

life Music

Waiting for Shawn Colvin

By Peter Jones

The last time Shawn Colvin released an album of new material, George W. Bush was in the White House, Pluto was still a planet and most people thought “tweeting” was literally for the birds.

“I wouldn’t call it perfectionism. I’m just a slow writer,” Colvin explained. “Once I’m done with a project, I take time off from writing. I don’t just hop right back into it. I don’t make records that quickly either... once I start them.”

Colvin’s output is sparse for an artist with such sustainability. In her nearly quarter-century career, the singer-songwriter has released only eight CDs, but she has always kept a placeholder on album radio, a format that inevitably welcomes her back with patience, open arms and regular rotation.

All Fall Down, Colvin’s newest CD, will not disappoint fans who have sold homes and changed careers since 2006’s *These Four Walls*. Whether due to the benefits of time or just unflinching talent, Colvin’s latest work is a strong addition to her catalogue of reflective lyrics and sturdy melodies delivered by a still-youthful soprano.

As she always has, Colvin seamlessly mixes songs of personal experience with an undercurrent of social observation. The moody opening title track accepts the reality of life’s losses with marked honesty, leading the way into a series of conceptually connected narratives of existential crises, urban alienation, unrequited love and hope.

Although Colvin, 54, takes her time when it comes to committing such ideas to a compact disc, she says she always keeps her eyes and ears open for new music.

“I take notes during the downtime and those almost always come to fruition in terms of ideas that end up in songs,” she said. “I view it all on a personal level. I sing about what moves me.”

Colvin will do just that at Denver Botanic Gardens Aug. 10.

Born in Vermillion, SD, ten-year-old Colvin taught herself to play guitar and ventured into as many styles of music as places she lived while her parents moved around the country, a rock group in Illinois and a country swing band in Texas, among them.

She turned full-time folkie when she found her musical home in New York City’s Greenwich Village. After serving as back-up singer for Suzanne Vega, Colvin inked her own deal with Columbia Records and was soon a player among a burgeoning movement of women with acoustic guitars, Vega, Tracy Chapman and the Indigo Girls, among them.

Colvin did not experience wide renown until 1989, when she won a Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk Recording for her album *Steady On*. Her

biggest hit happened almost a decade later. “Sunny Came Home” got attention for its ambiguous narrative of an abused woman who takes desperate action with a match... or does she?

Spoiler alert: Unlike Don McLean (interviewed in this column in September 2001) and Bobbie Gentry, this songwriter makes no bones about clearing up the vagaries of her biggest hit during press interviews.

“I think it’s safe to say she was pretty pissed and burned the house down, no regrets,” Colvin said of Sunny. “That was a perfect storm of great timing. I still love playing it. That’s fortunate. I wasn’t trying to have a hit.”

Colvin took home two Grammys for the song, but not before an ol’ dirty bastard... and we’re not talking about Sunny’s abusive husband... lit his own fire of sorts under Colvin’s parade.

Sure enough, Ol’ Dirty Bastard, leader of the rap group Wu-Tang Clan, inexplicably chose Colvin’s Grammy moment to literally grab the microphone and babble incoherently about his own loss in a different musical category.

Bastard launched his graceless and self-centered rant just as a dumbfounded Colvin was approaching the microphone on live television to accept her award. Her bewildered expression remains one of the classic awkward moments of TV award shows, among considerable competition.

“That was not a great call on his part,” the songwriter said. “It’s not what you picture happening in your dreams as a 12-year-old. I was confused. He sent flowers later.”

Bastard and Colvin were never bound for a duet. She had better relationships with more folk-centered musicians, having worked peacefully with the likes of Emmylou Harris and James Taylor, among others. For a time, Colvin, Roseanne Cash and Mary Chapin Carpenter (interviewed in this column last month) considered forming a sort of super trio, aptly called the CC&C Music Factory.

“It’s really hard to put things like that together,” she said.

It has been easier for Colvin to mull her life story on a word processor. In recent years when she has not been crafting songs for the long-awaited *All Fall Down*, she has been writing a kind of premature memoir for a woman born in 1958.

The result is *Diamonds in the Rough*, a book with much the wit and insight into Colvin’s songwriting, but less tuneful, more literal and harder to dance to.

“The book was such unfamiliar territory and then it was a relief to write the songs afterwards,” Colvin said. “The songwriting is usually pretty daunting. Writing the book changed my perspective on that.”

Diamonds in the Rough follows Colvin’s life, career and songwriting while exploring her relationships, motherhood, and bouts with depression and

anorexia. It’s a worthwhile storyline, but one has to wonder if a woman in her mid-50s really needs to be writing an autobiography.

“I probably shouldn’t have done it,” Colvin confessed with little prompting. “I was kind of egged on to do it by my manager. I really was dubious. I’m not old enough, which is something I don’t get to say very often these days. But I think I have something to offer in the book, and I face it with humor.”

The forced self-reflection has reinforced Colvin’s belief in luck.

“My career has been a dream come true,” she said. “After I made my first record, I thought, if I never make another record, I did what I always wanted to do, and I did it at 32 years old. Everything else has been gravy.”

Shawn Colvin will perform Aug. 10 at Denver Botanic Gardens. For more information, call 303-777-1003 or visit botanicgardens.org or shawncolvin.com. Contact Peter Jones at pjoneslifemusic@aol.com.

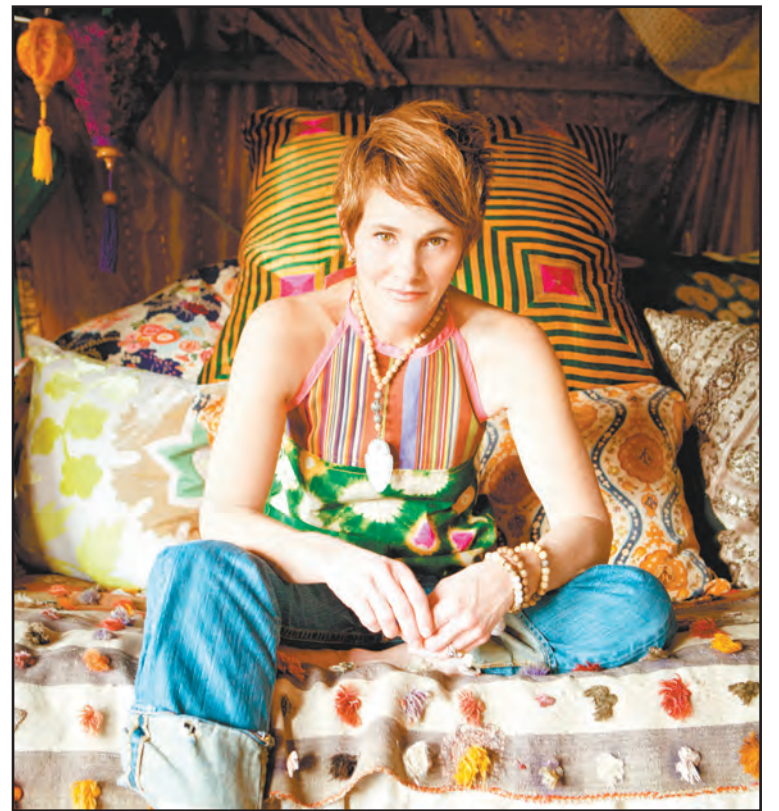


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SHAWN COLVIN’S LATEST WORK IS A STRONG ADDITION to her catalogue of reflective lyrics & sturdy melodies delivered by a still-youthful soprano.

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