

Honeysuckle on Rusty Barbed Wire

Lucinda Williams opens the Summer in the Vineyard concert series.

Lucinda Williams is hard to pin down, restless, complicated. And you get the feeling she likes it that way. Yesterday she might have been an obsessive, cast-off lover sifting through the ashes of old flames, a theme that flows through her songs over and over again.

Today she might be the gothic Southern Belle, a wordsmith with the skill to rip poetry from the aching pits of sorrow too deep for tears. And tomorrow she could be the independent-minded artist who's gotten a bad rap for acting like a pouty, demanding brat who clashes with producers and musicians and who people say is hard to work with. "Challenging" is the most frequently used euphemism.

For years she did her own thing, writing songs that blended country, blues and rock while the mainstream embraced the scuzzy grit of grunge. But that's the way she likes it. She lives on her own schedule, rarely rising before noon, forgetting appointments for interviews, and is known for turning cold, steely-eyed and almost hostile when she has to appear in front of a camera.

Her 1998 Grammy-winning album, *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, took almost five years to record because of her agonizing, perfectionist, control-freak tendencies and

painful self-doubt when in the studio. But when she recorded her most recent studio album, *World Without Tears*, she waltzed into the studio around seven in the evening after the band had been there working up a song, sang three takes and left.



"We'd do one song a day, usually ended up using the second take, and that was it," said producer Mark Howard, who's also worked with Bob Dylan and U2.

By the time the alt/rock/country sound made it mainstream, she was already well into her career, old, over the hill, some might say. For decades she'd already been weaving together the influences of Hank Williams, Flannery O'Connor, Loretta Lynn, Eudora Welty, the Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix.

And just when the artsy, creative fringe was trending back to a more retro feel that

soon evolved into a style that embraced old school country western music, rockabilly and alt-country, Williams released a couple of really great albums. Her timing was perfect.

With *Sweet Old World*, released in 1992, her poetic talent and gravelly, haunting lyrical style really took hold. Over the years, her music has evolved from the disciplined, intensity of *Cars Wheels on a Gravel Road* to the looser, more relaxed sound we hear today. With every subtle change, the music just gets better and Williams remains one of the most innovative musicians of the millennium.

She's got a voice like mud-covered honeysuckle twining around the spikes of a rusty, barbed wire fence — delicate, painful and dangerous. Something innocent and sweet trickles through all her songs that more often than not hover forlornly over desperate, romantic obsessions.

It's the searing realness of her lyrics that's made her the darling of critics and an icon with everyone from urban hipsters to small town folk. It's something about the way her songs make you feel the stifling air of the room she's singing about or smell the bacon frying and the coffee.

Her most recent album, the double-disc *Live at the Fillmore*, does an adequate job of capturing Williams' concert persona on a good day, a day when she's performing for an audience that loves her. But like most live albums, it doesn't even touch the raw real thing. Which is why you should sell your first born if that's what it takes to get a ticket to this show. **ew**

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