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Drawn From a Well of Experience

Studio City, Calif.
With sun streaming into her cozy house on the hills high above Hollywood, Lucinda Williams is seated at the kitchen table where she wrote the songs for her new album, "Blessed" (Lost Highway). The tabletop is covered with the morning's newspapers; the walls are appointed with found art, as well as framed posters from shows she performed in during a career now in its fourth decade. The sound of Bettye LaVette, who recorded Ms. Williams's "Joy" a few years back, flows from a nearby living room. Books are everywhere.

Upstairs, Ms. Williams's husband and manager, Tom Overby, conducts business amid their collection of compact discs and old vinyl. They married in 2009 at the First Avenue club in Minneapolis following a blistering set by Ms. Williams and her band at the time, Buick 6. Now, at 58 years old, Ms. Williams says with little prompting that she's happy, in love and settled. She wonders if her satisfaction will confuse fans who have heard her songs about how, for her, love has often led to betrayal.

"I'm in such a different place now," said Ms. Williams, who is dressed in denim, her eyes raccoon-ringed with blue mascara. "I'm with Tom and I'm content that way. I've got much more freedom. I always wanted to write about something other than unrequited love. Unrequited-love songs are the easiest to write. I think I speak for all songwriters when I say that. I had to field these questions: 'Are you still going to be able to write?'" Ms. Williams then shrugged. "Everywhere I go, I'm picking things up. I'm like a sponge. People think all my



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songs are autobiographical. They aren't."

Even by her standards, "Blessed" is an extraordinary album, the best by a singer-songwriter in quite a long while. It has everything a great album requires, beginning with biting, insightful and uncompromising compositions. They're served with power and expertise by a band Ms. Williams and producer Don Was handpicked—he brought in keyboard player Rami Jaffe and guitarist Val McCallum, who is excellent throughout, while she retained her brawny rhythm section of Butch Norton on drums and David Sutton on bass. Greg Leisz plays pedal steel and other guitars, while Elvis Costello contributes a few nasty guitar solos. "He just shredded," Ms. Williams said of Mr. Costello's work. "It added crunch to those tracks." The music's jagged edges reveal that most of the album was cut live in the studio.

Her delivery dusted with a Texas twang, Ms. Williams's voice is now a raspy crackle that suits her words, which, despite her hard-won happiness, fit well within her lyrical canon. "Sol-

dier's Song" and "Born to Be Loved" take her outside her customary métier, but "Buttercup," "I Don't Know How You're Living" and "Sweet Love" are shaded by autobiography. "You already sucked me dry / You roughed me up and made me cry," she sings with a snarl in "Buttercup." She said: "That's the only bad-boy song on the album. I had to get what's left out of my system."

Contentment flavors some of her new compositions. In "Sweet Love," she sings, "My breath is yours to share / Everything in me and of me is yours forever." But not all is honey sweet and smooth. In the seductive stroll "Convince Me," she sings, "The whole wide world is fallin' apart / The whole wide world's got a broken heart." And much as she did in "Sweet Old World," her best-known composition, she looks at suicide in "Seeing Black," a song sparked by the death of Vic Chestnutt. "When did you start seeing red? / Did you see me standing over your bed? / Did you hear anything I said?"

The power in Ms. Williams's words is amplified by her deliv-

ery: She's a singer who communicates on a visceral level. As a writer, abstractions don't much interest her. She writes about what she feels. She said, "I don't know how you can write about anything if you're not empathetic. You either are a witness or a participant."

The deluxe package of "Blessed" includes her demos of the album's 12 songs, cut with a Samsung tape recorder placed on the kitchen table—hence the name "Kitchen Tapes"—and played on a Martin D-28 guitar she bought in Houston for \$400 back in 1978. The "Kitchen Tapes" reveal that for all the authority in the band's performance, the brilliance of "Blessed" rises from the poignant songs.

Ms. Williams said she's at the point in her career where she understands and can readily access her skills. "I'm certainly better than I was in my 20s. My voice is better. I'm more prolific." Referencing her father, the poet Miller Williams, she said, "I grew up in a world where age didn't matter. With poets, the older you get, the better you get."

"I had to learn at an early age a survival instinct," she said. "I found it in creativity. I was never bored. My mind is always going a million miles an hour. The muse is always there."

Regardless of her state of mind, experience is the source for her writing. "I think of it as if it's a well filled with a whole life. You know, dip into the well, pull out a memory." Happiness won't stand in the way of a great song, she added. "You can still write about stuff that you remember from before."

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