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A strong sense of conviction is what makes Southern culture special. Beneath the earliest Sun records by Howlin' Wolf and the newest album from the Neville Brothers, there simmers a heated spirit.

As 35-year-old singer-songwriter Lucinda Williams drifted from her native Louisiana through Vicksburg, Miss.; Macon, Ga., and Austin, Texas, it was hard to distance herself from her dogmatic Southern background.

Her father, Miller Williams, is a poet-writer who heads the University of Arkansas Press, her mother was a music major at Louisiana State University and both grandfathers were Methodist ministers.

"There's a real deep-rooted sense of that spirit in my music, but at the same time, my father's agnostic," Williams said over the horn from Cambridge, Mass. "So I grew up in an agnostic household. My father's father was a conscientious objector in World War I. He was a Christian in the true sense of the word - liberal, socialist Democrat. (My grandparents) wore black armbands during the 1969 moratorium. That's the line I come from. And that's all in the music."

It's difficult to pin a label on Williams' sound. Her Rough Trade album "Lucinda Williams" runs from hook-happy pop such as "I Just Wanted to See You So Bad" to the Texas honky-tonk of "The Night's Too Long" to the mystical starkness of Howlin Wolf's "I Asked for Water (She Gave Me Gasoline)."

The woman's got soul.

Williams will play much of the new album with her three-piece band in her Chicago debut around midnight tonight at Cabaret Metro.

Although some people regard Williams as a new artist, she debuted in 1979 on Folkways Records with "Ramblin' on My Mind," a compilation of minimalist dust bowl covers by Hank Williams, Memphis Minnie and Robert Johnson. She followed that with 1980's "Happy Woman Blues" on Folkways, which featured original country-folk material.

How did "Lucinda Williams" arrive at such a distinctive form?

"It's just a development of what I've gone through over the years," she said. "I started playing guitar in 1965, which was the height of the folk thing. I grew through folk-rock and was influenced by everything that went on through the '70s. So I think it's a natural transgression that was kind of inevitable - at least for me."

In the nine years between albums, indecision was a problem. She couldn't figure

out if she was playing blues, country or rock music.

"I battled with that for a long time, and I didn't want to have to make a decision," she said. "When this record came along, it was like somebody saying I didn't have to make up my mind. And not being able to make up my mind for all those years made all those things meld together into my own style."

Williams is surprised with the breakthrough status of the record, which has been well-received by *Musician* and *Rolling Stone* magazines.

"I guess it's the right place at the right time," she said. "Other women artists are having success. Part of it is the music industry. Part of it is the press. That's piquing people's interest, but there's something that just makes people like the record."