

Best Americana Album

Can the Grammys resist a Tony nominee (Brandy Clark), a Pulitzer winner (Rhiannon Giddens), or a revitalized Lucinda Williams?



Brandy Clark

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Clark has amassed double-digit Grammy nominations over the past 10 years, and after a nom from the Tonys in May for her contributions to the Broadway hit *Shucked*, she's something of a lock for Grammy attention. Though she's been a presence in the country categories, the stripped-down production of this self-titled return to form — courtesy of Americana mainstay (and Grammy darling) Brandi Carlile — feels better suited here.

Lucinda Williams

Stories From a Rock N Roll Heart



The 70-year-old legend has 17 noms (and three wins) scattered across the rock, folk, roots, and country categories — including three noms in Americana. Expect no different for Williams' triumphant *Stories From*

Lucinda Williams



a *Rock N Roll Heart*, which finds the singer revitalized after a 2020 stroke. "This record has more energy than anything she's done in years," says Nelson Gullett, an Americana radio veteran and music director at WDVX in Knoxville. "It's as Lucinda as Lucinda has been in a long time." Given her Grammy track record and the backstory behind this one, it seems like a sure bet.

Allison Russell

The Returner



Russell's second album is a bold step forward for the singer-songwriter that both challenges and expands upon the more rootsy sound of her debut, *Outside Child*. While *The Returner* explores a rainbow of grooves, it's a strong Best Americana

Album contender, just as *Outside Child* was. Gullett says that Russell is "so deeply rooted in this sound, and in this community" that another nomination is a natural. "I think they owe her from two years ago," he adds, pointing out that Russell's contemporary Jason Isbell was never even nominated for his landmark album *Southeastern* but was recognized with a Grammy win for his subsequent album. Something similar could happen with Russell in 2024.

Amanda Shires & Bobbie Nelson

Loving You

This love letter to the American songbook features the final recordings of Bobbie Nelson, Willie's piano-playing sister. A legend collaborating with a singer 50 years her junior on a set of classic tunes is just the type of heartwarming Grammy-friendly story that might finally bestow long-overdue Recording Academy recognition on Shires, who's never been nominated for her solo work despite having released several top-notch genre-hopping records over the past few years. "It's time for her to get [some recognition]," says Gullett. "I could see voters going for it."

Rhiannon Giddens

You're the One

While Rhiannon Giddens' past few albums have been nominated in the folk and roots categories, her new record, produced by Jack Splash (Valerie June, St. Paul and the Broken Bones), opens up into a more sweeping full-band sound that makes it a natural fit for Americana. Gullett says *You're the One* "feels like a return for

her," and indeed it harkens back to Giddens' 2017 opus *Freedom Highway* — an album that somehow escaped Grammy attention. With Giddens winning a Pulitzer this year for the opera *Omar* (written with Michael Abels), it's unlikely her latest will do the same.

Forecasting the Field

Americana is a wide-open category, partly because it's hard to define. "I always look at half of the folk category and think they are more Americana than half of the Americana nominees," says Gullett. And as the nomination of Jackson Browne's *Downhill From Everywhere* two years ago shows, Americana can be a place to honor strong late-career work from legends. So while Paul Simon's *Seven Psalms* seems too experimental for this category, anything is possible — though as surprises go, a nomination for Rodney Crowell's *Chicago Sessions* (produced with a bluesy twang by Wilco's Jeff Tweedy) seems more likely, and don't count out six-time Grammy nominee Bettye Lavette. All this said, with its disco beats, hi-hat rhythms, full string sections, and deeply personal narrative, Russell's *The Returner* is a new lode-star in the Americana space that's certain to make its impact felt widely in the next few years. The Recording Academy would be wise to recognize it as such. Even so, the feel-good comeback narrative and burst of rock energy in Lucinda Williams' *Stories From a Rock N Roll Heart* is more than enough to make it a front-runner. If Russell and Giddens split the vote of Americana's more progressive wing, it could open up space for Williams, who hasn't won a Grammy in more than two decades. Add to that Bruce Springsteen's backing vocals on "New York Comeback" and the fact that Williams is a legendary songwriter now in her eighth decade and you have the candidate to beat in February. "I won't be shocked if this album wins," Gullett says. JONATHAN BERNSTEIN