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Colvin's Feeling Comfortable With 'These Four Walls'

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By Michael Corcoran

After the 2001 release of "Whole New You," her follow-up to the Grammy-winning "A Few Small Repairs," Austin-based singer **Shawn Colvin** went three years without writing a single lyric. She had other things to worry about as a newly divorced single parent whose most recent album was a well-kept secret. There was all that and her triathlon training.

Then, while waiting to do a show at the botanical gardens in Salt Lake City, Colvin sat in the greenhouse that served as her dressing room and started writing: "I put on my finest summer dress/ So light and thin it was my best/ I brushed my hair I held my breath/ I went out to face the wilderness."

Thus the seeds were planted for the new album "These Four Walls," an exquisite portrait of strength and vulnerability, which matches some of Colvin and collaborator John Leventhal's loveliest melodies with raw, unflinching lyrics about gazing back and looking forward.

"I think I was trying to figure out middle age," says Colvin, who turned 50 in January. "I was buying a lot of books and I found one called 'The Middle Passage' that cut right to what I was feeling. You spend the first part of your life proving yourself, professionally, romantically, as a parent, whatever. But then you get to the point where you don't have to keep trying to prove yourself. It's really a relief."

The title track reflects the Austin-based Colvin's station in life, of being both comfortable and yearning. "Everything's safe and everything's sound in these four walls," she sings in one verse, while following it with a vignette of going to the rooftop to remember borders she had to break. "That song is about making peace with standing still," she says. "When you get older, you learn how to dig in."

After she started "Summer Dress" in that Utah greenhouse, Colvin went to New York City to woodshed material with Leventhal, who lived with Colvin in the '80s and is currently married to Rosanne Cash. Colvin and Leventhal had a hard time collaborating after their 1990 breakup, but after six years they worked together again with fabulous results on "A Few Small Repairs," which produced the hit "Sunny Came Home."

"John and I have developed a lot of trust working together," Colvin says. The two co-wrote nine of the new album's songs. The process began with either Colvin bringing lyrics to Leventhal or the guitarist playing musical pieces and Colvin adding words or melodies. "It's amazing to me that 25 years after meeting, John and I are doing some of our best work ever," she says.

A great album is like a door and the knob here is the opening track "Fill Me Up," an irresistible radio number that dares you to call it a ditty. The song puts all of Colvin's commercial gifts front and center - her confident guitar playing, her sweet, breathy voice, the way she wears a hook like fine jewelry.

The album's hinge, which swings this whole thing wide open, is "The Bird," an organ-fueled number with a simple, driving melody line that knocks easy Joni Mitchell comparisons right out of the park. It's a blast of pure inspiration that stirs up the record when it's starting to get too wispy and introspective. It paves the way for a real cool cover of Paul Westerberg's "Eve-n Here We Are," which sounds written with Beatles-worshipping Colvin in mind.

"We were in the studio and it just wasn't clicking, so John said, 'Let's record some of the covers you've been doing,' so we bashed 'em out and 'Even Here We Are' sounded like it fit with what we were doing," Colvin says. The song, about finding beauty in unlikely places, brings the album back to its botanical roots. "Beautiful flowers in your garden/ But the most beautiful by far is the one growing wild in the garbage dump."

The album ends with a cover of "Words" by the Bee Gees, delivered with a mix of world-weariness and simmering jubilation that's a fitting summation for a record that finds the balance between safety and adventure.

"I wouldn't trade the experience of winning those Grammys (for Record and Song of the Year) for anything, but in a way it was a curse," she says. "It raised the expectations for the next album and there was this increasing need to sell tons and tons of records and I'm not that kind of artist."

Colvin says that she feels like she's finally outgrown the extended period of adolescence that a successful pop-music career brings. "On the one hand, you realize that there are a lot of things that you're never going to do, but then you also realize that you've done things that you never could've dreamed of."

Before the 1998 Grammys, for instance, no one could've predicted that Colvin would become forever linked with rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard, now deceased. When Colvin and Leventhal were called to the podium to accept the award for "Song of the Year," the stage was hijacked by the

Wu-Tang Clan rapper, protesting that his group was overlooked in an earlier category.

"John and I had completely different ideas about what was going on," Colvin says. "I thought we had made a mistake, that they had actually called out someone else as the winner. John thought (Ol' Dirty Bastard) was just a big fan who was so excited that we had won."

Luckily for fans, Colvin and Leventhal are on the same page musically.