

LOST HIGHWAY

Lucinda Williams - Little Honey *Biography*

Lucinda Williams has always been adept at painting landscapes of the soul, illuminating the spirit's shadowy nooks and shimmering crannies -- but she's never captured the sun breaking through the clouds as purely as on her new Lost Highway release, Little Honey.

"I'm in a different phase of my life, so there are more happy moments on this album," the singer-songwriter says of her ninth studio set. " 'Darkly introspective,' is one phrase people have used to describe a lot of my songs. There are moody songs, but I'm looking outside myself a little bit more. These aren't 'boy meets girl, boy leaves girl, girl gets bummed out' songs -- there's a lot more than that going on."

Williams wastes no time signaling that mood change, leading into Little Honey's opener, "Real Love" with a false start riff that's the six-string equivalent of a friendly wink -- then sidling into the tune's hard-rocking vibe with a sensual slink that underscores the passion of finding exactly what that title indicates. The bluesy physicality of that tune is echoed in several of Little Honey's tracks, from the charmingly chugging "Honeybee" to the gorgeous melodies of "If Wishes Were Horses".

"I'm stepping out and writing about things other than unrequited love. But because that's not part of my experience anymore," she explains, "doesn't mean I'm going to stop being a songwriter. There are plenty of other important things to write about -- the state of the world, for one thing -- I don't buy into the myth that because you get to a certain level of contentment, you have to throw in the towel."

While Little Honey certainly has plenty to move the hips, Williams doesn't neglect her uncanny ability to do the same to the heart. The sparse delta delivery she affords "Heaven Blues" -- a keening consideration of what might await on the other side -- hits home thanks to its arresting blend of hope and vexation, while the epic "Rarity" rides soft waves of brass (instrumentation never before heard on one of her discs).

"The one thing the songs have in common is directness," she says. "The beauty of country and blues is their simplicity, it's about getting things across in a really direct way. I've spent a while stretching out and going in different directions, which is my nature. But I feel that I can always embrace that original simplicity again -- that's why I went back to record 'Circles and Xs,' which I actually wrote back in 1985."

Over the course of a recording career that's now in its fourth decade, the Louisiana-born singer has navigated terrain as varied as the dust-bowl starkness of her 1978 debut Ramblin' (recorded on the fly with a mere 250 dollar budget behind her) and the stately elegance of last year's West (which *Vanity Fair* called "the record of a lifetime"). Between those signposts, Lucinda Williams established a reputation as one of rock's most

uncompromising and consistently fascinating writers and performers, earning kudos from artists as diverse as Mary-Chapin Carpenter (who helped win Williams a Grammy with her recording of “Passionate Kisses”) and Elvis Costello (who joins her for a duet on the Little Honey mini-drama “Jailhouse Tears”).

Williams learned the importance of professional integrity around the same time most kids are learning their ABCs, thanks in a large part to her award-winning poet father Miller Williams -- who invested her with a “culturally rich, but economically poor” upbringing where artistic expression was of primary importance. Later, she’d hone her vision playing hardscrabble clubs around her adopted home state of Texas, absorbing the influence of sources as varied as Bob Dylan and Lightnin’ Hopkins.

“I sometimes say I just started out singing folk songs acoustically by default,” she recalls. “Even when I was playing open mic nights by myself, I’d be sitting up on stage with my Martin guitar doing ‘Angel’ by Jimi Hendrix or ‘Politician’ by Cream alongside Robert Johnson and Memphis Minnie songs. It never occurred to me to pick just one style.”

She’s never settled for any sort of pigeonholing, entering the ‘90s with the slow-burning Sweet Old World -- a disc that, as much as any release, helped place the Americana movement at the forefront of listeners’ minds -- and cementing her own spot in the cultural lexicon with 1998’s rough-hewn masterpiece Car Wheels on a Gravel Road.

The latter disc earned Williams her first Grammy as a performer, but rather than try to capture the same lightning in a bottle a second time, she stretched her boundaries on 2001’s Essence, an album rife with both cerebral interludes and soul-stirring stomps. In recent times, Williams has broadened her palette even further through frequent collaborations with kindred spirits -- acts as varied as The North Mississippi All-Stars and Flogging Molly -- who share her uncommon sense of non-revivalist traditionalism.

Little Honey continues that ongoing forward quest, mixing country, R & B and blues-rock elements with adventurous aplomb. The disc gets an added octane boost from the powerful chemistry between the musicians, primarily drawn from Williams’ latest road band (now collectively known as Buick 6) -- includes bassist David Sutton, Eels veterans Butch Norton and Chet Lyster as well as longtime collaborator Doug Pettibone.

Williams augments that core unit with a passel of like-minded folks spanning a huge chunk of the musical spectrum, from octogenarian singing legend Charlie Louvin to power-pop vets Susannah Hoffs and Matthew Sweet, the latter of whom helped arrange the Spector-tinged “Little Rock Star” -- applying studio skills that prompted Williams to dub him “this generation’s Brian Wilson.”

“I feel that this is the most eclectic record I’ve ever done, and I’ve always been known for being eclectic,” she says. “For this album, I was comfortable just letting the songs flow, and not worried about being so serious and heavy and having to top myself -- and I think that shows.”

She needn’t have worried for a minute because, with Little Honey, Lucinda Williams has indeed topped herself again.