

# VANITY FAIR

LEGENDS

## Lucinda Williams on Her Life, Her Lyrics, and Everything In Between

The country rocker and author of a new memoir opens up about surviving a stroke, relearning to play the guitar, and collaborating with Bruce Springsteen for her next album.

BY LISA ROBINSON

FEBRUARY 3, 2023



“**T**here’s no room for that in art,” says three-time Grammy winner and legendary Americana singer-songwriter **Lucinda Williams** about censorship in today’s cultural climate. “I’ve had to question things when I’m writing songs, I’ve had to reword stuff in case people misunderstand it,” she adds. “I hate that, fuck that; it gets in the way of creativity when you have to think about what you’re saying and become conscious about it.”

Williams—once named “America’s best songwriter” by *Time magazine*—turns 70 this month, and will publish a memoir, *Don’t Tell Anybody the Secrets I Told You*, this spring. She’s also working on a new album, 44 years after her debut. Here, she talks with **Lisa Robinson** about her upcoming book, surviving a stroke, depression, politics, and longevity.

**Lisa Robinson: Your father (the late poet Miller Williams) told you never to censor yourself; did you hold back in *Don’t Tell Anybody The Secrets I Told You*?**

*Lucinda Williams:* I talk about sex, but I don’t go as far as **Carly Simon** did in her book. In **Chrissie Hynde’s** book, which I loved, the line that really got me was so hilarious—she said [someone] said, “Stop talkin’ and start suckin’.” I thought putting that in a book was really brazen.

**You have a very powerful song on your last album (2020’s *Good Souls Better Angels*) about a previous abusive relationship; do you go into that in the book?**

I do go into it in the book, but I don’t know if I’m going to [name him], because I do feel protective of people too. I don’t want to hurt their feelings. Chrissie told me before she finished [her] book that she decided not to go into the dark side because she didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. She said, “I’m trying to be nice—for once in my life.”

**Why bother to write it if you’re not going to be as brave or forthcoming as you are in your songs?**

I think you can say something in a certain way so you get the images.

## Why did you want to write a book?

I didn't really want to, but people kept approaching me. My songs tell so many stories that people said I should write a book. I talk a lot [in the book] about my childhood and my background, but I never knew writing a book was going to be this difficult. Everybody said, "You're a songwriter, you'll be great." But it's such a whole completely different deal.



Lucinda Williams performing at Summerstage in Central Park, New York City on June 27, 1992. EBET ROBERTS/GETTY IMAGES.

## **You've had bouts of depression—do you still, and do you write about it in the book?**

I write about it, and I talk about my mother's mental illness; she had been diagnosed with manic depression with paranoid schizophrenic tendencies. My childhood was hard. I had a special bond with my father, so I had that to fall back on. That's what really got me through it. Then later, I latched onto my music. [Now] my depression is just a low-grade thing...I think I might need talk therapy. And I'm on medication; I'm just trying to find the elixir—whatever works.

## **You had a stroke in 2020—what happened?**

I didn't know anything about strokes, I didn't expect the stroke; there were no warning signs. I was real tired, but I get tired a lot, so, big deal. I was in the bathroom, getting ready to take a shower, and my legs felt real heavy—I just didn't feel I could stand up. I know it sounds weird now, but I just put some towels down on the floor and had to lie down. **Tom [Overby, her husband and manager]** called our doctor who said to call an ambulance, the ambulance came—I asked them not to turn the sirens on, but they did. And in the ambulance, I saw a little digital box that said “stroke alert.” I stayed in the hospital for a few weeks then went right into weeks of rehab. I'm still in recovery.

## **They discovered a blood clot on the right side of your brain, which affected your body's left side, your motor skills, and ability to play guitar. But you never got aphasia or slurred your words?**

Right, [I lost] my ability to play guitar and I think some of my memory. Basically a version of brain damage. I learned so much about how the brain works; my left arm and left hand are hard to move. I had to learn how to walk again. But thank God it didn't affect my singing.

## **After the stroke, your voice sounded deeper. It's always been distinctive and great, but it sounds like something else is going on.**

Even before my stroke, I felt I was gaining more control of my voice. I felt like I was singing better. I was learning more about how to use the microphone, not to push too much—after all these years of singing. It's ironic, because a lot of people have told me, “I know you had a stroke, but I've never heard you sound better.”

**You went from being considered a “cult” artist to one now lauded as an “Americana icon.” How do you feel about that “Americana” term?**

I guess it’s supposed to mean not straight-ahead country, not straight-ahead rock, not straight-ahead folk. In the middle somewhere. But I think it was created for marketing—they didn’t know how to market me. When I first tried to get a record deal, they give you money to live for a few months, you write songs, make a demo, then they decide if they’re going to sign you or not. I did all that but they didn’t sign me, because the demo went to LA and they said it was too country, then the demo went to Nashville, where they said it was too rock and roll. I fell into the cracks until I found Lost Highway Records, then things started to happen.

**You’re known for unrequited love songs, dark delta blues influences, you wrote the best breakup song ever (“Changed the Locks”), but your last album had angry political songs—like “Man Without a Soul” about Donald Trump. I’ve asked this of Jack White, Sheryl Crow, Alison Krauss, Jason Isbell, Amanda Shires, Brittany Howard, and others who live in the South—given your politics, what’s it like living in Nashville?**

Well, there’s a tribe of people who live here; we like each other and hang together. I’ve had this same conversation with people here who are progressive and they all say, “We feel we live somewhere where we can join the fight and it’s going to make a difference.”

**How did you feel when *Roe v. Wade* was overturned?**

It was a shock—complete and utter dismay. It’s hard to wrap my head around it; like did that actually happen? It seems so unreal.

**Your husband manages you and you’ve collaborated with him a bit on songwriting. How is it living, working, and touring with him?**

It’s hard. At first it felt like it was stabilizing my life, but working on the book with Tom and living with him has been incredibly stressful. Women say [they have] hormonal things, but I think men have that too.

**You're singing, but still unable to play guitar onstage. How do you feel touring and performing?**

It's exhausting. I enjoy the shows but the travel really tires me out.

**You toured with Tom Petty and did a Hollywood Bowl concert with him the weekend before he died (in 2017)?**

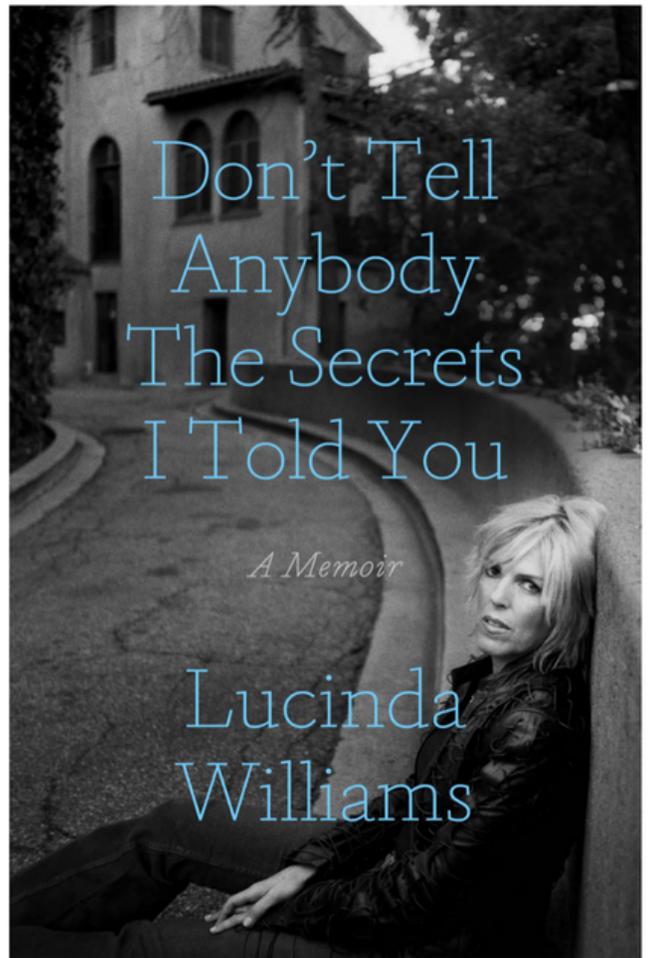
Yes, I had toured with him [previously] and we did the Hollywood Bowl together; we were just beginning to form a great friendship. Then he died. His death really affected me.

**Did you go through your own bad period of drugs or drinking?**

The drinking, yes. Some drugs, psychedelics mostly. The drinking didn't come in until my 20s, 30s. As for drugs, I've never really got into the hard stuff. I'm a wine drinker, but I'd go into the bars on tour and the wines were horrific. So a friend told me to have vodka tonics instead.

**You've credited Bob Dylan and Neil Young as musical influences; are there any female musicians who inspired you?**

I loved **Bobbie Gentry**—she was the first female voice I heard whose voice was low and husky. Most of the female voices I heard were high, pretty voices—**Judy Collins, Joni Mitchell, Joan Baez**. They had these amazing ranges and I could never sing like that; it was frustrating. I also listened to Memphis Minnie, Dinah Washington, and I loved Loretta Lynn and Tammy Wynette.



Preorder *Don't Tell Anybody The Secrets I Told You* from [Amazon](#) or [Bookshop](#).

## **What's the new album like?**

I've got some great guest artists singing background vocals on it: **Bruce Springsteen**, **Margo Price**, **Angel Olsen**. I started cowriting with (New York City–based singer-songwriter) **Jesse Malin**—and one of my favorite songs on it is called “New York Comeback.” We recorded some stuff at the historic RCA studios in Nashville where legends like Tammy [Wynette] and **Dolly [Parton]** recorded.

## **Can you believe it's the 44th anniversary of your first album?**

No, the thing with time just blows my mind.

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