

the arts

live music view

The Atlas of Lucinda Williams*Lon S. Cohen*

By now it's clear that I love female rockers. A disproportionate amount of my time is spent listening to the female voice on my iPod. For some reason it seems to me that women have that ability to convey emotion through music and lyrics better than most men. Whether it's a dreamscape of Sarah McLaughlan, the keyboarding sexual nymph of Tori Amos, or the hard rocking, rootin', tootin' doot, doot, dooting of Nancy Atlas, the women just do it for me, musically.

So when I learned that Lucinda Williams was coming to Long Island to play the festival at Bald Hill, I immediately thought, "Why don't I know her music better?" My second thought was, "Ask Nancy Atlas." She's a big fan of Lucinda Williams so I asked her for her opinion.

Lon Cohen: Suggest that album again that you told me to listen to that will give me the Lucinda Williams experience.

Nancy Atlas: "Car Wheels On a Gravel Road", you can listen to that album over and over and over. Every Lucinda Williams album has at least several gems on it. Songs that make you buckle or smile while the dust falls in the sunlight.

LC: What brought you to her music first?

NA: The song that turned me on to Lucinda was "Sweet Old World". I literally stopped in my car, pulled over on the road and was scrambling to see who wrote this song (*Emmy Lou Harris had covered it). Hits you in the gut. After that I bought several albums but fell in love with "Car Wheels". It is so fun and diverse. I really truly love that album.

LC: On her newest album release, "West", what is your favorite track?

NA: "West" has a song aptly named West on it that is just divine. I listen to this song and it just makes my heart beat a little slower and think of old loves and all the lost potential. It makes you remember that calling that you have when you first fall in love. Take the chance. Buy the



ticket. Get on the plane baby. That is the power of her music: To transport you in three minutes to a very real, sacred place. But I am just a fan of Lucinda Williams. It's like naming your favorite child. Impossible.

LC: Explain a little from what you know of her musical history

NA: Look it up.

LC: Yes ma'am...

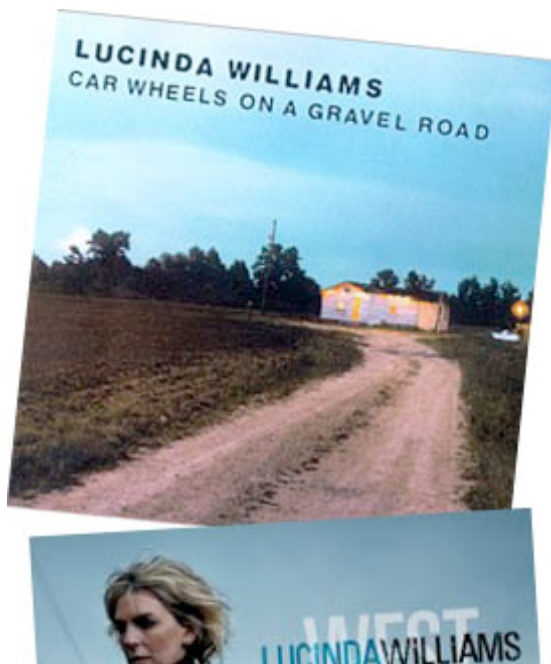
(See now, I could have looked it up at this point. But then why bother. Nancy went on to tell me all about Lucinda Williams as we went along and I realized that Nancy does what Nancy wants to do, when Nancy wants to do it and no one is going to tell Nancy. Man, I love this girl.)

LC: Can you tell me why she is your music goddess?

NA: Lucinda wrote a string of great songs—"Change the Locks" sung by Tom Petty, "Passionate Kisses" sung by The Carpenters, "Sweet Old World" sung by Emmy Lou Harris—before she hit it big. So first and foremost she was writing, making a living at it and having killer artists cover her songs. That is dream number one for me.

Secondly, I love the way she crafts songs, her writing. I can feel completely different emotions towards songs I've listened to many, many times, depending on the mood I'm in. Sometimes her words twist, turn and fold into each other and other times they just fall effortlessly. Her music is a kaleidoscope. Lucinda has the rare ability to create a new palette for well-worn emotions. You believe she's been there or is there now. That's it for me. To be so pure, that you connect on a universal level.

Thirdly, we followed her at the Talkhouse years ago and she wrote to me for quite sometime. She believed in my writing and really took the time to listen to my album and tell me to keep going. I can't tell you what that does for someone who is in the trenches, playing to drunken people every night with her eye on the ball even when she can't see it. The first time I received a letter from her I walked around the post office three times with my hands shaking before I could even open it. Sweet memory.



LC: Tell me your favorite song to cover. (See how I start to assert myself to Nancy, trying to give the Chick in Command a command?)

NA: "Drunken Angel". Wow. Anyone who knows an alcoholic has to listen to this tune. That is a great example of just genius writing. If you've been there with someone you love, well, it's hard not to get a little misty when you listen to this song. It was based on a real friend of hers, and man, you can feel it.

LC: Is there anything that you know about her in her personal story that inspires or that you admire.

NA: Her "Big Hit" album came out when I believe she was about 42. She had releases before that but that is when "Car Wheels" came out on a Major (Mercury I think) and got an epic review from Rolling Stone. I am constantly hounded by people in this business about my age and I just find it refreshing to see someone as talented as Lucinda just going and going and then getting her just desserts after years of playing in bars



and around town. It inspires me. I write from the heart and my attitude is if you don't like it then don't listen. To me, age is makes you better. I told one record label to stick it their ass when, at 26, they told me I was to old. Crazy. Personally that is water off my back but it gets me mad when I think of the truly talented people that just give up because their digits are starting to add up. I'm a whiskey baby. A lifer. So to someone like me Lucinda is a beacon.

LC: Give examples of musicians she has influenced (besides yourself).

NA: You have to look that up too. I don't really know.

LC: Oh snap! The Chick in Command is back in control.

NA: Damn right!

LC: Can you describe to me the "sound" of Lucinda Williams?

NA: Man. There are just so many sides to this lady. She is Americana, Rock, Blues a shaker of country from time to time. She is timeless and that is why she is a legend. She obviously loves electric guitar to boot because she uses the best players and the guitar solos on her albums are so smoking. Just so damn smoking and deep. They get you off.

LC: Would you like to say anyth...

NA: I would just like to thank Lucinda from the bottom of my heart for just doing it. Half the battle is putting yourself out there. The more famous you get the bigger the hyena's. She is like a great lioness to me. She follows her own rhythm, doing it with such grace and purity continually rolling out these killer albums. There have been so many days on my own journey that I have thought of her and that single thought has lifted me out my own spiral down. I can hear her roaring in the back of my head "Keep Going!" The birds scatter; I grab my guitar case and take that one step further on my way. I look forward to when our paths cross again.

Lucina Williams' new album, "West", is available everywhere. She will be playing Brookhaven Amphitheatre in Farmingville, on July 28th. You can check it out at <http://www.brookhavenamphitheater.com/events.html>. Nancy Atlas wanted me to tell you that she has changed her acoustic show at The Stephen Talkhouse to August 23rd. I asked why and she told me, "Because." Good enough for me.

Lon S. Cohen has been a short order cook, a Generation X slacker (aka artist), a fence installer, a marketing designer and once he was the only Jewish kid working on a Christmas Tree lot. There is no order to the aforesaid list. He currently works full time but only to pay the bills for a McMansion, beautiful wife and three lovely children. What he really wants to do is write, podcast, blog and drink a really good IPA. Again, not in any order of importance. Visit him at www.lonscohen.com and contact him by email at lon@lonscohen.com.

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