

Colvin uncovers for upcoming concert

By Carter Smith

There are confessional singer-songwriters — and then there's Shawn Colvin. For Colvin, who appears in concert at Purpl in Hastings next Saturday, Sept. 12, the admission that she wet her pants while dancing onstage with 'N Sync, before a national TV audience, is no big deal. "You can't tell that it happened. It was my little secret," she said in a phone interview from her home in Austin, Texas, on Aug. 31. "I thought it was hysterical."

So she included the incident, which occurred during the broadcast of a 1998 Disney Christmas special, in her 2013 memoir "Diamond in the Rough," which also chronicles her serious lifelong struggles with anorexia, depression, alcoholism, motherhood, and relationships.

Colvin, 59, arrives in the Rivertowns prior to the Sept. 25 release of her ninth album, "Uncovered," on which she reinterprets songs by some of her favorite artists, including Bruce Springsteen, Tom Waits, Stevie Wonder, Robbie Robertson and Graham Nash.

"The title 'Uncovered' has a few meanings," Colvin explained. "It means uncovering as in an excavation, and uncovered in the sense of vulnerability. This album was made very spontaneously. We didn't over-think or over-dub it. One of my friends said to me, 'You sound so exposed on this record!' and I think that's the thematic key, vulnerability."

Born in Vermilion, S.D., and raised in Illinois and Ontario, Colvin learned to play guitar when she was 10. "I learned fast and could copy anybody," she said. "My favorite artists were songwriters: James Taylor, Carole King, and Paul Simon among them. I was so in awe of the fact that these were actually songs that someone had written. I was terrified, like, how could I ever live up to that? I had writer's block before I was a writer."

In 1980, after formative years in the

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Austin, Illinois, and Berkeley, Calif., music scenes, Colvin landed in New York, where she met musician, producer, and longtime songwriting collaborator John Leventhal. Soon thereafter, she became part of the burgeoning Greenwich Village "New Folk" scene. Her first recording, a ballad called "I Don't Know Why," was included in *Fast Folk* Musical Magazine in 1984.

"The *Fast Folk* scene was exciting, but I wasn't much of a songwriter back then," Colvin said. "I had one song, basically. They liked me and I did other people's songs. The only song that I'd written that gave me any notoriety was a song called 'I Don't Know Why' that ended up on my second record. And that kind of got me in the door, but there were much more accomplished songwriters there than me."

In 1987, acclaimed producer Steve Addabbo, now a Hastings resident, hired Colvin to sing backup on a song he was recording — "Luka" by Suzanne Vega. He also recommended her to Columbia Records, which signed her. Her debut, "Steady On," which appeared in 1989, won her first Grammy, for *Best Contemporary Folk Album*.

"I was 31," she said. "I was grounded and humbled. I wasn't super, super young. I worked hard for that. I was thrilled, but I know I deserved it."

"*Fat City*" followed in 1992, and her re-recording of "I Don't Know Why" for that record earned her a nomination for the *Best Female Pop Vocal Performance* Grammy.



PHOTO BY ALEXANDRA VALENTI

Shawn Colvin performs at Purpl on Saturday, Sept. 12, at 8 p.m.

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be neurotic anymore. I know what's good. I know what's working. I've learned to trust myself. It's not rocket science. I used to sweat over every note, and I don't do that anymore. And I think the results are more genuine."

When choosing songs to cover, Colvin said that making someone else's song your own "either happens or it doesn't." For example, on Aug. 8, Colvin joined the Watkins Family Hour and others at Lincoln Center Out of Doors where they covered Bob Dylan's album "Highway 61 Revisited" in its entirety. "I had to do 'Ballad of a Thin Man.' There are seven verses, it's very abstract, and everything [Dylan] does is iconic; so how was I going to get there, you know? That took some work, but I had to do it, so I found a way. Normally I don't work that hard. It either works or it doesn't."

As for her own songwriting process, Colvin doesn't write as consistently as she used to. "Going on the road and being a single parent has changed my time management. I used to write at home, but after I had my daughter [who is now 17], I realized I had to go somewhere else — a studio space here in town, or to go away on some kind of retreat. So where I write has changed, but the basic overview and tone and subject matter of what I write has not."

Shawn Colvin's concert takes place Sept. 12, 8 p.m., at Purpl, 52 Main St., Hastings. Tickets, \$49, are available online at www.purpl.org/shawn-colvin. For more information, call (914) 231-9077.

songs darker content. A pop murder ballad, "Sunny Came Home," made Colvin a household name. Co-written by Leventhal, the song won Grammys for both Song of the Year and Record of the Year.

"I was pregnant when I won those Grammys, so I kind of had other fish to fry," Colvin explained. "But the pressure did catch up with me when my daughter was 1 year old and I had to follow that record up, and of course, the record company wanted it to be as successful."

Although she released a holiday record in 1998, her next original material appeared in 2001. That record, "Whole New You," peaked at number 101 on the Billboard chart. Two more critically acclaimed releases followed in 2006 and 2012, though neither cracked the Top 100.

The latter, titled "All Fall Down," was released simultaneously with her memoir. "It was terribly frightening," Colvin recalled about writing the book. "I would have never have done it on my own, but my manager actually suggested it to me, saying, 'You have a story to tell. Why don't you write it?' I said, 'Because no one's going to want to hear this story. I'm not Jane Fonda.'"

Nonetheless, Colvin agreed to write one chapter. "Then I wrote another, and I was into it. So I wrote the book."

Now comes "Uncovered," 21 years after she interpreted songs by artists like The Police, Talking Heads and Tom Waits on "Cover Girl." When asked if the process of recording "Uncovered" was different, given all that she's been through since the earlier record, Colvin insisted it wasn't — at least in terms of material. "I didn't exactly cover any shockingly new ground. It's still songwriters that I admire out of a certain era. It's