

Lucinda Williams' *World's Gone Wrong*: An urgent protest against the fascist danger

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On January 23, veteran musician and songwriter Lucinda Williams released her 17th studio album, *World's Gone Wrong*. As the title indicates, Williams takes direct aim at the social crisis enveloping tens of millions of poor and working-class people across the country and the world. Formally, it could be described as a blues-rock album, but it is more importantly a call to fight against the fascist regime emerging in the US. This is a welcome development among popular musicians.

Williams is one of the more perceptive American singer-songwriters over the last 40-50 years. At her best, she has a gift for capturing complicated and honest emotions in the imagery of her lyrics. This tends to surface in songs about people falling in or out of love, as well through the ways men and women generally become worn down by the difficulties of life. But her best work usually has a raw element of the delta blues somewhere in the foundation, as well as a deep empathy for those suffering around her.

Williams was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana in 1953, the daughter of a prominent poet from Arkansas, Miller Williams. As a guitarist, she played folk, rock and country music for nearly a decade before releasing her first album at age 26, a remarkable collection of covers, through Moses Asch's Folkways Records, on *Ramblin' on My Mind* (1979). The album showcased her early range as a musician, with terrific renderings of blues and country material. Appalachian folk, southern gospel, Cajun and Memphis jug band classics. Her version of the blues traditional "Motherless Children" is an early standout.

Williams wrote all the songs for her second album, *Happy Woman Blues* (1980). Among the remarkable tracks are "Lafayette," "Happy Woman Blues," "Rolling Along" and "Howlin' at Midnight." After an eight-year gap, in 1988, Williams released *Lucinda Williams*, with "I Just Wanted to See You So Bad," "Big Red Sun Blues," "Crescent City" and, especially memorably, "Side of the Road."

She is often grouped with artists of the "alternative-country" wave of the 1990s in the US, in particular because of the success of her critically lauded 1998 album *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*. But her music generally eludes simple classification and is in fact often more hard-hitting emotionally

than that album.

On most of her material, particularly in the 1980s and early 90s, one can sense that Williams is steeped in the music of the "Americana triangle"—which includes the broad and often intertwined musical styles associated with Memphis, New Orleans and Nashville. However, she also continually broadens her musical range, including an interesting collaboration with legendary jazz saxophonist Charles Lloyd in 2018 on *Vanished Gardens*, and several 'covers' albums of popular musicians.

Her distinct, weathered singing voice can render difficult feelings in ways that sound hard-earned and honest. She is perhaps best known for the 1988 song "Passionate Kisses," which was covered by Mary Chapin Carpenter in 1992 and became a big hit, exposing her to a wider audience. She has a talent for straight-to-the-point love and heartbreak songs, such as "Something About What Happens When We Talk" (1992), "Fruits of My Labor" (2003), and "Changed the Locks" (1988).

But while her songs about the yearning and difficulties of romantic relationships tend to be the most celebrated by music critics, it is her outwardly empathetic songs that make the longest lasting punch on the listener. Songs like "Sweet Old World" and "Pineola" – both about individuals dealing with the impact of a suicide – from the 1992 album *Sweet Old World*, are standouts. Other notable songs include "When I Look at the World" and "Compassion" from the compelling 2014 album *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone*.

She also has become an increasingly capable songwriter about injustice, including the cutting anti-war "Soldier's Song" (2011), "West Memphis" (2014) about the framed up "West Memphis 3" victims, and the hard-charging cover of blues legend Memphis Minnie in "You Can't Rule Me" (2020), which is a deliberately defiant gesture toward the first Trump administration.

The impulse to these empathetic and socially concerned songs find reflection in the current album, *World's Gone Wrong*—though the conditions are obviously much more advanced now. All but one of the ten songs touch on some element of the current social crisis.

Several songs early in the album grapple with the rapidly deteriorating social and economic situation. The opening song

“The World’s Gone Wrong” is an anxiety-driven rock song centered on a couple, a nurse and a car salesman, who increasingly find it hard to get by. But even amid their daily struggles they are even more worries that most people around them are also doing similar or worse:

The can see what’s going down
Empty houses all over town
So many lost are never found
And bad, bad signs are all around
A lot of people being put on the street
It’s getting’ harder to make ends meet

But the song’s chorus tries to counter the initial bleakness with a call to push forward: “Come on, baby, we gotta be strong ... Everybody knows the world’s gone wrong.”

The song that follows, “Something’s Gotta Give,” continues in this world-weary tone, but much more ominously making clear that we’ve entered a very dangerous period in history: “There’s a darkness to these days / Things happen out of sight / As the light fades away / Something just ain’t right / There’s an anger in these days.”

Elsewhere, Williams denounces Trump, without mentioning him by name, in a Bo Diddley-style song “How Much Did You Get For Your Soul?” Certain verses pack a punch:

You’re nothing but a worthless fraud
It was all just bait and switch
It’s the oldest story ever been told
You got nothin’ left to sell
Now your blood is running cold
And you’re on the road to Hell

The song itself is a kind of continuation of a similar song Williams released during the first Trump administration, “Man Without a Soul” (2020).

Musically the most effective of Williams’ “troubled world” songs on the album is a cover of reggae legend Bob Marley’s 1979 song “So Much Trouble in the World.” Performed with veteran Civil Rights singer Mavis Staples, now 86, it is played convincingly as a combination Jamaican dub-country song. Both singers perform the chorus passionately, the power of their voices in the chorus conveys something urgently felt. In a livestreamed album debut of the song Williams repeats one of the key lines several times to close the song: “We the street people talkin’ / We the people strugglin’ / With so much trouble / We the street people talkin.”

This motivation to rally the “people in the streets” finds reflection in the most interesting and propulsive songs on the album, such as “Sing Unburied Song,” “We’ve Come Too Far to Turn Around” (with talented artist Norah Jones on piano and back-up vocals) and “Freedom Speaks.” These are all sung as a kind of call to arms—the latter two songs end the album—and feel distinctly pertinent to the current climate and situation.

“Freedom Speaks” is likely the most memorable track on the album. It is sung from the perspective of “freedom” as the author of the lyrics, speaking to an audience on the verge of

significant struggles. It reminds that “History will come back around,” and the chorus works as a kind of crescendo:

So let me remind you
Just what’s at stake
Apathy will blind you
Until it’s way too late
So don’t take me for granted
I’m strong in the light
Don’t take me for granted
Stand up and fight

The album doesn’t break new musical ground, but her band performs admirably, with genuine connectedness and conviction. Williams has also not been able to play guitar herself since suffering a stroke in 2020. But the 73-year-old still sings with the passion and anger of her best songs, without self-pity or ennui, and ultimately aiming to push upward.

And as a form of social protest, the album is more moving as an attempt to reach a broad audience in struggle—and to reflect and encourage a growing opposition—than it is as a thoroughly worked out form of artistic-political opposition. On the latter, Williams relies often on Civil Rights and related religious forms of protest imagery as her artistic guidepost, with their various limitations.

Nevertheless, the fact that Williams is taking such wholehearted artistic aim at the biggest crisis of our lifetime is a credit to her. According to reports, Williams had been working on an entirely different kind of album in the winter of 2024-2025, when she made the decision to scrap that and refocus on an album that spoke about the current situation. *World’s Gone Wrong* clearly aims to capture the current moment we are in a serious musical form, and more importantly is not intended to leave the listeners with their heads buried in their laps. This is commendable, and one hopes other popular artists will follow Williams’ lead.



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