

# Performing Songwriter™

September/October 2006



Shawn Colvin: Peter Eastman

FIVE MINUTES WITH: SHAWN COLVIN  
BY RUSSELL HALL  
1 2 3 4 5  
*These Four Walls*

## FIVE MINUTES WITH Shawn Colvin

**"THESE FOUR WALLS"**  
From *These Four Walls*

I'm gonna die in these four walls  
I had enough and I tried it all  
I watched the day break  
and I see the night fall  
In these four walls  
Show me trouble  
I'll take him down  
I drew a line  
on this patch of ground  
And everything's safe  
and everything's sound  
In these four walls  
Up on a rooftop  
I can remember  
Orders I had to break  
And now I can see  
I had this life to make  
To make  
And I'm gonna miss  
your Southern drawl  
A baby's footsteps  
in an empty hall  
And every little thing  
I can ever recall  
In these four walls



A five-year stretch between albums could be a death knell for some artists, but for Shawn Colvin the period was a necessary prelude to creative renewal. In fact, after releasing *Whole New You* in 2001 Colvin didn't write one new song for *three years*.

**"THE EXPERIENCE** of making and promoting *Whole New You* wasn't a lot of fun," she allows. "After that album was finished I retreated and let my life play out a bit, and got myself on solid ground until I had energy, and excitement and something to say."  
Colvin's new album, *These Four Walls*, shows that the 50-year-old artist has lost none of the songwriting power that garnered her a "Song of the Year" Grammy for "Sunny Came Home," from the 1996 album *A Few Small Repairs*. Working with longtime producer and co-writer John Leventhal, Colvin shifts with ease between jangly pop rockers ("The Bird"), stately acoustic ballads (the title track) and a couple of choice covers (Paul Westerberg's "Even Here We Are" and a stripped-to-the-bones version of the Bee

Gees' "Words").  
With *Walls*, Colvin continues to navigate the fine line between introspection and empathy. In the following interview she talks about her work methods and the making of one of her best albums to date.  
**You've said many times that *A Few Small Repairs* was an easy album to make whereas *Whole New You* was very difficult. Where does the new album fall in that range?**  
This one was relatively easy. Those previous two records were such a contrast. Some people told me that when I said *Whole New You* was difficult, that comment got in their way of experiencing the album. I sort of learned my lesson from that, but this one really was fun and interesting. Overall it was

a great experience.

***You became a mother in 1998, before beginning work on Whole New You. At the time you said that drawing upon your personal life was made more difficult by that, that you didn't feel the urge to be poetic about your life.***

That's true. It was an adjustment and an experience beyond expressing. I'm a loner artist, and I like having all the time in the world to sort of "naval-gaze." And I made a conscious decision to move away from that when I had a child. I knew what I was setting myself up for, and I felt, and still feel, that that was the greatest thing I could have done. But I think if you're really taking it in, the experience of having a child shakes you to your core. I had to grow into that, and there just weren't words for it, initially.

***Were you writing during that time?***

No. For about three years I didn't write anything. And then I went on a tour in the summer of 2004, and I felt like writing stuff again. That was the start.

***On the new album, was there one song that sort of pointed the way or kickstarted everything?***

Yes, there was: The song "Summer Dress." The lyrics to that were started in the summer of 2004, and that was the breakthrough, where I jotted down some lines that turned out to be that song.

***Knowing your writing style, are many of these songs pretty personal?***

They're always personal, but a song like "Sunny Came Home" is obviously a story. For me a song like "Summer Dress" is a story, too. I don't know someone named Mary—who I'm singing to—but obviously the writing is coming from my emotions.

***It's clear on the new album there are very few concessions toward pop radio.***

John and I don't do well when we think about pop radio. We enjoy pop music and we make music that feels "pop-ish" to us, but any time we consciously attempt to address that, we fail.

***The way you and John work together is interesting. He composes the music, and then you write the lyrics and the vocal melody to his tracks, right?***

Essentially that's the way it's always been. There have been a few exceptions. Coming up with the chords for the chorus to "Summer Dress" is something we did together. But "Fill Me Up," for instance, was exactly the track I got from John. The title track was exactly what I got from him as well.

***Does John try to write to what he perceives to be your strengths?***

That's a good question. You would probably have to ask him, but I think not. John just

writes and writes. And at times he will think, "This could be good for Shawn." In the process of making the record, he might say, "I think there's a color missing. We don't have a song that does 'this.'" And then he will write something specifically towards that end.

***To what extent do you rework what John gives you?***

It depends. Sometimes stuff pours out of me, things that go immediately with the track. But if I get stuck or if there's something about the music I've gotten from him that I don't like, then we'll amend it or mess with it. And sometimes we merge two songs. A song like "Venetian Blue," on the new album, is a hodgepodge of stuff. The track that I wrote those lyrics to isn't the track that ended up on the record. The process is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle.

***"Performing doesn't daunt me in the least, but songwriting terrifies me. It's the hardest thing I do."***

***At what point do you start thinking about how you're going to adapt the songs for live performance?***

Pretty much immediately. That's such an essential component. I can't really commit to a song unless I can go out there and connect to it. I also immediately start thinking about my guitar playing—how I'm going to make the song work by myself, with the guitar. In that respect a song can really change. "The Bird," which is a pretty rocking track on the album, is a good example. I can play loud and do upbeat stuff, but for some reason when I play that song by myself it takes on a different character. It's a pretty regretful song, and it just doesn't work for me to go out and bang it out live. I have to be willing to let the character of some songs change when I play them by myself.

***Did you first learn to play guitar by mimicking other people's styles?***

My father taught me the first bits of guitar that I learned. He was a big Kingston Trio fan, so I learned some very standard folk-oriented stuff—hammer-on techniques, finger-picking, fundamental strumming, basic things like that. After that I started learning songs by James Taylor. But really the next big thing that happened for me was Joni Mitchell. She had two things that were important for me: She used alternate tunings, which is something I wasn't aware of until then, and she had a very percussive way of playing. She would hit the strings

with either her wrist or her fingertips. I'm not sure which exactly, but from watching her today I believe she was muting the strings with her fingertips, which created a clicking sound. The way I ended up doing that was to hit the strings with my wrist. Something about making the guitar percussive became interesting to me and an important part of my style when I went out and started playing live. It made things sound like there were more people playing than really were.

***Has your guitar playing become less aggressive through the years?***

I don't think so. It's stayed pretty consistent. I'm not a virtuoso guitarist by any means. I have my style, and it is what it is. What I'm after is a marriage of the guitar playing and the singing. I don't want to just strum the appropriate chords. I want a strong feeling that the guitar and the singing are connected in a way that can't be separated.

***You covered two songs on the new album. Paul Westerberg's "Even Here We Are" seems fitting, but on the surface the Bee Gees' "Words" seems like an odd choice.***

I love that song. We had some down time, and we were just sitting in the studio while something was being done in the control room. John started playing the piano, and I started singing some Beach Boys songs and things like that. It was really just a case of musicians going where they go, from the snottiest and most difficult stuff you can think of to the most basic pop song. If something works and if it moves you, who cares whether it's a two-chord song or a 10-chord song—whether it's the Bee Gees or Steely Dan?

***Playing cover songs, especially early on, must have helped facilitate the process of becoming a strong songwriter in your own right.***

For me it was essential. I had good ears, and the things I enjoyed listening to taught me a great deal. But that took a long time, and in the meantime I wrote a lot of bad stuff.

Some people are born songwriters, but I was not one of them. I was a born singer and a born performer. To this day performing doesn't daunt me in the least, but songwriting terrifies me. It's the hardest thing I do. It took a very long time for me to figure out who I was as a songwriter, but it's something I was determined to do. I think I lucked out. ■

*Read more from Shawn online in an exclusive interview where she talks more about her guitar playing and goes through the process of interpreting "Every Little Thing" and "Home." [www.performingsongwriter.com](http://www.performingsongwriter.com)*