Car Wheels" proved a runaway commercial success, won the best Contemporary Folk award at the Grammys and topped the Village Voice's prestigious "Pazz & Jop" critics' poll. If you've ever been a woman in a male-dominated field, you probably have some inkling how this feels. Assertiveness in your own interest often garners you a certain reputation, whether your instincts prove true or not.

Anecdotes like these feature prominently throughout Ms. Williams's story. Now 70 years old, she has garnered a slow-burn success, owing largely to a hardwired impulse to trust her own judgment when all those around her were calling it into question. The often hilarious, occasionally harrowing "Don't Tell Anybody the Secrets I Told You" is a bracingly candid chronicle of a sui generis character plotting a ramshackle but ultimately triumphant trajectory. "I don't want it to be one of those sugarcoated books like you find at Walgreens," she says in a brief intro. "I want them to see the truth."

Her early life was one of peripatetic journeys and literary adventures. Before becoming a celebrated poet and creative writing professor, Lucinda's father, Miller Williams, was a vagabond teacher whose piecemeal adjunct work caused him to shuffle his wife Lucille and their three children from Louisiana to Arkansas to Mexico to Utah, a simultaneously nourishing and alienating experience for a child. Lucille battled severe mental illness and its unnameable horrors, and eventually Lucinda's parents divorced, their partnership exhausted by financial strain and the stress of her mother's unpredictable moods. In all Ms. Williams moved 12 times before she was out of her teens, forging a template that would follow her into an adulthood spent largely on tour buses and in extended stay hotels.

For all of the considerable dysfunction of her early years, they contain an uncanny element, a thread of events that seem freighted with portent. As an eight-year-old in Macon, Ga., she

chases peacocks around Flannery O'Connor's property while her father pays a visit to the great lady. When she's 11, her father wins a scholarship to teach in Santiago and befriends Pablo Neruda and Nicanor Parra—Chilean music and poetry become deeply ingrained influences on the young Lucinda. Her father's commitment to the community of artists is an abiding influence. Teaching at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Miller Williams routinely hosts no-holds-barred bacchanals for local and visiting authors. James Dickey is a regular. Charles Bukowski bases his torridly ill-behaved novel "Women" on a trip through town. Watching, Lucinda gets insights into the literary scene: "People think musicians are wild and crazy and drunk and f—cking each other all the time. Musicians are nothing like writers, not even close, from what I've seen."

The shape of Ms. Williams's career has also unfolded at a writerly pace. She was 43 in 1996, when cutting those vexing extra vocals for "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road"—still on the young side for a novelist, but past the age when popular musicians had typically been put out to pasture. By that time she had been nurturing a two-decade career as a beloved cult act, but the notion of a major breakthrough seemed vanishingly unlikely. Yet, that's exactly what she achieved, even after a farrago of industry cock-ups caused the release of the LP to be excruciatingly delayed until 1998. Having become something like a star for the first time approaching 50, Ms. Williams doubled down on her methods while expanding her artistic purview on powerful records like 2001's swampy "Essence," 2007's sprawling "West" and 2020's rough-and-ready "Good Souls and Better Angels." By magic or alchemy, she was able to subvert the right-this-second marketing obsessions of digital age media, forcing the industry to adjust to her own slow-growing creative development: an inspiring feat on its own.

Achieving stardom, even when deeply deserved and long in gestation, is no guarantee of personal equilibrium. The forensic examination of romance (and sex) is her great topic, and she comes by it with the hard-won acuity of a long-term combatant in those labyrinthine trenches.

In keeping with the promised candor, Ms. Williams leaves few stones unturned in describing her penchant for tumultuous affairs, which features a parade of variously nurturing and dangerous guys with considerable overlap. She knows her type—"a poet on a motorcycle"—which somewhat unsurprisingly connotes the type of individual who isn't in it for the long haul.

Certain bold-faced names cycle through, along with a motley assortment of literary-minded rebels of various repute and temperament. Ms. Williams is not a songwriter who speaks much

in code—she acknowledges that many of her compositions draw as directly from her personal experience as she is able to dictate. Listening to tracks like “Real Live Bleeding Fingers and Broken Guitar Strings”—an account of a brief and desultory dalliance with the songwriter Paul Westerberg—one feels relieved that her current, happy marriage to her manager Tom Overby is the harbor at the end of a journey that’s encompassed more than one shipwreck.

Ms. Williams’s freewheeling story concludes with a list. It is explained as a late addition to the final text wherein the writer, having generously opened a vein to share her experience, decides to simply consolidate her philosophy into a litany of things that make life worth living. It’s the perfect ending to a gleefully imperfect book. “Listen to Coltrane, Nina Simone, Hank Williams, Loretta Lynn, Son House, Robert Johnson, Howlin’ Wolf, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Miles Davis, Lou Reed, Nick Drake, Bobbie Gentry, George Jones, Jimmy Reed, Odetta, Funkadelic, and Woody Guthrie.” Also: “Lie in the sunshine but from time to time let the neon light your way. ZZ Top, Jefferson Airplane, Spirit.” I don’t know exactly what it means, but I can’t remember any book giving me better advice.

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*Appeared in the April 15, 2023, print edition.*