On figuring out what's important

Musician Lucinda Williams on juggling everyday life and creative work, collaborating with loved ones, staying positive, and what makes a good protest song.

September 22, 2020 -

As told to Max Mertens, 3259 words.

Tags: Music, Culture, Collaboration, Process, Adversity, Multi-tasking, Inspiration.

I assume I'm reaching you at home in Nashville, you've been there since March or April right?

We were on the road touring when we closed on the house, which was in December, I think. We finally got moved in sometime towards the end of February. We weren't in the house a month when the tornado hit, came through, and we were in the neighborhood that it did the worst damage. The front porch got blown off and the fences knocked down. So that happened, and then the pandemic hit, and then we had to cancel everything for the rest of the year.

We've been in lockdown since March 9th. We had some shows booked in Austin, Texas, we were having a meeting about the shows, and that was the beginning when people were starting to wonder if they should cancel shows. We decided, "Okay, we're going to do it, we're going to cancel everything." That's why I remember that day. I've been out a few times, but just over to Ray Kennedy's studio—who we did our album with—for a couple of those Zoom music things. We did a couple at his studio, we did a couple at our house with my guitar player Stuart Mathis, he lives here. The other guys, Butch [Norton] and David [Sutton], they're stuck in LA. I haven't even seen them in awhile.

Have you found yourself taking up any new hobbies while in quarantine?

Not really because I'm kept busy with doing a lot of press and everything. Probably more than usual, because I'm usually on the road touring. In a way, it's been good, because I've been able to just concentrate on press and not have to squeeze it in between doing shows on the road. Since we just moved into the house, I've been buying dishes online, lawn furniture, and stuff like that. Getting things fixed. Repairs after the tornado have taken forever because there's so many other houses in demand that need the work. We got the roof fixed, that was the first thing, but we still have the front porch and we need a new front door. That's time consuming. It's time consuming, because you have to find the right people, and then get the estimate from the damage insurance companies, you have to wrangle with them. I've been getting caught up on movies, Netflix. Before you know it, it's time to go to bed and start all over. We stay up late watching movies and then we sleep in the next day. It makes the day shorter, I think that's the way to do it really.

The songs on *Good Souls Better Angels* were recorded in 15 days doing only a few takes for each of them. Was it freeing to work so quickly, and because of that, were you able to not be overthinking every single detail?

Well, I still have a tendency to overthink every detail when it comes to my vocals. We would do two or three takes or sometimes four and they would always be good. The whole band would listen together and we generally start by picking the take that has the best rhythm section, the best vocal vibe, and everything. Then I'm listening to my vocals and deciding "Okay I don't know if I like that part." I still get like that in the studio, but I'm learning. Part of what helped everything along was that we were on the road between recording. It was a more relaxed vibe probably than maybe it would be otherwise, because we had been talking to [producer] Ray Kennedy, he had opened this new studio and just mentioned "Oh you should come in and check things out." It wasn't

like a big “Okay we’re doing the album.” We just wanted to see how it was going to be.

We were literally in-between tours, the tour bus always ends up in Nashville because that’s where most of them live. We had the whole band here, David and Butch before they had to fly back to LA, so we had some days and we made a schedule. At that point, I had some songs that I had been working on. We didn’t even have the house yet, Tom and I were staying at the Lotus Hotel, which became our second home.

We just started cutting stuff and it was like “Oh my god, this sounds amazing.” It wasn’t just that, it was “Oh my god, this is fucking amazing!” I think the first track we cut was “You Can’t Rule Me,” I came out of the vocal booth, and afterwards the whole band and I were like “Holy shit.” It was a combination of how we were playing this stuff, but also a lot of it had to do with what Ray was doing at the boards as an engineer. He has all these vintage guitars and amplifiers. That one I was playing some 1960s guitar going through a 1960s-something amplifier. The sound that we got was perfect for these kinds of songs. It just all came together. I’m going to say it—it was magic.

Your husband was also a co-producer on this album. Can you tell me about some of the benefits and also maybe the challenges of working on music with somebody that you’re living with?

Tom and me you mean? I guess we’re different in that regard, because I know it doesn’t happen with everybody. We work well together. The whole saying he wants to work on songs together kind of started a little bit back, that song “Ghosts of Highway 20” was actually Tom’s idea. Basically I would be in a writing mood and he would have an idea for a song. He’s interested in creative writing and everything, but he was always sort of shy, he was hesitant about showing me his work. It was really kind of sweet.

Eventually he would tip-toe in when I’d be working on something and say “I’ve got this idea for a song,” and he would have a few lines, and say “If you want to look at it and see what you’d do with it.” So we started doing it, and then he got a little more confident and it proved to be a really interesting exercise, because basically it just broadens the horizon as far as the songs and ideas. I’m completely open to that sort of thing.

“Ghosts of Highway 20,” I remember we had all the songs on the album, and at first I said “I’m not really seeing it, I feel like it’s almost like ‘Car Wheels on a Gravel Road.’”And he said “Yeah, but I’ve got this idea.” I kind of pushed against it a little bit in the beginning, but it worked, and I finished the song based on some of his ideas and him gently nudging me. Cause I can be a little stubborn sometimes about that, and he would be like “Oh come on, just see what you can do with it.”

That song “Compassion” I did from my dad’s poem, Tom had that idea to put that poem to music, because I had been working on this other poem of my dad’s for years trying to put it to music. Tom said “You know what, I’ve got this idea with his poem ‘Compassion,’ why don’t you see if you can do that one.” And I did and it worked. It’s been good for me, I think it’s healthy, because like I said, it just broadens the whole spectrum of everything. It’s not like we’re sitting down writing a song together, it’s more he just shows me stuff he’s been working on, and I’ll take it and flesh out the verses, write the melodies, arrange it.

“Big Black Train” was another one, that was his idea, at first I kind of rebelled against that one because I said “What am I going to write about a train that hasn’t been written about in two hundred and fifty years?” And he said “No, this is a different thing,” he said it’s like a black cloud of depression, and “Just give it a shot, see what you can do.” I went “Okay” and started messing with it and something happened, I don’t know, it came together. Now when I sing it, it almost makes me cry, there’s something forlorn about it in a strange way even though it’s a really simple song. I compare it to Tom Waits and his wife Kathleen, they work together, and you’ll see her name on some of the songs on his album.

The last two years you played shows celebrating the 20th anniversary of *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, and in 2017 you re-recorded [1992’s] *Sweet Old World*. Are you someone who’s constantly revisiting your old songs for inspiration or to determine what you want to do differently?

Yeah sometimes. A lot of that, doing anniversary shows and that sort of thing, comes from Tom, too, because he’s a

manager. He worked at record companies for a long time doing marketing and A&R—he's the one sitting in his office with the wheels spinning in his head, coming up with different ideas. I've been asked this question before as far as "How does it feel to sing songs that I wrote a long time ago?" I haven't found it difficult to do that. Of course, there's certain songs that I do more than others on a regular basis in our shows, but when we did the *Car Wheels* shows, I'm singing all the songs off *Car Wheels* and getting into more of the stories behind it than I normally would.

The thing is a lot of them I was already doing in my shows, like "Drunken Angel," we did that one every single show pretty much, "Drunken Angel," "Joy," "Metal Firecracker," "Lake Charles," a lot of those are on the regular playlist. I'm revisiting those songs a lot and I like doing them. When you have older songs, there's certain ones you like better than others, a lot of them stand the test of time better than other ones do.

I read the conversation you recently had with Waxahatchee and I know you were supposed to go on tour with Jason Isbell. What have you learned from talking to these younger musicians?

Well that's kind of a hard question. I don't know how to answer it. I don't know if they necessarily taught me anything that I didn't already know since I'm older and they're younger. I guess I'll just say it's good to see they're doing what they do, there aren't that many good songwriters out there so it's refreshing to see or hear one. Another favorite of mine is Sharon Van Etten. She's really good. Everybody learns a little bit from each other, regardless of age, you don't always know what that is. You're not sure what you're learning a lot of times at the time you're learning it, you know?

Are there any artists who gave you any valuable advice about playing shows and making music when you were starting out?

When I was first starting out, I used to go to music stores and buy songbooks, I don't even know if those exist any more. I couldn't read music, so I would get the album and learn the melody and try to find the songbook that would have that song in it. I'd spend hours and hours and hours just figuring out how to play a song like that, and learning other people's songs before I started writing my own. I wasn't able to sit down with anybody and get instructions about anything really, it was probably a combination of listening to their music, and going out and seeing people play. Playing live and figuring out "Okay people aren't listening very much, how am I going to make them listen more?" Instead of giving up and shutting down, it just made me try harder. A lot of it has to do with drive, it's kind of a trial and error, pass-fail, see what works.

I've known the kind of purist folk singer back when I was starting out, and people were talking too much in the audience or it was too loud in a place, they would pack up and go home. I would finish out the set and I'd go back to my little apartment and sit and figure out "Okay what kind of songs can I do that are going to make people listen to me and not talk?" or "How can I make my voice project better?" That was probably around the time when I started doing a lot of blues songs and all that. In terms of having that kind of camaraderie with another, I wasn't able to really do that. My dad was probably my biggest mentor in terms of writing, not music, but in terms of actual writing. When I started writing songs, he would constructively critique just like a professor would because that's what he did. That was probably the biggest help, and then listening to all this great art that was going on in the 60s, Neil Young and The Byrds and Bob Dylan and the list goes on and on. Just soaking it in, just listening, and paying attention.

There's a certain political urgency to *Good Souls Better Angels*. What makes a good protest song?

The one that always comes to mind is "Masters of War," the stuff that Bob Dylan was writing, "The Times They Are a-Changin,'" "Blowin' in the Wind." It was all around back then, everybody was writing—well, not everybody—a lot of artists were writing those kind of songs. It wasn't like it is now where people make such a big deal about it. Back then, Phil Ochs, "Love Me, I'm a Liberal," and "I Ain't Marching Anymore," Woody Guthrie, Joan Baez, everybody was doing those kinds of topical songs. It was either about the civil rights movement or the anti-war movement. I was all caught up in that, I was pretty active starting as a teenager, going to demonstrations and I would sing at rallies. Whenever and however I could, I was just one of those kids with a guitar, willing and ready you know?

For me, some of these songs I've started, it can take me years to finish the song. That's the ultimate mystery. It's not like I just sat down and all these songs came out about what's going on right now. That one "Big Rotator," I had that little refrain thing for I don't know how long. I'm always jotting down ideas. Sometimes when I'm watching a movie I'll hear somebody say something, and I'll say "Oh wow, that's a cool line" and I'll write it down. Or I might be at a bar and hear somebody say something. I've got all these cocktail napkins.

Are you a hoarder of notebooks and journals and scrap paper?

I am. It got to be so much that I finally organized everything into these files. I put everything that was connected with a certain song in a file, named it with a title, and put it in this big briefcase. When I sit down to write, I can have everything organized. It's funny you said that, because I was just organizing, and going through a stack of papers that was all piled up on the kitchen counter. At first it looked like just chicken scratch, you'd probably just throw it away, I had written little lines on papers so I had to pull those and separate those out.

There's a song on the record, "Shadows & Doubts," where you're talking about social media and how there's this judgmental aspect to it. How do you consume news these days, and how do you avoid feeling overwhelmed or burnt out by everything that's happening right now?

I think what you're talking about is how do I stay positive? At the end of the day I'm pretty angry right now, but so are a lot of people especially here in the United States, because this is absolutely unprecedented what's going on right now. None of us over here has been through anything like this ever before with the person trying to lead this country has no idea what he's doing. It's the height of insanity. It's at the forefront of everybody's mind, so when I was working on a lot of these songs, that's the vibe here. Every day you read the news and there's something else crazy that Trump said or did, or one of his cabinet members said or did. It just goes on and on and on and on. I get angry and it felt good to do these songs.

I'm an optimist when it's all said and done, that's why I put "Good Souls" at the end of the album, that song is about not giving up and everything. I read a response on social media about my song "Man Without a Soul" and he accused me of not being compassionate. He said he was a fan of my music and "I thought Lucinda was a compassionate person because she wrote that song 'Compassion,' but this wasn't compassionate" and he was referring to "Man Without a Soul." This guy said he wasn't going to ever listen to my music again. What he's not seeing is that the reason I write these songs is because I do care so, but you know, I can't control that. Everyone's going to see things the way they want to and all I can do is make my statement. The majority of people who have heard this album have thanked me and said "Thank you, I needed this right now," so I feel like I did my job.

What does an ideal post-pandemic world look like to you for artists and in general?

The first thing obviously is getting this guy out of the White House. We gotta get rid of him, number one. That's the first priority. Voting, get rid of him, we gotta try to fix what's broken. On a more humanitarian level, it would be great to see something positive come out of all this shutdown stuff, where I don't know, people kind of realign their priorities, I guess. Maybe figure out what's important, which is other people and coming together, and making art and being creative and connecting with people. Not so much fame and material stuff. Now that we've had to do without a lot of that kind of thing, maybe be more appreciative of having the connection with people. I just want to see people come together more, spiritually and on a humanitarian level. Things are really fucked up over here. We can't take four more years of what's been going on. I think that's at the forefront of everyone's minds right now. I'm pretty much doing what I can do, writing about it, singing about it, talking about it.

Selected Lucinda Williams:

Lucinda Williams (1988)

Car Wheels on a Gravel Road (1998)

Lu In '08 (2008)

Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone (2014)

The Ghosts of Highway 20 (2016)

Good Souls Better Angels (2020)

Name

Lucinda Williams

Vocation

Musician, Singer

Danny Clinch