



Shawn Colvin LIVE

Shawn Colvin is complicated. She's moody, strong, impulsive, courageous, paranoid, self-possessed, depressed. And that's all just in the first song. This new live solo-acoustic recording opens with "Polaroids," the track that also led off *Fat City*, her 1992 sophomore LP, and it's a song that typifies Colvin's dense poetic imagery and so-honest-it-hurts self-analysis. "Please no more therapy," she pleads at the song's outset, but that's precisely what her songwriting feels like. How dark and candid is she? How about this line from "Shotgun Down the Avalanche": "Sometimes you make me lose my will to live." Oh, snap!

Colvin has produced six studio albums (the lullabies collection doesn't count) worth of smart, emotional modern folk, and she draws almost exactly evenly from them on this 15-track set (she had no new album to push), culled from a three-night stand in San Francisco last year. The stats: Three from 1989's *Steady On*, two from 1992's *Fat City*, two from 1994's *Cover Girl*, three from 1996's *A Few Small Repairs*, two from 2001's *Whole New You*, two from 2006's *These Four Walls*, and one new cover.

Such even coverage makes for a terrific career overview although it can't be considered a best-of live album, as a few of her biggest hits ("Steady On," "I Don't Know Why," "Whole New You") are left out. Instead, this is a record for those whose favorite Shawn is the one who stands alone on stage. It's a fitting scenario because there are few artists whose songs feel as lonely and personal as Colvin's—it always felt when Colvin was backed by a band that she wanted to turn around any second and tell them to get the hell out of her way. And for good reason—Shawn Colvin is a solo-acoustic performer of stratospheric skill. You could make a case that her studio albums, especially the last couple, are lugubrious and uneven, but on *Live*, those same songs are given new life without the thick studio treatments that tended to choke the life out of songs that could hardly afford it. But here, the songs are infused with a direct clarity and beauty.

One reason this works so well, of course, is that Colvin is simply an amazing singer, and there's no document that proves it more than *Live*. The clean pliancy of her voice is a marvel, and she sounds young and sweet throughout these performances without once reaching for cutesy little-girl affectations (anyone heard from Jewel lately?). But as controlled and subtle a vocalist as she is, she makes instinctive choices that are dynamic just the same. Take "A Matter of Minutes," the prettiest post-partum depression song ever written—listen to her sing that second verse, how she pushes and pulls back, chewing those Rs and resting on the Ns, exhaling her breath suddenly after "If there's one thing certain" (even the delicate wheeze of her taking in air between lines is pretty) and then letting her voice break quickly to the word "ain't," slowing things down as she enters the chorus, giving her voice a sharp edge at the beginning and pulling back to a gentle, breathy vibrato by the end. Pick your own ten seconds—moments like these are everywhere across the hour-long disc. *Live* is also Shawn's long-overdue guitar album; her intricate, adroit playing is largely lost on the studio records, but those who saw this tour were treated to her complex fingerpicking and peculiar tunings, found here on "Trouble"'s tricky hammer-on lick that travels up and down the fretboard and "Shotgun"'s rolling syncopated pattern.

The album's ultimate success has much to do with song selection, and while Colvin's musical instincts generally slow things to a crawl—there's no rocking side to this artist—she has a remarkable ear for melody, even if they're not always her own. She's always had a knack for choosing great covers, throwing two or three in each show. She's a sucker for the prettiest songs ever, and I've heard her play The Eagles' "Best of My Love," Tom Waits' "Hold On," and Paul Simon's "The Only Living Boy in New York" at various shows, not to mention her asininely-underrated *Cover Girl* album—that version of Dylan's "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go" alone justifies that record's worth, but the whole thing is first-rate. On *Live*, someone calls out "Freebird!" (her response is a classic), but she ends up settling on three covers: Robbie Robertson's "Twilight," the Talking Heads' "This Must Be the Place (Naïve Melody)," both also on *Cover Girl*, and Gnarls Barkley's "Crazy," which is a perfect fit since it's a subject that Colvin has long been worried about. It was gutsy of her to start playing "Crazy" when it had barely cooled off from the top of the charts, but she plays it without the slightest ironic wink and in doing so teaches any doubters what a killer song "Crazy" really is.

The album starts to bog down in the middle—"Sunny Came Home" shows up; it's her biggest hit although it's no one's favorite, but things pick back up with "Wichita Skyline," the all-time second-greatest song about that city, and the record reaches a climax with two gems from her early (and best) compositions, "Ricochet in Time" and "Diamond in the Rough." On its surface, *Live* seems like an effort to tide her fans over during a relatively slow production pace—no new music in three years and counting. However, the album is more than that—it's a gorgeous and satisfying reminder of what is so special about this great American artist.