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MUSIC REVIEW

‘Stories From a Rock n Roll Heart’ by Lucinda Williams Review: A Steadfast Songsmith

At the age of 70 and about three years after her stroke, the singer delivers an album full of reflection, perseverance and unwavering devotion to music.

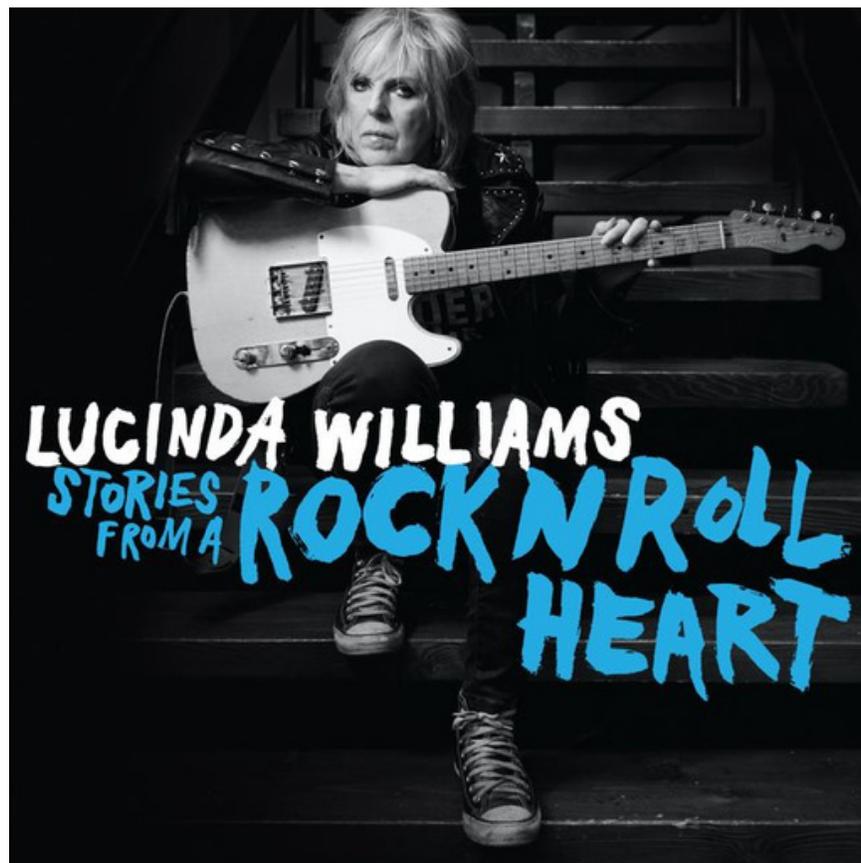
By Mark Richardson

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Lucinda Williams PHOTO: DANNY CLINCH

Lucinda Williams is a lifer, a true believer in American roots music as a vehicle for expression who has plied her trade on record for over 40 years. She was born in and mostly raised in the American South, having lived in Louisiana, Arkansas and Mississippi as a child, and the mythology and plain-spoken reality of the region have been fundamental to her work since the beginning. She's mined these elements—blue-collar settings rendered with a poet's eye by someone committed to a life in art—for 17 Grammy nominations and massive amounts of critical acclaim, and as much as any single artist she has defined what is now called Americana, a term used to describe the mix of rock and various strands of roots music that congealed in the '80s and '90s.



Ms. Williams was mostly unknown until her 1988 self-titled album, released when she was 35 years old. She was slow to finish records through the '90s, though the two she issued during the decade, 1992's "Sweet Old World" and 1998's "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road," are now considered classics. But she ramped up her output in this century, releasing 10 LPs through 2020's "Good Souls Better Angels." Late that year, she suffered a stroke. She still can't play guitar, but she has recovered her singing voice and was back on the road in 2021, and Friday she returns with a new album, "Stories From a Rock n Roll Heart" (Highway 20), that finds her looking back and taking stock at age 70.

Because she now can't play an instrument, she mostly wrote the record with her husband and manager, Tom Overby, and singer-songwriters Jesse Malin and Travis Stephens. But the songs bear her stamp, and cover subjects she's tackled many times before. It says something about her history in music that Ms. Williams can open an LP with a rollicking, bluesy rocker called "Let's Get the Band Back Together"—where one might expect a quiet look back given her circumstances, she uses this collection to announce that she's not going anywhere anytime soon. Her voice is pretty much where we left it on her 2020 record—not as supple or versatile as it once was, but still solid nonetheless. Where she could once rely on shifts in pitch for emphasis, she now delivers her lyrics in a narrow register, adding trills of vibrato for punctuation.

On the second track, "New York Comeback," she enlists Bruce Springsteen and Patti Scialfa for background vocals. It's a song about delivering like you used to after the world has already counted you out, and Mr. Springsteen exudes warmth and affection while Ms. Scialfa adds "sha-nah-nah" girl-group style backing vocals, recalling tunes all three loved in their youth.

Later in the record, the first couple of New Jersey joins Ms. Williams on "Rock n Roll Heart," an ode to life as an outsider redeemed by music. Though Mr. Springsteen didn't have a hand in writing either tune, the latter sounds like a rave-up from "The River," and both tracks are among the record's best.

The songs mentioned above are about defiance and sticking with what you know even after most people around you have moved on, but others examine with sadness the toll taken by the rock 'n' roll lifestyle. On "Hum's Liquor," a loping ballad about a fellow musician she sees each day walking to get booze first thing in the morning, Ms. Williams describes his ritual as "a lonely waltz of pain." For Ms. Williams, transcendent highs and crippling lows are always in close proximity to each other, and each extreme gives its opposite meaning. That's part of what makes her work so interesting—there's no judgment or preachiness. She sees what is happening around her and lends her characters dignity by getting to the heart of their struggles.

Elsewhere on the record, Ms. Williams pays tribute to a fallen peer—"Stolen Moments" is dedicated to Tom Petty, and the chiming guitar distantly recalls his music—and on "This Is Not My Town" she touches on the political anger that fueled her previous album. But most of these songs circle back to the redemptive power of music. On "Jukebox," she sings of feeling stuck inside and lonely and finding escape at the corner bar, where a Wurlitzer gives her just what she needs: "And I know how to ease my lonely heart / With Patsy Cline and Muddy Waters." The penultimate track, "Where the Song Will Find Me," is a sturdy ballad about waiting for the creative impulse to strike.

The album's lyrics aren't Ms. Williams's best or most poetic—a little too often, she leans on the most obvious rhyme—but her narratives are never less than compelling. And it should be said that this is a record for someone who has heard and enjoyed her work already—for the uninitiated, it would feel like walking into a movie halfway through, the dogged examination of such limited subject matter might scan as perplexing. But those who have been following along for a while, particularly those who are feeling the unease of encroaching mortality themselves, will find much to be inspired by.

"I wanna feel that moment / When the song can save me," Ms. Williams sings on "Where the Song Will Find Me." She's given her listeners many such moments along the way, and this record adds a few more.

—Mr. Richardson is the Journal's rock and pop music critic. Follow him on Twitter @MarkRichardson.