

Jazz goes country—the music of Charles Lloyd and Lucinda Williams

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Saxophonist Charles Lloyd has been a presence in jazz since the early 1960s, when he replaced Eric Dolphy in Chico Hamilton’s innovative quintet. As a bandleader, Lloyd is best-known for the 1967 album *Forest Flower*, which captured an inspired performance by his quartet at the previous year’s Monterey Jazz Festival. It was a smashing success, selling more than a million copies—an unusual achievement for a jazz recording.

While his first success came out of the West Coast jazz scene, Lloyd’s musical roots run even deeper. Born in 1938, he grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, a city which has played an important role in many genres of American music. While still cutting his teeth as a performer, Lloyd had the opportunity to perform with several of the top blues and R&B acts in the area, including Howlin’ Wolf, B.B. King, Bobby “Blue” Bland and Johnny Ace. He was struck by the ability of each of these singers to communicate with audiences. The importance they placed on touching listeners with something genuine and truthful greatly affected the young Lloyd.

Even today, Lloyd often thinks of himself as a singer. “That piece of plumbing became my voice,” he once said of his saxophone during an interview with NPR. His playing is versatile, sometimes pretty and lyrical, sometimes filled with those cascading runs of notes spilling over notes, approaching the “outside” playing of “free” or “avant-garde” jazz. John Coltrane is an obvious influence, but Lloyd’s overall sound is somehow sunnier than Coltrane’s. He has a light touch. He dances where others dig in their heels.

At 80 years old, Lloyd is in the middle of one of the more artistically successful periods of his career. He is responsible for some of the more interesting jazz releases in recent years, including *Hagar’s Song*, an

outstanding collection of duets with pianist Jason Moran released in 2013, and *I Long to See You*, his 2016 album with his group The Marvels. Now Lloyd returns with *Vanished Gardens*, his second album with The Marvels and a collaboration with country singer Lucinda Williams.

Williams was one of the more serious writers and performers to emerge in country music during the 1980s and 90s, not exactly the heyday of the genre. She has always been an outsider—too rock ‘n’ roll for country traditionalists and too country for many rock fans. “Passionate Kisses,” “Drunken Angel,” “Ventura,” and “Car Wheels on a Gravel Road” are just a few of her most valuable songs. She continues to put out interesting material, her 2014 album *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone* being especially noteworthy.

Williams appears on five of the ten songs included here, four of which she wrote herself and another written by Jimi Hendrix (“Angel”). The collaboration with Lloyd and the Marvels feels entirely natural. The band is not simply “jazzing up” Williams’ country music. There’s no attempt to impose a traditional swing beat where none is called for. The musicians only stretch out what is there, adding room to elaborate on the feeling already present in Williams’ work.

Many of Williams’ songs are about lonely or isolated people who yearn for a connection to the world or someone to love and be loved by. Lloyd’s playing adds a new dimension of hope to these songs. Williams sings of the sorrows, Lloyd “sings” of the potential and possibilities.

The album opens with “Defiant,” one of Lloyd’s own compositions. It provides a perfect example of his “vocal” playing. It would not be difficult to imagine Bobby “Blue” Bland singing some of the same lines

played here by Lloyd. The saxophonist's opening runs are immersed in a wave of pedal-steel and electric guitar, supplied by Greg Leisz and Bill Frisell, respectively. Drummer Eric Harland and bassist Reuben Rogers soon enter, hitting a confident stride.

Williams first appears on "Dust," a new rendition of a song from her 2016 album *The Ghosts of Highway 20*. It was created from lyrics written by her father, the poet Miller Williams, about someone gone numb from too much hurting. Williams sings, "You don't have to try to keep the tears back/You couldn't cry if you wanted to/Even your thoughts are dust." The version here is looser and warmer than the original. Lloyd's saxophone seems to articulate some of the otherwise inexpressible feeling hinted at in the lyric.

The chorus of "Ventura," first recorded by Williams in 2003, contains one of her most memorable expressions of longing: "I wanna watch the ocean bend the edges of the sun/then I wanna get swallowed up in an ocean of love." As she completes this line, Lloyd's solo takes flight, a direct extension of that sentiment. As she reaches out, he extends her grasp considerably.

At least one song, "Unsuffer Me," is a significant improvement over the original version featured on Williams' 2007 album *West*. "I long for knowledge," she sings, "Whisper in my ear/Undo my logic/Undo my fear/Unsuffer me." This is a far more spirited recording of the composition. If in the earlier version the character in Williams' song wanted something more out of life, the Marvels send her out to get it, thanks in large part to the drumming of Eric Harland.

"We've Come Too Far to Turn Around" is a new composition written by Williams for this project. It is a response to the Trump administration and the fascist rally held in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017. Referring to the historical fight for racial equality in the United States, the song rejects the racist filth displayed in Charlottesville. But it also overestimates the extent to which Trump has "fooled" the population. However well-meaning and determined it may be to "lay down the burden of hate and separation," it is not the most convincing or moving song on the album.

Among the remaining songs not featuring Williams, there is "The Ballad of The Sad Young Men," written by Fran Landesman and Tommy Wolf, and popularized by Roberta Flack. It makes plenty of room for the quiet lyricism of guitarist Bill Frisell, who has himself been a

significant presence in jazz since the 1980s. He seems to reach out and carefully pluck the notes right out of the air. Lloyd responds in kind when it comes time for his solo.

Frisell is also featured in a duet with Lloyd on "Monk's Mood." It is a pleasure to hear the guitarist's delicate take on this composition by legendary jazz composer and pianist Thelonious Monk. It recalls his time as a member of the Paul Motian Trio, which paid frequent tribute to the composer.

Vanished Gardens is a strong offering. Its seamless mixing together of multiple genres is extremely appealing. Some of the best jazz releases in recent years have done the same, whether it's the fusion of jazz and Middle Eastern traditions in the work of Omer Avital or jazz and country music in the work of John Scofield or Charles Lloyd and the Marvels, there is something moving about these musicians and traditions finding their way to each other, crossing all sorts of boundaries and borders. The contributions of Charles Lloyd and Lucinda Williams to this trend are worth exploring.



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