



Michelle Shocked: She calls herself 'psycho'

Former Squatter Beats the System With Hit Album

BY TOM LANHAM

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

ADORNING THE cover of folk singer Michelle Shocked's latest album, "Short Sharp Shocked," is a rather stark photograph. Taken during San Francisco's Democratic National Convention of 1984, the candid shot reveals a struggling young girl in the choke-hold grasp of a riot-squad policeman. Contrasting the officer's stern, dutiful glare is his prisoner's anguished expression, her mouth twisted into a scream of pain and terror.

And yes, admits the politically motivated Shocked, who adopted her surname after her harrowing arrest at a demonstration, "That's me in that picture, all right."

The Texas-born, world-traveled storyteller lived as a squatter in the Bay Area for only a few months, during which time she participated in a fair-housing movement that led to her arrest at Moscone Center one fateful afternoon. And — with a mixture of homespun warmth and working-class idealism that's win-

ning Shocked a following on the folk circuit as well as on college radio — she delights in retelling "all the gory details."

Supporting squatters' rights in a peaceful march, Shocked was soon surrounded by police, who charged the protesters with blocking a sidewalk. "Mind you, it was conspiring to block a sidewalk," she said, laughing, her southern twang still intact after nine years of itinerancy. Phoning from her manager's office in London — where she now lives on a "nonresidential houseboat with a self-sufficient wind generator" — the 25-year-old had only been fighting for what she believed to be a basic human right.

"So six of these cops surrounded me and started working me over," Shocked continued. "Bending my thumbs back and pulling my hair. And then I remembered that movie 'The Tin Drum,' and I realized they couldn't shut me up. So I started screaming at the top of my lungs, and no one could see what they were doing to me but everyone could sure hear."

A photographer pushed through the crowd and immortalized the moment that Shocked comments after a telling pause, "helps

Michelle Shocked performs a benefit for Central American Mission Partners on Thursday at the Great American Music Hall.

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ne remember the spirit that I might've gotten a little bit away from lately."

For a brash activist like Shocked — who'd sworn to live on less than \$3,000 a year after running away from home at 16 — participating in the pop music industry sometimes makes her feel like a hypocrite. Although her initial theory about "the system" was "if I couldn't stop it, I could at least keep from supporting it by not paying taxes," cult figure Shocked is now nervously watching the charts as her first anecdotal alternative-radio chart "Short Sharp Shocked" is al-

ready a Top 5 hit.

But with typical panache, Shocked dismisses her accomplishments: "This is all either a good thing or a real bad thing, because it's kinda scary to think that the same thing happened to Reagan — we are listening to the words of a psycho!"

The term "psycho" has a far deeper meaning for Shocked than for most performers. Because she fled her family and entered a self-described "vicious circle of homelessness and relying on the kindness of strangers," the vagabond was believed insane by an overly protective mother. Twice Shocked was committed to psychiatric hospitals while doctors tried to figure her

out.

"The first time was in Santa Cruz," she recollected, her voice soaked with indignation. "It was a case of me sleeping in the hills at night and walking into town during the day, a little bit out of it, I must admit." Injected with Thorazine until "you really start thinking you're crazy," Shocked finally was rescued from the ward by her troubadour father, whose blues and bluegrass record collection first had inspired her to sing and play.

After a second "quite terrifying" confinement attempt on her mother's part, Shocked wound up in New York City, seeing "this psychiatrist woman who told me, 'You're not crazy, Michelle — you're just poor.'" Shocked began to feel confident, and at folk festivals around the country she turned her experiences into song. At one such festival in Texas in 1986, an eager British folk producer was so impressed

with Shocked's vignettes he taped her tunes on a Walkman. Shocked laughed as he spoke of recording contracts.

PRESSED onto vinyl in Europe, the "Texas Campfire Tapes" became Shocked's accidental debut album. The disc was also a big indie favorite last year, was eventually picked up by Polygram Records stateside and led to a stint in a real studio with Dwight Yoakam producer Pete Anderson. Reluctant at first, Shocked dug into her grab bag of tales for "Short Sharp Shocked" and surfaced with a winning effort.

On "Short Sharp," Shocked proves herself as real and imaginative as any folk predecessor. But her traditionalism is firmly tied to the contemporary.

In "Graffiti Limbo," a black spray-paint artist is beaten to death by white police officers, who some-

how escape prosecution: "The holy virgin, she's gonna greet you up there/ With a big can of spray paint and a big blank wall," Shocked wails, her vocals curt but aching. "And I can guarandamtee you there ain't no cops around at all."

On the charming "Anchorage," the vocalist evokes an old Alaskan friendship with the simple reading of a letter. And Shocked — never one to do things the industry way — had a filmed reunion with her pen pal stand as her "rock video" of the track.

Shocked is also "quite pleased" to let the grim photograph on her LP jacket stand, a reminder that the talented songwriting inside might easily have been squelched somewhere along the line. Reminded of oppression everywhere, she becomes terse: "You know, when they were taking me away, I felt like a lamb going to the slaughter — again, I was being held against my will."

But Shocked can only look at the dark side of things for so long before leavening her words with humor. "Let's put it this way," she lightheartedly said. "I've always had a very paranoid vision of the future of the U.S., and back then it sure felt like my worst suspicions were being confirmed."