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## On the Road Again

### Live Reviews:

#### Lucinda Williams

October 3, 1999  
Convocation Hall, Toronto



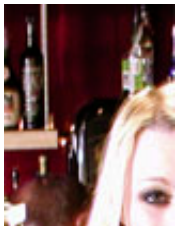
With her latest album, 1998's magnificent *Car Wheels On A Gravel Road*, recently certified gold in the U.S.A., and riding a wave of critical acclaim which included a Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk Album, one would be justified in thinking that **Lucinda Williams** and band could do no wrong as they descended into the hallowed circle of Convocation Hall on this rainy night on the thin edge of October.

Unless, that is, one had witnessed some of her late-night television talk show appearances in recent months where her performances resembled more a deer caught in the headlights than an unstoppable musical juggernaut. But maybe that's what a potential TV audience of millions can do to you. Of course, her opening slot for Tom Petty this summer at the Molson Amphitheatre was a gratifying, if not exuberant performance. But there again, my blanket on the lawn wasn't the ideal vantage point from which to judge. So here was my chance to see the real thing up close and personal, as they say.

After a well-received set by openers The Bottle Rockets ("the pride of Festus, Missouri"), Williams and band took to the stage at 9:30 pm. The first offering of the night was a satisfying run at "Pineola" from 1992's *Sweet Old World*. Next came an honest but slightly flat performance of "Metal Firecracker" from *Car Wheels*. The title, Williams explained, was inspired by the name they had given a former tour bus. By the third song, the title track from *Car Wheels*, Williams was starting to warm up,



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really belting out the chorus, her voice ringing clear as a bell.

Williams was dressed in sleek black polyester pants slightly flared at the bottoms, and a black leather vest zipped up in front, covering the rather sexy semi-transparent patterned material that clung to her exposed arms and neck. Gone was the much lived-in straw cowboy hat that she favoured this past summer opening for Tom Petty. Instead her hair was coifed in a kind of shaggy style, leading me to suspect that she's been going to Sheryl Crow's hairdresser. Standing with feet slightly apart, she swayed back and forth as she strummed her beat-up Gibson acoustic guitar, the white spotlight glancing off the flat top's varnished wood, reflecting a beam of light that swept the audience from side to side; not so much searching as guiding the audience to find their way into the song.



Although having something of a reputation for stage nerves, Williams seemed quite relaxed and at ease with the capacity crowd as she introduced each song with a brief story about what inspired her to write it, or some other related anecdote. "Drunken Angel" was prefaced by Williams explaining that she wrote it about her friend, songwriter Blaze Foley, who was shot and killed in a bar over a senseless argument. With such a personal song, you could really feel that Williams was putting a lot of herself into its singing. No other beacon was necessary for anyone to find their way to the heart of this song.

While playing, however, it would be a stretch to call Williams' stage presence "riveting." While she doesn't do much to project a presence into a room, the life-force of her songs is not measured in kinetics or motion, but rather from the ground zero of her life, her place in the world and, ultimately, on the stage - nothing more, nothing less. Still, she seemed much more confident than on previous occasions. Having spent the past 16 months on the road, part of that time opening for the Allman Brothers and Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers, has no doubt helped immeasurably in the

confidence department. And it's also created one incredibly hot touring band. Anchored by Richard "Hombre" Price on bass and Irishman Fran Breen on drums, and featuring Kenny Vaughan and John Jackson on guitars, these guys really helped carry the musical load, with stringmen Jackson and Vaughan in particular keeping things hummin'.

Both guitarists were dressed in classic Country and Western style shirts, untucked of course. Jackson, a 6-year veteran of Bob Dylan's touring band, lanky and a little scruffier under what looked like Williams' old cowboy hat, was the more passionate player, and the more versatile, also playing slide and electro-mandolin. Vaughan, a wiry and youthful Buddy Holly look-alike, proved himself more the technician. But when each was given room to show his stuff, especially later in the evening on the hypnotic set-closer "Joy," they both tore up the room in their own ways: Jackson with his mesmerizing slide playing and Vaughan with his tide of furious riffing, ebbing to a more subtle use of textures and harmonics.

While the main set was populated mostly by songs from *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, the encores took us back a little further, first with "Passionate Kisses," the up-tempo number successfully covered by Mary Chapin Carpenter, then to another song from 1992's *Sweet Old World*, the immaculately conceived "Something About What Happens When We Talk," which made me think I'd died and gone to heaven. Then she took us all the way back to the delta with "Down The Big Road Blues," a song she learned from an obscure blueswoman named Mattie Delaney, before capping the evening with a sexy and sensuous cover of Howlin' Wolf's "Come To Me Baby," highlighted by her breathy singing and Jackson's sassy Telecaster spanking.

These final two numbers served to show that in addition to her obvious Appalachian folk and country leanings, just how deeply many of Williams' own songs are also rooted in the delta blues. And that's where her music draws a lot of its strength: going to the deep well of the blues, folk and country traditions. And strength is the lasting impression this evening of music imparted to me. Strong songs, played by a strong band, and sung by someone with an obviously strong conviction that music is life, and life is music.

#### **The Set List:**

- Pineola
- Metal Firecracker
- Car Wheels on a Gravel Road
- Right In Time
- Drunken Angel
- Greenville
- I Lost It
- 2 Kool 2 Be 4-Gotten
- Can't Let Go
- Changed The Locks
- Joy

#### **First Encore**

- Passionate Kisses
- Something About What Happens When We Talk
- Crescent City
- \*[Unknown - a Williams song that the Silos covered]

#### **Second Encore**

- Down The Big Road Blues (learned from Mattie Delaney)
- Come To Me Baby (Howlin' Wolf)

— review by Jim Kelly

— photos by Graham Kennedy