

Second wind

Starting slow, Williams almost loses audience but then finds her groove

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DALLAS — Lucinda Williams does two things remarkably well: She writes artful, introspective songs that sprawl out lazily and beautifully on an album. And she rocks hard on stage, spitting out angry, yearning or lascivious lyrics over loud layers of rhythm and guitar.

Saturday's concert in Dallas revealed how hard it is to balance those strengths in one show. The sold-out Granada Theater was full of fans who wanted to rock. Williams, meanwhile, started out slow, with a handful of measured compositions (“Ventura,” “Fruits of My Labor,” “Lake Charles”) that require quiet and keen attention. It took a while for the singer and her audience to reach a compromise.

But when they did, the show found its groove.

The music itself was impeccable; it's early in the tour, and Williams' voice was in better shape than it sounds on her new album, “West.” And her new touring band sounds every bit as good as her longtime backup crew, the Love Band.

But on Saturday, Williams struggled with pace. She is touring to promote “West,” but she nearly lost her audience when she dipped into the album's languorous material. The thoughtful, subtle new songs “Rescue” and “Words” are better-suited for the sort of intimate acoustic tour Williams brought through Dallas last year.

The album closer, “West,” is easily the disc's prettiest song — but it's also the slowest, and Saturday's crowd just wasn't in the mood.

But after Williams consulted with the band, things started to go right. For the second half of the show, she pulled out the rock 'n' roll side of her catalog, drawing heavily from 2003's “World Without Tears” and 1998's “Car Wheels on a Gravel Road.” And with a dark, lusty version of “Essence” — followed by a searing “Real Live Bleeding Fingers and Broken Guitar Strings” — Williams hit her stride.

It got better. Her performance of “Unsuffer Me” had all the passion and energy it lacks on the new album. And by the time Williams and her band launched into a loping, funky “Get Right With God,” she was turning a bland recitation of songs into a bluesy, sexy Delta revival.

Williams finished the night with a blissfully lazy, drawly cover of Howlin' Wolf's “Come to Me Baby.” Seductive and cool, it was the perfect way for Williams to end, and reclaim, a night that almost slipped away.

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