

Lucinda Williams

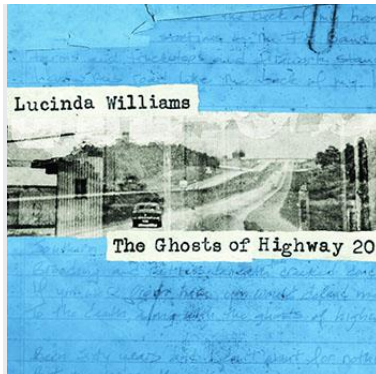
The Ghosts of Highway 20

BY [GEORGE DE STEFANO](#)

3 February 2016



ON HER SUPERB NEW ALBUM, LUCINDA WILLIAMS TAKES THE WHEEL FOR A MEMORY TRIP DOWN HIGHWAY 20.



LUCINDA WILLIAMS
THE GHOSTS OF HIGHWAY 20

(HIGHWAY 20)
US: 5 FEB 2016

“I know this road like the back of my hand,” Lucinda Williams assures us on the title track of her superb new album, *Ghosts of Highway 20*. On her 12th studio recording since her 1979

debut, *Ramblin'*, the singer-songwriter takes the wheel of memory for a trip down the eponymous highway, a real, nearly 200-mile interstate that cuts through the northern part of Louisiana, her home state, and an interior, emotional route mapped by sorrow and pain, but also by nostalgia and fond recollection.

“It is literally a map of my life in a lot of ways,” Williams has remarked. While on tour — over the past couple of years the peripatetic singer has been challenging Bob Dylan’s status as the ultimate road dog — “I kept seeing things that brought me back to times and places in my past. Like when we played in Macon, Georgia, a place I lived when I was five or six years old, I got out of the bus and I was transported back to when I saw this street singer, Blind Pearly Brown. It was like nothing had changed. All these things started percolating in my brain, and the songs just came.”

The songs on *Ghosts of Highway 20* mostly were written and recorded during the 2013 sessions that produced *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone*, Williams’ 2014 double album. Tom Overby, her manager, co-producer, and husband posted on Facebook that “Lucinda had a whole bunch of songs ready for the sessions and we had split them up into a couple of groups. For lack of better description, we called them the ‘rock’ and ‘non-rock’ songs.”

“Magnolia”, the last track on the previous album, turns out to have been a signpost for *Ghosts*. The lyrics of the J.J. Cale song, which Williams first performed in the late ‘70s, ache with longing for a lost place—New Orleans—and a lover abandoned there. That “Magnolia” is a taste of things to come is even more evident in the song’s arrangement, featuring guitarists Bill Frisell and Greg Leisz, and in its nearly ten-minute length. *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone* proved that Williams still could write tight, country- and blues-flavored tunes with great hooks. But “Magnolia” signaled a new direction—expansive and exploratory—that *Ghosts*, an album of 14 “non-rock songs”, fulfills. There is some delectable rockabilly on “Bitter Memory”, but most of the album is steeped in country, folk, the blues, and even jazz, something new for Williams. Tempos mostly are slow or medium, and with the exception of “Bitter Memory” and Williams’ cover of Bruce Springsteen’s

“Factory”, both clocking in at around four minutes, the tracks run from five to nearly 13 minutes.

The album’s sonic unity comes from Williams’ collaborators, guitarists Bill Frisell and Greg Leisz, and her usual, excellent rhythm section of bassist David Sutton and drummer Butch Norton. Frisell and Leisz are ideal partners for Williams on this outing, masters of American roots music and adventurous, genre-crossing players. With them on board, *Ghosts of Highway 20* is a guitar lover’s dream: the two give every song exactly what it needs—country twang (“Bitter Memory”), delicate filigree (“Louisiana Story”), bluesy slide licks that slither around electric lead and rhythm parts (“Doors of Heaven”), and lead and rhythm combinations that evoke the Jerry Garcia-Bob Weir partnership. Yes, the spirit of the Grateful Dead is one of the album’s “ghosts”, a welcome presence that haunts not a few of the tracks (most strikingly the title song and “Dust”). Frisell, who has acknowledged being something of a Deadhead (over the past year or so he has played shows with ex-Dead bassist Phil Lesh), channels Garcia’s tone and modal jazz leanings, blending Garcia-isms with his own distinctive, immediately recognizable voicings and looping and phasing effects.

Ghosts of Highway 20, was recorded live, without overdubs or post-production sweetening. It’s defiantly, proudly, and gorgeously organic, in a different universe from today’s processed digital pop. Williams’ latest also is the work of a mature artist (she turned 63 in January) who approaches music-making like a poet or novelist, returning to themes, places, images that inspire and preoccupy her: turbulent relationships (“Can’t Close the Door on Love”); women’s abuse by men, including bible-toting fathers (“Louisiana Story”); spiritual yearning (“Faith & Grace”, “If There’s a Heaven”); and death (“Death Came”, “Doors of Heaven”, “If My Love Could Kill”). In recent years, Williams lost her mother (eulogized on “Mama You Sweet” from Williams’ *West* album) and her father, the poet Miller Williams, a student of Flannery O’Connor’s who was a major influence on his daughter and, late in life, also a collaborator. Williams set his poem “Compassion” to music on *Where the Spirit Meets the Bone*; and here, with her vocal the calm center in the exhilarating scrum of

Frisell's and Leisz's guitars, she makes something stirring from the utter bleakness of his "Dust".

Williams brings her abiding compassion and unsentimental sympathy to her cover of Springsteen's "Factory", and also a different perspective: as the working man's daughter, she's observing a life that she's not fated to live. On the jazzy "I Know All About It", Williams, her tone intimate and conversational, admonishes a young, self-destructive woman who spurns her wise counsel: "Girl, don't try to run away like that / I know about the pain/and all of that jazz."

"My House of Earth", a Woody Guthrie lyric written in the voice of a prostitute, surprises with an erotic bluntness you might not expect from the "Dustbowl Troubadour"; "You'll leave some drops of honey on my couch," she tells a john. "I do these tricks your wife refuses to." She's proud of her skills and indignant about the hypocrisy of those who judge her, and Williams infuses her with anger and defiance, shaded with melancholy.

As a lyricist, Williams at her best combines a poet's knack for the sharp observation, the simple but vivid image that holds layers of meaning, with a country singer's plainspoken storytelling. Her writing on *Ghosts of Highway 20* is some of the best of her career, sometimes laconic and suggestive, other times so rich in sensuous detail you practically can feel the enervating southern heat, see the "farms and truck stops and firework stands. "Louisiana Story", whose narrator is "looking back on the sweetness/looking back on the rough" of a Southern upbringing, conjures up the past with tersely powerful imagery, pleasant ("sweet coffee milk", "playing barefoot in the street") and painful (a daddy who "didn't spare the rod", a mother who calls her menstruating daughter "unclean").

"Faith & Grace", the 12-minute and 45-second groove number that closes the album, is unlike anything Williams has ever recorded. With spare backing from Frisell and Sutton, and steady, no-frills percussion by reggae beatmakers Carlton "Santa" Davis (drum kit) and Ras Michael (hand drums), Williams becomes a desperate soul pleading for the song's titular

attributes, the essential ingredients, in Christian theology, for salvation. She's turning to God because there's no one else to share her life's burdens, and there's need, desperation, and doubt in her prayer. It ends not in blessed assurance but with the ominous, fade-to-black churn of Frisell's guitar.

Ghosts of Highway 20, at 84 minutes, is a long album. It's also one that demands to be heard in its entirety, each song in sequence, contemporary listening habits notwithstanding. After you've immersed yourself in it, at least a few times, maybe then do the song shuffle, picking your favorites. But I recommend staying with your driver for every mile of this highway excursion, taking in every stop along the way. After all, she knows exactly where she's going, and she's excellent company.

THE GHOSTS OF HIGHWAY 20

Rating:

George de Stefano is a New York-based writer specializing in culture, politics and sexuality. He is the author of *An Offer We Can't Refuse: The Mafia in the Mind of America* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux) and a contributor to many other books, websites and print publications.

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*the best of my heart
standing by the side of
my car and truckstop and I think I stand
now has said like the back of my*

Lucinda Williams



The Ghosts of Highway 20

*Standing on the side of the road
If you are a ghost here you will defend me
to the death along with the ghosts of highway
been in the news and I don't want for nothing
that we have the highway*