

OCTOBER 2001 NO. 106

WIN A FENDER ACOUSTIC

# ACOUSTIC GUITAR

www.acousticguitar.com

# Shawn Colvin

## BACK IN THE GROOVE

NEW MUSIC TO PLAY

## REMEMBERING JOHN FAHEY

## GUITAR HITS THE SCHOOLS

### Rodney Crowell Bares His Soul

### Tacoma's Affordable Archtop

### Cut Your Capo in Half

\$4.95US \$5.95CAN







# Steady On

## Shawn Colvin adopts a relaxed new attitude on stage and in the studio

By Julie Bergman

**S**hawn Colvin began performing on stage with her Martin D-28 long before the term *singer-songwriter* became an accepted part of the language of music critics. Her core fans, who knew her beguiling poetry from the years she spent incessantly touring the U.S., were drawn into larger venues to hear their heroine play after the 1989 release of *Steady On*, her debut CD, which was created with the help of co-writer and producer John Leventhal. *Steady On* was bursting with strong tracks, the intense pulse of Colvin's guitar, and soothing vocals framing the dichotomy of her sometimes devastating, sometimes hopeful message. The CD won a Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk Recording and jump-started her international career.

Colvin's subsequent recordings, *Fat City*, *Live 88*, and *Cover Girl*, garnered her ever wider recognition, and she again scaled the music charts in 1997 when the single "Sunny Came Home," from *A Few Small Repairs*, won Grammy awards for both Record of the Year and Song of the Year. Several tracks from the CD dominated AAA-format radio, and the record was a platinum seller.

After the seasonal recording *Holiday Songs and Lullabies* (1998), Colvin teamed up once again with Leventhal for *Whole New You*. The new release is more layered with instrumentation than her previous recordings, but the songs are pure Colvin, consistent with the best of her past work. You hear the same intimate sense of story that permeates her lyrics and the same focused, sincere melodic and vocal style.

Although Colvin is typically modest about her musical accomplishments, her evocative vocals, considerable songwriting talents, and percussive guitar playing have influenced a generation of musicians. Her right-hand muting, pull-offs, hammer-ons, and varied fingerpicking techniques do more than just set up the song structure and support her vocals. And she often uses alternate tunings (including dropped D and variations of open G and open D) to create fuller sonic palettes.

Her live shows have taken on a lighter tone in recent years, with Colvin relaxing into her stage act. She is disarming, funny, and often brutally honest about herself, making her life, not others, the brunt of whatever jokes she spins off between songs (and occasionally in the middle of a song).

I caught up with Colvin just after the release of *Whole New You* and before the start of her solo U.K. and U.S. summer tours. We talked about her songwriting, guitar playing, and performances and about how the new record took shape.

*How has your playing style evolved over the years?*

**Colvin** I don't know if I've learned all that much in the last ten years in terms of different tunings or more complicated picking styles. But experience has paid off in terms of having a feel for the instrument, relaxing with it, and being more dynamic. I'm a more comfortable player.

*When you talk about being more dynamic, are you talking about volume or energy?*

**Colvin** I was thinking of volume. But the amount of energy applies, too. What's fun is that a song you do one way when it's new can become very different after you've done it for a while. A very energetic song can eventually become subdued and vice-versa.

*You've always been known for your right-hand technique, your muting and rhythmic playing. Has that changed over time?*

**Colvin** I think it's probably less pronounced. That seemed to be my little signature in the beginning, something distinctive. It evolved because I played alone so much. Putting enough rhythm in the right hand made it sound like more was going on than just a voice and a strumming guitar. I don't think about it as much now. In fact, it's kind of fun to play

things more wide open. There's a song on the last record, "Wichita Skyline," where I put as little percussion in as possible and just keep it extremely open.

*What other new guitar techniques are you using now?*

**Colvin** I love playing the guitar. I'm crazy about the acoustic guitar and I sleep with it by my bed, but I really have more to say about the process of writing than the actual specifics of being a good player or having a good guitar. It's sort of my partner, and we need each other. I probably don't have the knowledge that peo-

**Colvin** Most of the time he has much more than that laid down. He defines things in a production sense. That leaves a lot of room for me to come up with a way to play it on guitar that's really mine.

*He's thinking about production and you're thinking about guitar?*

**Colvin** He hears the whole picture and has a way of demoing that up that I just don't have the tools to do. So I generally get a fuller piece of music that I then have to break down, and that's true with this record, too. Like "Whole New You,"

## **"If you pick the right key and change one string, you can get a neat effect. You don't have to change the whole tuning of the guitar to do something interesting!"**

ple would expect me to have about guitar. I practiced for years (obviously I had to learn to do what I did), and I was a student of a lot of people. But in a way, it's really an intuitive process—the entire musical thing.

*How does your co-writing process with John Leventhal work? Does he give you a basic musical structure over which you write a melody and lyrics?*

you just wouldn't think of that song as an acoustic guitar song, yet I do it by myself. So I had the opportunity to strip that song down and make something different out of it.

*Were you involved during the production of the tracks on the new record?*

**Colvin** I was there for a lot of it. I was there for all the mix, but I wasn't there



**Shawn Colvin rocks out with Lyle Lovett on *Austin City Limits*, 2001.**



Colvin with co-writer and producer John Leventhal.

for the mastering. On my first record, I was paying great attention to every note. I don't think the record would have turned out all that much differently if I'd been able to walk away here and there. It's valuable to walk away and come back with fresh ears to what the other person is doing. A trust has evolved between John and me, and I can walk away now. So I'm not there for every shaker hit. I can come in after some work has been done for a day and say, "That instrument really helped that part" or "That didn't need to be there." John loves as many ideas as he can come up with. Simplicity is important sometimes, and I guess I serve that function.

*You're not credited in the CD liner notes for playing guitar on the tracks. Did you play on any of them?*

**Colvin** Yeah, I just didn't credit any of them. I didn't give myself credit on this CD for any instruments because I didn't feel like what I did was anything that someone else couldn't have done. The guitar playing on this CD was just not my focus this time. Like on "Nothing Like You," which is the totally acoustic guitar-based song on the record, it's not me playing the guitar. I can play that now, and it sounds just like the record. If you look at the first couple of records, I spent a lot of time playing those songs live before they got recorded, so I knew what I was doing. I could have spent some time learning the songs on the new record better so I could be the one

to play them (rather than John), but I didn't want to spend the time doing it. Now I can play them fine.

*How did you feel about the production on Whole New You, compared to previous CDs you've released?*

**Colvin** It is a lush sounding record. We didn't go in with that intention. The last record was sparer, and that's where I tend to like to go. But I still felt like every song sounded and felt right, even though I would take a step back and go, "Wow, this has got a lot of stuff on it."

*Did you use a lot of alternate tunings on the new CD?*

**Colvin** I did on quite a few songs. The ones that are in alternate tunings are all pretty much in G tuning with a C in the bass (C G D G B D). That's become a favorite. "Roger Wilco" is in that. ["Matter of Minutes" was recorded in a variation of that tuning, but with the B string dropped down a half step to B<sup>b</sup>, and capoed on the first fret.] "Whole New You" is in standard tuning, but the guitar is tuned down a half step, which was just some wild hair of John's. He probably had a guitar that was already tuned down.

*Do you explore new tunings when you get a chance?*

**Colvin** I mess around, but I usually start with something I know and then change

## Songwriting Partner John Leventhal

**John Leventhal** has been co-writing songs with Shawn Colvin since the days of *Steady On*, when they wrote six of the ten tracks together and he coproduced the album with Steve Addabbo. Leventhal generally contributes the musical ideas, and Colvin usually writes the lyrics and melody and sets the songs to her distinctive acoustic guitar style. Leventhal adds a wide range of sounds to the tracks, everything from electric guitar to acoustic guitar, mandolin, keyboards, bass, percussion, horns, and background vocals. He co-wrote and produced all the tracks on *Whole New You*.

When it comes to co-writing with Colvin, Leventhal says that they've collaborated in countless ways over the years. "Probably what happened more on this last record than on past records is that I came up with musical ideas in various states of completion. I try not to give Shawn melodic information, but supply her more with a groove and some changes—a broad sketch of something that is evocative. It could be an eight-bar groove, maybe with a hint of some chorus and some chord changes. If it sparks her, I'll either try to do more on it or she'll immediately have a take on it and we'll go from there.

"This particular record is not as acoustic guitar-based as some of her past records. We were trying to do some different things, to not repeat ourselves and maybe stretch our wings. I suspect the next record she does will be more acoustic guitar-based."

Leventhal, who is married to Rosanne Cash, lives in New York City. When he's not in the studio, he performs in what he calls his "recreational band," Mojo Mancini.

it from a major key to a minor, or something like that. I like to know where I'm at so I can get back to it. If it's too outrageous I have to keep a record of it, and I'm not the best record keeper. My friend Mary Chapin Carpenter showed me the value of just changing one string. If you pick the right key and change one string, you can actually get a neat effect. You don't have to change the whole tuning of the guitar to do something interesting.

*When you were out on tour last year with Bonnie Raitt, Jackson Browne, and Bruce*

*Continued on page 60*

*Hornsby, you all played as a band, doing some of each of your songs. What was your focus as a guitar player in that kind of band configuration?*

**Colvin** The first thing I think of in a situation like that, like when I toured with Richard Thompson, is to retune the guitar. If somebody else is playing acoustic guitar, you're generally going to come up with something that can sound cool. There's one song in particular I can think of—one of Jackson's songs called "The Next Voice You Hear." I retuned to some droney thing (either open G or open D) and really

didn't play anything on the verses, only on this great chorus that opens up. It really sounded great. I felt I added something.

*In your shows, you talk and joke around with your audience quite a bit. Do you approach performance differently than you did years ago?*

**Colvin** It's been a natural evolution. I used to be reticent to talk at all, and somehow I started taking chances with talking in an unscripted way—and for the most part it was a good idea. It keeps shows interesting for me, and peo-

ple seem to enjoy it. I've definitely gone too far, but I'm not interested in having a well-scripted show.

I think some people can do that really well, like Lyle Lovett. I've toured with Lyle, and he did about the same show every night. He said very little, and when he did say something, it was perfect for him. He's so dry. You just hang on his every word. If he gave away too much, it would be no good. He did the same songs night after night, and I was riveted. I watched every single show that he did, and I can't say that about everybody. So what works for one doesn't necessarily work for another.

I don't particularly want to pose up there. I feel much better about the music and much better about where the set can go if I just wing it a little bit and get

# PICK A REGAL!

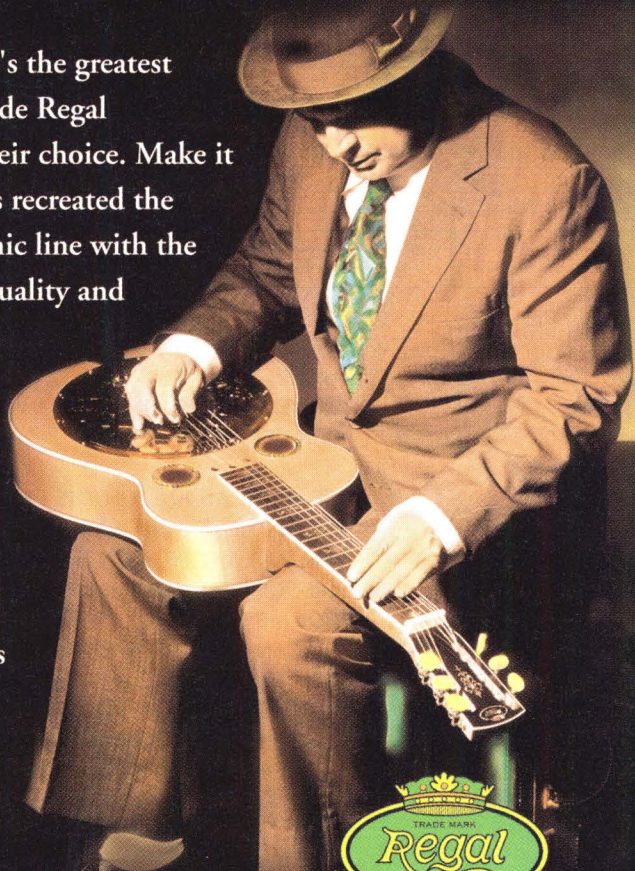
*...And You'll Pick A Winner!*

Since the 1930's the greatest artists have made Regal instruments their choice. Make it yours! Saga has recreated the Regal resophonic line with the vintage look, quality and features of the 30's with modern improvements in tone and playability. Available in a variety of styles and finishes.



**Saga Musical Instruments**

Dealer inquiries invited. P.O. Box 2841 • So. San Francisco • CA 94080  
650 • 588 • 5558 Email: [saga.music@juno.com](mailto:saga.music@juno.com)



## What They Play

On the road, **Shawn Colvin** plays the late '70s Martin D-28 she's had for years as well as a Martin 000-18 she bought from Charlie Sexton a few years ago. A new addition to her guitar collection and live rig is a vintage Gibson LG-2, a gift from Jackson Browne. She also has a Lowden that she uses from time to time. She usually just takes one guitar when she's touring by herself and changes tunings as she goes. When she's out with a band, she takes two or three guitars. "Usually I tour with the D-28 and one other," she says. "On this tour I'll probably take the Gibson."

At home Colvin also plays a Dobro. "I just play it like a guitar," she says. "It's fun to play around with because of the different sound. It's a wood-body with a steel cone. And I have this tiny, handmade guitar that I bought from Greg Brown in 1990 that has a pretty awesome sound for playing indoors."

Colvin uses D'Addario light-gauge strings and a white National thumbpick for fingerpicking and strumming. Her guitars are equipped with Sunrise pickups, and she uses whatever DI box is provided by the venue.

"I've toured with Jackson Browne, and there's a guy who's crazy about his instruments," says Colvin. "He loves experimenting with what the best sounds are, and he loves setting his guitars up and doing whatever he can to get the best sound. I just play by myself in a theater, and I use my Sunrise pickup, direct box, strings, and one of three or four really nice guitars that I have. And I'm happy."

to know the audience. Sometimes it bombs. Sometimes I can't break the ice. Then I try to be provocative and say something gross that will break the ice. Most of the time it works. It loosens me up and makes me feel comfortable. It makes me feel like they're seeing something besides just the songs.

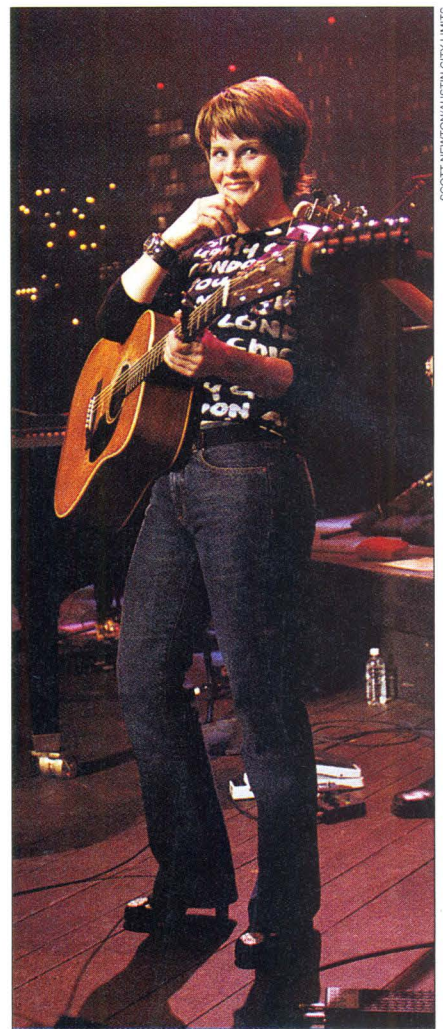
*Do you have plans for a live album?*

**Colvin** There's a project out there somewhere that has to do with a lot of outtakes—not necessarily album outtakes, but just songs that have gone by the wayside.

*How do you see your place in the music scene these days?*

**Colvin** This business is only interesting to me to a certain point. If it's not an emotional, growing experience for me, I don't want to do it. You have to let the trends be what they are and believe in people's need for whatever it is you might be trying to say.

*You've said the songs on the new album were harder to write, being a new mother and having a lot to deal with including following up a platinum, Grammy-winning album. Do you feel like it'll get easier again?*



SCOTT NEWTON/AUSTIN CITY LIMITS

**Colvin** I think it'll be easier again. Writing's never been the easiest thing I've done. With this last record, there was a combination of pressure: needing to do it and hopefully having it [sell] as well as the last one. It was hard not to think about those things. And then having Callie, [her daughter], put me in a position of having to work harder at it. But when I'm feeling less pressure and I'm more comfortable with my life, I have a pretty good time. ■

# Play it safe. Kyser Lifeguard® Humidifier. (Lab Tested)

You spend big bucks for your guitars. But dry conditions can cause checking, loose bracing and joints, and loss of resonance. Protect the heart and soul of your round-hole acoustics with the scientifically designed Kyser Lifeguard Humidifier. See the Lifeguard demonstrated at your dealer, and look for Kyser capos and other fine accessories.

Lab test demonstrates Lifeguard regulating humidity inside an acoustic guitar with 4" sound hole over a 21 day period.

America's Capo

Made in the U.S.A.

KYSER MUSICAL PRODUCTS P.O. BOX 6346 ARLINGTON, TX 76005-6346  
www.kysermusical.com

## Discography

SHAWN COLVIN

*Whole New You*, Columbia 69889 (2001).

*Holiday Songs and Lullabies*, Columbia 69550 (1998).

*A Few Small Repairs*, Columbia 67119 (1996).

*Live '88*, Plump 5901 (1995).

*Cover Girl*, Columbia 57875 (1994).

*Fat City*, Columbia 47122 (1992).

*Steady On*, Columbia 45209 (1989).