

Shawn Colvin: A story of music and survival

By David Lias

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Shawn Colvin admitted before a crowd of local media Saturday, Dec. 5, 1998, that returning to Vermillion after more than a 25-year absence had some frightening aspects. "It's pretty bizarre . . . I have some very vivid memories, though," she said at a press conference shortly before she performed on stage at USD's Slagle Auditorium in a concert simply known as "An Evening with Shawn Colvin."

She admitted at the time that it's hard to bridge the distance from when she moved from Vermillion at age 12, to today. Some things, though, she'll never forget.

"I certainly remember the seasons being very discernable," Colvin said. "I remember Main Street really pretty well, and I've always asked about the places I remember really well — none of which are there anymore."

She remembers car trips to Mt. Vernon, near Mitchell, to visit her grandmother, and family vacations in the Black Hills.

During the return to her childhood community nearly 15 years ago, she talked about plans to tour Canby Street the next day, where the Colvin family once lived, and take a drive on Valley View Drive, where her grandparents used to live on a bluff.

"Somehow or another I remember you could take your bike to where that hill went down and ride like a bat out of hell," she said.

Colvin picked up her first guitar at the age of 10. At age 12, she moved from Vermillion with her family to Canada, and her love of music continued to grow.

She left college to perform and compose on a full-time basis, living in Texas, San Francisco, New York and Boston.

Her first album, "Steady On," contained 10 original songs including "Shotgun Down the Avalanche," "Cry Like an Angel" and "Diamond in the Rough." It was awarded a Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk Recording.

A second album, "Fat Cat," released in 1993, received two Grammy nominations. Colvin has also kept busy with film projects and shortly before her visit to Vermillion in 1998 took on perhaps her most important role — motherhood.

Growing up in a small town like Vermillion, she admits, was both a blessing and a curse.

"I think it took me a long time to feel like I could do artistic work, because it's not really encouraged in a small midwestern town," Colvin said. "On the other side of it, having come from a

place like Vermillion, I'm really grateful for what I have. I've often thought that coming from this particular landscape has given me a lot of imagination."

These days, Colvin is crisscrossing the country. This month alone she will have performed in Texas, Louisiana, Florida, Mississippi, and New York, on what has been dubbed a fall duo tour with Mary Chapin Carpenter.

The upcoming holidays will provide very little down time for her, as Colvin begins, according to her web page, her Transatlantic Sessions debut, joining the 2014 tour of the UK, which kicks off with two performances at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall for the Celtic Connections festival, in January and February.

Also performing in the Transatlantic Sessions tour are Sarah Jarosz, Transatlantic regulars Darrell Scott and Tim O'Brien, and Scottish vocal ambassadors Julie Fowlis and Kris Drever. The all-star house band, along with musical directors Aly Bain and Jerry Douglas, Danny Thompson, Phil Cunningham, Russ Barenberg, Mike McGoldrick, John Doyle, John McCusker, James Mackintosh and Donald Shaw.

A survivor

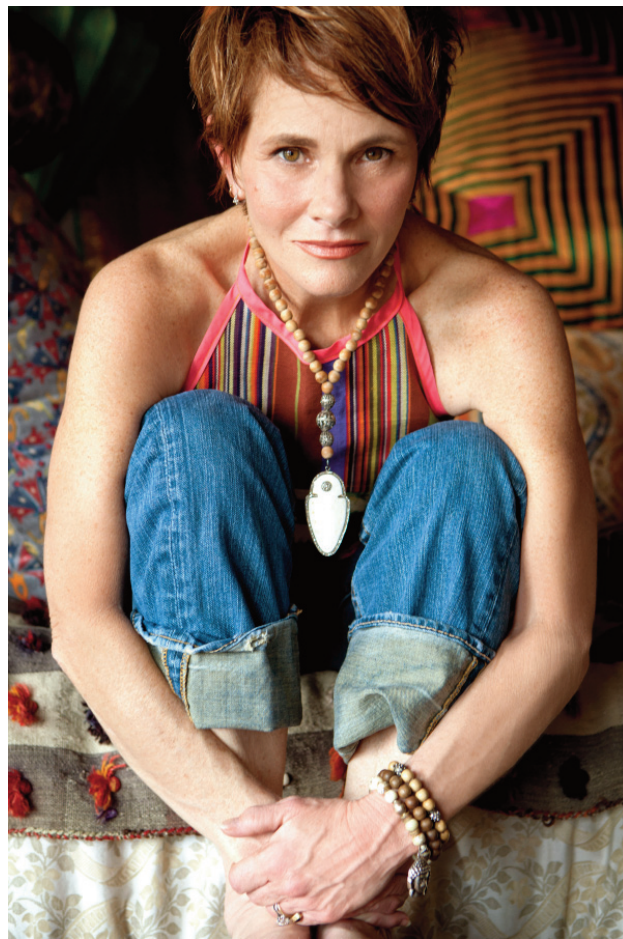
In 1991 Colvin's album, "Steady On," received a Grammy as "Best Contemporary Folk Album."

In 1997 — the year before she returned to Vermillion to perform at the University of South Dakota, Colvin received her two Grammys — one for Record of the Year — "Sunny Came Home," and for Song of the Year — "Sunny Came Home."

From all appearances during her return to Vermillion in the late 1990s, Colvin is a typical product of the Midwest — happy, almost seeming carefree at that time, enjoying being a new mother and riding the wave of a music career that included hit albums, hit songs and three Grammy awards.

Despite the commercial success, offstage Colvin was juggling a new marriage and the birth of her daughter. She released a rushed album of Christmas songs and lullabies, but no true follow-up studio album for nearly five years.

"When you know part of the industry thinks of you as a one-hit wonder, that's painful," Colvin told Andy Langer in a story that appeared in the June 9, 2012 New York Times. "For a long time, I felt like I failed myself, my career and my record company. I took a break. And that's not what you do after a



huge record and a No. 1 hit. I was 42 years old, and motherhood was something I wanted. I paid a price. And then it was kind of a perfect storm — my mood problems, the postpartum depression, and the pressure of following up a huge record."

Colvin chronicles those struggles in a memoir, "Diamond in the Rough," which was published in June 2012 to coincide with the release of her first new studio album in six years.

It's a story of survival — she characterizes as "a stick-with-it, keep-pushing-through survival story." What's there to survive? Anorexia. Clinical depression. Addiction. Motherhood. Career crises. Lots of men.

As recently as 2008, Colvin's feelings of despair were so severe that she considered suicide and checked herself into a psychiatric facility in the midst of a nervous breakdown.

Today, Colvin, 57, lives in Austin, TX, the divorced mother of a teenaged daughter. In a story written by Brad Buchholz that appeared in the June 20, 2012 Austin American-Statesman, he notes that, according to Colvin's book, the musician with Vermillion roots has been battling depression and sorrow for more than four decades. The tentative, open-ended conclusion of her memoir raises the question: "Are you OK?"

According to Buchholz's story, her reply to that inquiry is, "I'm really OK. There's more resolution now than there was when I finished the book. I'd come out (of depression) and was feeling better. But I still had what I'd call 'sinking.' Not a hideous descent into a black hole. But just what I would call 'a sinking.' You

suddenly turned into one big one. I stomped for all I was worth, but it was of no use, I had me a fire, and I went running to the house to tell my father; swearing with big wide eyes that I had just found it. I didn't know how it happened. He didn't believe me, of course, but as parents will do at times when they know you've just gone through a rite of passage, like saying the dog ate your homework, my dad let it go and put the fire out.

"Having learned nothing from this experience, I went on as an adult to continue setting fires. All my fires backfired. But Sunny's didn't. Sunny is the arsonist in what is probably my best-known song, "Sunny Came Home," and I've been asked more than a few times what she was building in her kitchen with her tools, what did she set fire to, and why? First of all, Sunny is me. Everything I write is through me, through my perspective. Both Sunny and I went through a lot, I suppose, and came out the other side (at least I like to think Sunny was acquitted). She may have gone overboard a tad, but we are both of us survivors."

The stage is home

When Colvin stepped onto the stage of Slagle (now Aalf's Auditorium) in on the USD campus in December 1998, she knew by the warm response of the large audience that she had returned home.

It didn't matter that Vermillion had changed a great deal since her family moved away from here when she was 12 years old.

One of the first things she told the audience after performing her first song was of the great anticipation she felt by performing in the town where many of her dearest childhood memories were formed.

"I do this professionally,

but tonight I feel like an amateur," she said, joking with the audience, "I'm nervous . . . I am standing naked before you now . . . and the Queen of England and Sting in Carnegie Hall."

Above the laughter, an audience member near the front row shouted loud enough for Colvin to hear, "We love you Shawn."

From that moment on, her performance just took off. Standing alone on the stage, with no musical accompaniment other than her guitar, she would string a popular song with one that hadn't received as much exposure to the public.

And then, she would stop briefly to talk to her audience, many whom who had something in common with her — they were living in Vermillion the same time that she did.

She noted how the theme of a lot of songwriters is to "get out" of the small towns or dead end jobs that once were part of their youth.

"I think it's very interesting, because we 'get out,' and then we write very nostalgically about where we came from," Colvin said.

Nostalgia, she said, played an important role in her first trip to Vermillion since moving away from here as a child.

Colvin admitted during her 1998 performance that her stroll down memory lane was difficult. Many of Vermillion's institutions that made a great impression on her during her youth aren't around any more.

"Here's some of the places I was looking forward to going to," she said. "Some of you will remember these places, some of you won't. I really want to go to The Cavalier. Chocolate ice cream every Thursday. It's gone."

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Through Time...

In 1983, the museum's Board of Trustees establish the Arne B. & Jeanne F. Larson Endowment Fund from proceeds from the sale of the farm where Larson was born.

The Townsley Courtyard is dedicated on Sept. 26, 1987. It was a gift from Mr. and Mrs. R. E. Rawlins in memory of Mrs. Rawlins' parents.

In 1986, a \$1 million restoration of the Carnegie building is completed.



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