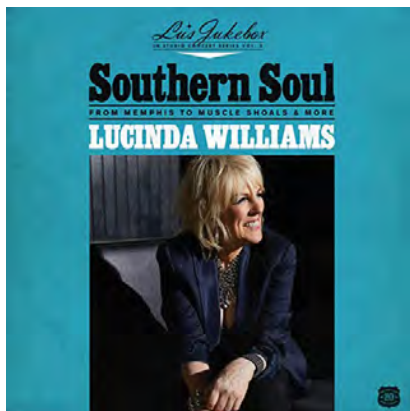




MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Lucinda Williams: *Southern Soul: From Memphis to Muscle Shoals & More*. Highway 20/Thirty Tigers (LP).

During the COVID-19 lockdown, blues-rock songstress Lucinda Williams presented a series of six streaming studio concerts that are being released as Lu's Jukebox Series. The concerts, 76 songs in all, were recorded in October and December of 2020. On Vol. 2, Williams lends her Louisiana drawl to 10 of her favorite Southern soul hits and performs one original ("Still I Long for Your Kiss")—the album is nicely packaged in a gatefold sleeve. These heartfelt recordings include Joe South's "Games People Play," Ann Peebles' "I Can't Stand the Rain," Bobbie Gentry's "Ode to Billie Joe," Brook Benton's "Rainy Night in Georgia," O.C. Smith's "Main Street Mission," and Dorothy Moore's "Misty Blue." Williams' vocals are laid back, as she languishes on the lyrics of some of the greatest songs in the 60s-soul canon. But she finally unleashes guitarists Stuart Mathis and Joshua Grange for a blistering, show-stopping cover of Al Green's "Take Me to the River." This is essential stuff for fans of the legendary Southern soul that flowed out of Tennessee and Alabama. Other albums in the series include impressive tributes to Tom Petty, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, 60s country, and rockin' Christmas songs. **Greg Cahill**

Further Listening: Lucinda Williams: *Runnin' Down a Dream: A Tribute to Tom Petty*

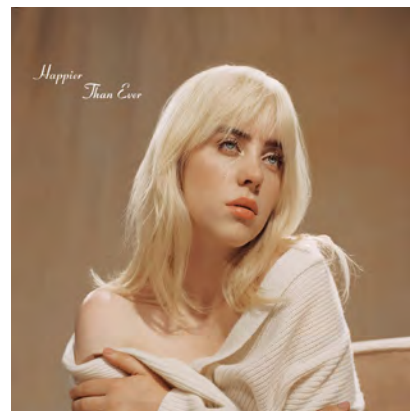


MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Billy Bragg: *The Million Things That Never Happened*. Cooking Vinyl.

On his first album of original material since 2013's *Tooth and Nail*, British protest singer Billy Bragg takes a tender look at the impact of the pandemic. Recorded in December 2020, the new album is Bragg's response to the alienation experienced by millions. The title track ponders the cost of putting personal and professional plans on hold while the melancholy piano ballad "Lonesome Ocean" addresses the isolation of the lengthy quarantine. He has said the lockdown—or "shield," as it's known in the UK—left him wondering where he fit in after putting his own career on hold. The answer came when his wife, Juliet De Valero, was diagnosed with Stage 1 breast cancer. Her condition inspired Bragg to write "I Will Be Your Shield," a nod to Britain's National Health Service and a metaphor for protecting loved ones in the face of adversity. Bragg fans will note that "Ten Mysterious Photos That Can't Be," "The Buck Doesn't Stop Here No More," and "Freedom Doesn't Come for Free" reflect the singer's socialist views and echo the empathetic tone of "The Milkman of Human Kindness," a sentimental ballad from Bragg's 1983 debut album *Life's a Riot with Spy vs Spy*. **GC**

Further Listening: Billy Bragg & Wilco: *Mermaid Avenue*; Billy Bragg & Joe Henry: *Shine a Light: Field Recordings from the Great American Railroad*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Billie Eilish: *Happier Than Ever*. Darkroom/Interscope.

Eilish's 2018 debut album was inward-looking, with themes rooted in night terrors and lucid dreaming. Relationships with others or with fame take center stage here. Some lyrics elicit a sympathetic chuckle: "Things I once enjoyed/ Just keep me employed now." Some elicit the willies: "You know I love to rub it in like lotion." "Not My Responsibility" is the heart of the album, taking aim at both the shamers and the lustful who focus on her body. More artists need to give the finger to a culture that proclaims freedom and acceptance while judging and demanding. In the better songs that aren't just diatribes against soured relationships, Eilish lays bare the struggle to grow under a spotlight that's warped and worn down many people. She often sings in a near whisper, but there's little exaggerated vocal processing or that accursed Auto-Tune. There are some hard lefts, too: an ethereal choral snippet from Gustav Holst, a bossa nova, and the Tin Pan Alley turn in the title track before purposefully grating distortion takes over. Moody, ethereal auras and highly processed instrumentation aren't usually my thing, but it's nice to hear actual melodies and some provocation in modern pop music. **Stephen Estep**

Further Listening: Lorde: *Solar Power*