

**GUARDIAN** June 14, 2007

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,2102465,00.html>

# Personal effects

**Alcoholism and depression have given folk singer Shawn Colvin no shortage of material, but she tells Gareth McLean she's happier just being 'wistful'**

**'Sometimes I still just want to take the edge off'... Colvin**

Bob Dylan, Shawn Colvin assures me, is hilarious. "C'mon! Listen to his lyrics: 'I feel like falling in love with the first woman I meet/ Putting her in a wheelbarrow and wheeling her down the street.' That's hysterical. 'I used to care but things have changed'. That's funny. You know it is. Wry and curmudgeonly."

There's a wryness to Colvin's own songs. In *That Don't Worry Me Now*, on *These Four Walls*, her latest album, she sings, jadedly: "If Jesus is coming, he'd better start running". Throughout her work, there's a thread of mischievousness. In person too, she's sharp, sardonic and self-deprecating. But along with her wryness, there's also a darkness: an inky, enveloping gloom and occasionally, a despondent sense of dread. Colvin sings about damage and makes it sound beautiful.

The damage of which she sings is, mostly, her own. She writes intimate, confessional songs, in what she describes as a "folk idiom that has evolved from old folk music, through Bob Dylan, to personal folk music". Citing Joni Mitchell, James Taylor and Jackson Browne as influences, Colvin sings about herself. So, on top of the usual broken hearts and shattered love affairs that singer-songwriters perennially plumb, she also deals with her alcoholism and depression.

"Looking back, I see I've had a form of depression from when I was around five years old," she says. "I believe in a biological predisposition towards it, and I suffered terrible anxiety and panic and sensitivity."

Growing up in the 1950s and 60s in the American midwest meant her

condition went unrecognised. (Even when she was diagnosed and medicated, in the 1970s, drugs then had dreadful side-effects). Her family situation didn't help. Her parents, who married young, were the product of their time. "They weren't prepared for a kid like me. They didn't understand me. Essentially, they tried to break my spirit, which wasn't an uncommon way to bring up a kid in those days."

In Tuff Kid, she sings "My daddy hit me but he couldn't quit me/ We showed each other how to feel alive", while in The Story, she sings of her parents, "And he never did guess/ in her cast-iron dress/ she was burning beyond recognition".

After a difficult childhood, Colvin went to college and it was there she started drinking. "I didn't drink until then because I was frightened of losing control, but when I started, when I was 19, that was it. I don't think anyone escapes into addiction because they feel good about themselves and the world is bothering them. You're full of self-loathing and fear. And if you're that anxious for that long, it takes a lot of energy to deal with it. It was so nice to take the edge off."

Even today, some 24 years after she stopped drinking, she struggles with it. "Sometimes, I still just want to take the edge off."

Music played a huge part in keeping her together. She learnt to play guitar at 10 and moved to New York in her early 20s where, after playing in various bands, she met John Leventhal, the producer and writer with whom she's maintained a creative partnership for 25 years. Leventhal's fingerprints are visible on most of Colvin's nine albums and it was with him she achieved her most commercial success with Sunny Came Home, which won song of the year and record of the year at the 1998 Grammys.

Given her tendency and talent for writing personal songs, it's ironic that Colvin is best known for a song that isn't about her at all. A feisty murder ballad, Sunny Came Home, is about a woman, betrayed and belittled by her husband, who returns home and sets fire to her house. "For the record, I've never set fire to my house or murdered anyone," she says, impishly.

If Colvin had a breakthrough, A Few Small Repairs, the album containing Sunny Came Home, was it. Another song from the album became the theme tune of the short-lived Brooke Shields sitcom, Suddenly Susan, and she recorded songs for film soundtracks, among them Julia Roberts'

Runaway Bride. She's appeared in The Simpsons, in which she voiced Rachel Jordan, the Christian rock star who dated Ned Flanders after Maude's death. And yet, she never fully crossed into the mainstream, remaining more of a cult favourite, a hidden gem, a diamond in the rough.

In America, where they are fetishistic about categorisation, she's been described as "skating the line between adult contemporary and modern folk" (a description that prompted a bemused snort from Colvin herself) but, simply, she sings great grown-up pop songs. The legendary David Crosby calls her "the best lady songwriter in the world right now". Leaving aside his use of the word "lady", that's some compliment.

And so to These Four Walls, her newest album, one she describes as "a coming-of-age record". Having turned 51, Colvin is pensive. "The mood is somewhat resigned, somewhat content. You get to my age and you take stock. You no longer have your life stretching out before you and realising you've lived more than you're going to live is a shake-up. Some people skate right by it, but for me, it's something I need to come to terms with."

Indeed, the title track is about coming to terms with death, while So Good To See You, about meeting a former lover, is drenched with thrill-tinged regret. Not to say there aren't any upbeat songs, though Colvin half-jokes that she doesn't write happy tunes.

Colvin brings to mind film critic Pauline Kael's description of Marlon Brando - in possession of a tough waifishness. To all her music - along with anger, humour, sorrow and, in songs such as Set The Prairie on Fire, real sexiness - there's a weary wistfulness. "Life takes courage. It takes grit. You can either feel sorry for yourself or get on with it. Wistfulness is a good alternative to self-pity".

• **Shawn Colvin** plays Shepherds Bush Empire on Monday (0870 400 0688), and then tours. These Four Walls is out on Nonesuch.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,2102465,00.html>