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Shawn Colvin Uses Song To Escape Times, Towns

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By Walter Tunis

Who knew? After establishing herself as one of the pre-eminent folk/pop performers of the '90s, we discovered last night that **Shawn Colvin** is, at heart, an escape artist.

For the better part of a very attractive 95-minute solo acoustic performance at the Kentucky Theatre, the multi-Grammy-winning singer-songwriter offered music of departure -- of fleeing old times, old towns and old flames.

Sometimes the stories came from distant regions of her career, like Polaroids. The scenario-style song was prefaced last night with a story about a 1987 tour of Europe and the mischievous (and temporary) freedom it afforded her.

In other instances, such as the encore version of *Cinnamon Road*, escape meant tossing away emotional baggage ("a picture in your head of somebody that you never did know").

And in one of the evening's most sublime escape episodes, the words weren't even her own. *On Wild Country*, a tune by the late Chris Whitley, a modern world of jackhammers is abandoned for a flight into a comfortably native habitat ("the wild, where I'm from)."

Colvin even went so far, in one of several amusing between-song chats, to claim the majority of her songs dealt with ways to "get out or come back."

She also confessed to having almost jokingly told a reporter how her new *These Four Walls* album possessed themes of "death and regret" only to later find the tags to be largely accurate.

"Don't worry," she told the crowd. "About 40 or 50 minutes into a set I naturally wind down and shut up."

Luckily, that was the part of the bargain Colvin didn't make good on. As the performance progressed, the vocal and emotive fragility that defined her early recordings eased off in favor of tunes that displayed a darker but more assured sense of drama.

The 1996 mega hit *Sunny Came Home* cemented the shift. "Let's offset all this sensitive melancholy with a murder ballad," the singer said by way of introduction. But richly percussive solo reworkings of *Tennessee* and *A Matter of Minutes*, along with works from *These Four Walls*, firmly grounded Colvin's escape plans.

Among the best of the newer tunes was *Summer Dress*, a feathery but assertive farewell to childhood and an impending call to "face the wilderness."

Colvin's escape route last night did include, however, several essential provisions -- namely cover tunes that revealed varied but complementary pop preferences.

The cover girl went to the well at the show's onset with a version of The Band's obscure *Twilight* that boasted a sense of vulnerability in line with Colvin's early music. By encore time, the singer skipped generations with a 1-2-3 punch of the Gnarl Barkley hit *Crazy*, The Beatles' beautifully despondent *I'll Be Back* and Jimmy Webb's homespun reflection *If These Walls Could Speak*.

Dedicated Colvin-ites might have moped at evening's end over the omission of such career-defining tunes as *Steady On* and *Shotgun Down the Avalanche*. But there was no need to feel shortchanged by a program that was all about Colvin's wily escape plans. That's because true escape is never realized unless at least a little piece of the past is left behind.