

## Mary Chapin Carpenter & Shawn Colvin - Give It Up For, The Incredible Sony Sisters

Back when Mary Chapin Carpenter was the local songwriting phenomenon in Washington D.C., her band was called The Saddle Sores. In those days she regularly regaled audiences with an amusing ditty tog hers titled, "The Opening Act." In the decade and a half that she has been a Sony/Columbia recording artist, Carpenter has never released the song officially, although she did perform a *toned down* version during the Country Music Association Awards show in 1990. To rapturous applause, it must be added. Subjectively, the lyrics relate the woes of a musician who has to warm up the audience for the headlining performer. Here's a few lines: "*Cause you're at the bottom of the pecking order, Even the bouncer at the door comes before you, You don't know me, I'm the opening act*" and "*Now for 37 minutes I'll sing out my heart, I was so damn nervous I just wanted to barf, This is my career and I'm paying my dues, And if I ever get rich and famous, I guess I'll be an asshole too.*" The foregoing should indicate the general direction Carpenter was coming from. Written in more youthful times, albeit from the perspective of personal experience, there's a self-deprecating edge to the lyric that prevents it from being interpreted as *sour grapes*. There has always been a feisty side to this *hometown girl*. For instance, at a post gig party in Austin I believe, a male – probably from the *Neolithic* sub-species - asked Chapin if her guitar had been plugged in during the show. Chapin's straight from the hip, stinging reply was encapsulated in her song "Girls With Guitars."

In the light of the foregoing it's somewhat amusing that the opening act on Chapin's recent, eleven-date, UK tour was none other than one of her best pals, and the only multi-Grammy winner to hail from Vermillion, South Dakota, Shawn Colvin. For Colvin, an Austin, Texas resident these days, this support slot was by way of a return to the fray, following a career hiatus featuring motherhood. From the get go, I could sense Colvin's assured maturity onstage. It literally screamed "*Hey I'm back, and I'm the most relaxed girl in this hall.*" I've seen Colvin perform on too many occasions, in a solo capacity or with support players, where there seemed to be a palpable tension in the air. On this occasion, and since she was the evening's comeback girl, what we got was Shawn, her guitar and some of her songs – *some old, some new*. Well almost - following the fourth tune, a rendition of the title cut from her latest album, Shawn announced that she would like to introduce the audience to a special guest from Austin, Texas who had flown in the previous day. Entering stage right, came a small, three-year old, blonde haired, bundle of fun, Caledonia Jean-Marie aka Cally. Totally oblivious to the almost capacity audience, Kelly was intent on one result - the *vitally important something* that she was anxious to impart to her Mom. If Shawn's plan had been that Mom and daughter were going to perform Rodgers and Hammerstein composition "Do-Re-Mi," an alternate agenda had been hatched backstage, by Cally and her nanny Tiki. Cally offered the option of singing one of Queen's hits, plus, the insight that Radiohead was Tiki's favourite band. After some subtle negotiating, Mom got the upper hand, with no bribery offered or expected - and the duo reprised the planned tune. A pause for applause, a bow and Cally was gone.

For a number of years, and consecutive ones at that, during the nineteen nineties, Colvin and Carpenter [and band] were booked to appear at the annual Telluride Bluegrass Festival. During that event, in the mountains of Colorado, they had been known to perform as a duo, and this tour at least offered opportunity to repeat that partnership. Thankfully, circa 2001, they grasped the chance enthusiastically with both hands. At one stage a few years ago, and solely by dint of the fact that they were signed to the same label, there had been a plan to release an album featuring Colvin, Carpenter and Rosanne Cash. As major corporations do, I suppose Sony/Columbia felt they needed to reply to the Warner Brothers aggregation, The Trio. Of marginally more mature years, The Trio - Emmylou Harris, Linda Ronstadt and Dolly Parton eventually recorded two albums. The Sony plan never reached fruition, Cash eventually left the label, left her second husband Rodney Crowell, decamped from Nashville to New York, and married Colvin's long time musical collaborator and sometime partner, John Leventhal. But I digress.

Reflecting that "*new material soon becomes old material*" and that the audience should go figure that "*after all these years of writing intensely personal songs, I finally have a hit with a song about a pyromaniac,*" Shawn sang "Sonny Came Home," from her 1998 album "**A Few Small Repairs.**" As the closing notes died away, Shawn proceeded to introduce her next special guest. With Carpenter stood on her left, the pair launched into the Neil Finn/Crowded House song "Four Seasons In One Day" from that band's 1991 album "**Woodface.**" Colvin's voice, high and airy, was underscored by Chapin's deeper tones. The result, on the oft repeated chorus, were harmonies to die for. Once Chapin's guitar roadie had delivered her hollow bodied friend, it was time for upbeat Steve Earle anthem "I Ain't Ever Satisfied" which was followed by one of Colvin's finest, "Round Of Blues." OK, so she co-wrote the latter tune with Joni's ex, Larry Klein. Thirteen songs down, with her buddy by her side, Colvin's set was over. Was that it for Messrs. Colvin and Carpenter, I wondered?

At this juncture, let's have a few kind words for the venue, and for the foresight of our city fathers. The main thing that can be said about Birmingham Symphony Hall, currently celebrating its tenth anniversary, it is that, acoustically, it is one of the finest auditoriums, if not *the finest*, in the world. It's the home of the world renowned Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, whose leader, at the time of its construction, was Simon Rattle. Quoted in the New York Times as "*Maestro of the moment and still growing...with the orchestra world at his feet*," Rattle departed for fresh pastures three years ago. Now Sir Simon Rattle, he takes up the baton as Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in 2002. As for us Brummies, whether we are native sons and daughters or adopted ones, we continue to enjoy the legacy. A sonic splendour, that is our Symphony Hall.

Before Colvin delivered the opening set, I counted [at least] fifteen stringed instruments, a grand piano/organ combination and a drum kit c/w podium, slumbering on the stage. Maybe Chapin picked up some subliminal message, because during her performance she saw fit to comment on the foregoing armoury, and the fact that "*We need and play each and every one of these instruments*." And as musically tight outfits come, I'd say they play them darned well, although her British born drummer, Dave Mattacks, seemed a little heavy handed at times.

Some eighty minutes later, having delivered a sixteen-song concoction of hits and new material, Chapin and the boys bade their farewells to rapturous applause. Returning with her band, plus Shawn Colvin, the ensemble tore into a blistering version of "He Thinks He'll Keep Her." And then the entire band departed. What had occurred earlier in the evening was about to be repeated, and as it turned out, to a greater degree. Praise be, occasionally there is justice our troubled world. It was time for more heavenly harmonies, and Greg Brown's "One Cool Remove" was given the first song to be given the *full treatment*.

Song over, like a pair of conspiratorial schoolgirls they indulged in some personal code and then let the audience into their world. In fact, in Chapin's presence, Colvin became the *energiser bunny*. One minute Shawn was recalling a gig at King Tut's Wah Wah House, in Glasgow, where she had inadvertently mentioned to the audience that she was going to undertake some gigs with the Scottish roots/rock group, Runrig. According to Colvin, the audience responded instantly with the insight that the band was "*a bunch of sheepshaggers*". The Scots psyche has always sheltered a deep-seated subtlety, when it comes to phraseology. Some would say that they call it as they see it, be it a countryman or foe.

In the annals of British folk music, Maddy Prior [formerly of Steeleye Span] and June Tabor once partnership, and called themselves The Silly Sisters. Here we had the American equivalent, The Sony Sisters. The reference to animal abuse had hardly left Colvin's lips, than she was into a rap regarding the world within a world that was the underlying plot to the Keanu Reeves movie, "**The Matrix**." Carpenter could only turn away from the audience to gain some composure. And just to prove that they were really hip gals, they reprised The Backstreet Boys hit "I Want It That Way" – it seems that an audience, a couple of days earlier, had dared them. A foolhardy move. Next they launched into a lesser known song from The Beatles catalogue – the closing track from the "**A Hard Days Night**" soundtrack, "I'll Be Back." If their harmonies had been sublime to date, this time they moved them into a whole new universe. Having performed "That's The Way Love Goes" the moment was over [again] and the duo departed.

Carpenter and band then returned without Colvin, with Chapin commenting that "*She [Colvin] had to put the baby to bed*." I guess it was the nanny's night off. I don't think so. Some fifteen hundred words later, here's my point. The final encore, consisting of the crowd pleasers "I Feel Lucky" and "Shut Up And Kiss Me," were masterful, but we've seen it all before dear girl. What Shawn and Chapin did, with some wood, wire, melodies, words and their two voices happens rarely. They should think about what they accomplished in Birmingham, and probably at most of the other venues on this UK tour. My message is "*Take it to the stages of the world girls, we need more of your brand of acoustic magic*."

Just in case you check, the liner artwork of both new Sony/Columbia record releases by Colvin and Carpenter, feature sepia toned portraits. Full torso, from the waist upward. Curious, huh. For Carpenter it's her eighth release for the imprint, including the greatest hits collection, "**Party Doll**," while Colvin's grand total is currently three less. In fact promotion of these discs, was precisely the reason for this UK tour. Hell, there were boxes of CD's and T-shirts to clear. The faithful could assuage their urges to symbolically identify with their heroes, and it was all waiting for them right there in the foyer.

Turning up my collar to the cold and damp, I walked home empty handed. My treasure was those precious moments that featured Colvin and Carpenter onstage and alone – with a guitar and some songs. Girls, simply having some aural fun. But such beautiful fun. An image of what could be, had been firmly planted in my heart and mind.

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikle 06/01.

[1880 words]

**P.S.** - If the term "*sheepshaggers*" is going to cause anyone distress, although that is precisely the derogatory term Colvin used, we could mitigate it to ...."...with the insight that the band interfered sexually with livestock." Regarding the foregoing, I will be guided by what you feel is acceptable to your readership. For obvious reasons, I have written much of the article from a British perspective. Further to the foregoing, it might be worth offering you readers - maybe in a leader - the additional insight that I am, after all, a Scot by birth.

According to one UK concert review, it appears that Chapin and Colvin confirmed they would definitely be making a duo album.