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With Ease, Colvin Charts a New Beginning

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By Marc Hirsh



Shawn Colvin's latest album, "These Four Walls," is her first release on Nonesuch Record. She performs at the Roxy this Saturday (Tracie Goudie)

Shawn Colvin is no stranger to cover tunes, having cut her teeth playing other people's songs in the Boston and New York folk music scenes of the 1980s. Two of her seven studio albums -- 1994's "Cover Girl" and 1998's "Holiday Songs and Lullabies " -- are devoted to non original material. Even so, the version of the Bee Gees' "Words" that ends the new "These Four Walls " came as a surprise to the three-time Grammy winner.

"We were just having fun," says Colvin. "We didn't intend to record it. The whole thing happened in the space of 15 minutes. We were mixing the record, and we just were messing around while the engineer was fixing something. It was never an idea ever, until the minute it was an idea. Never played it before in my life."

It may not have been in her repertoire previously, but Colvin's not giving it up now that she's got it. She's been using the spare, tender, and affecting song to open shows on her tour, which arrives at the Roxy on Saturday.

It's not the first time Colvin has ended up with more than she anticipated. The singer-songwriter's 1989 debut, "Steady On," won her a Grammy for best contemporary folk album and set the stage for a successful, if low-key, career. Later came the revenge-minded "Sunny Came Home," the 1997 Top 10 single that marks the only time that she's visited the Billboard Hot 100 chart.

The song nabbed Colvin two more Grammys (for song and record of the year) and officially

made her a one-hit wonder. It also put pressure on Colvin and her longtime collaborator and producer, John Leventhal (Rosanne Cash, Marc Cohn), to try to duplicate its success.

"I think we more consciously went after trying to make a pop record on the album after that [2001's 'Whole New You']," says Leventhal. "It was certainly commercially not successful, and I guess the jury is still out on whether it was artistically successful. But that was the only time I've ever worked with her where I think we put effort into a quote-unquote pop record."

"These Four Walls " feels anything but forced. It's Colvin's first release on Nonesuch Records after spending her career on Columbia, and it has both the spark that comes with a new beginning and the ease and confidence of a collaboration with Leventhal that began in 1981. "Steady On" was a big break for both of them, and as the two have grown in prominence in their respective corners of the industry, their connection has deepened. "I believe that we've both been through enough experiences that we've seen it all at this point in time," says Leventhal. "It's really extraordinary to look back over 25 years and see this body of work and all these songs we've written, and I think we're both real proud of it."

For her part, Colvin doesn't try to o hard to unravel why the two work so well together. "We just are inspired by what the other does. It's taste," she says. "We just seem to fit." It's that comfort that results in serendipitous moments like an off-the-cuff cover ending up as one of the linchpin songs of her new album and its accompanying tour. At this stage in her career, Colvin can afford to let things happen without forcing them. But that's been a hallmark of Colvin from day one, with a rebellious streak that has wound its way through her songs, from "The Story" on "Steady On " all the way to the new "Tuff Kid " and "Summer Dress ." Colvin denies that there's a conscious effort to write about misfits finding their way.

"I don't search for anything, really," she says. "I could understand that that's a theme that would come out, because I was a kind of kid that felt like I didn't fit in. But I don't look for it. I don't really look for anything, to tell you the truth. I just sort of try to let it happen, and once there's an inspiration that catches and it feels like it's working, then I start to know what the song's about. It's like putting a puzzle together."

Shawn Colvin is at the Roxy Saturday at 7 p.m. Tickets \$35. Call 617-931-2000 or go to ticketmaster.com.