

# Singers for Central America

By Philip Elwood  
EXAMINER MUSIC CRITIC

**L**ET'S SORT OUT just what was happening Thursday night at the Great American Music Hall.

The four hours of performance were a benefit for the Central American Mission Partners group, locally represented by guitarist-singer-activist Paul Kantner.

Some in the overflow audience bought their tickets a couple of weeks ago in order to attend the unusual announced performance by singer Grace Slick, joined by Kantner, her Jefferson Airplane/Starship colleague (and more) in days of old.

Others came not only to hear the Slick-Kantner duo but also to enjoy Mancotal, a delightful Nicaraguan band famous not only for great music but also for political activism.

Early last week, Jean Bradshaw (co-owner of the Great American Music Hall) discovered that the intriguing singer Michelle Shocked, originally scheduled to open for folk-punk protest troubador Billy Bragg at Zellerbach Auditorium on Tuesday, was not available, but she was anxious to perform Thursday at the Nicaraguan benefit. So be it — Kantner put her on the increas-

ingly crowded bill.

Finally, not one to miss a rip-roaring benefit, Bragg himself came aboard, turning a modest club benefit into one of the most interesting, and eclectic, of shows.

Some in the audience seemed a little confused. Many of Shocked's fan are fascinated and delighted (as am I) with her poetic lyrics, her remarkably distinctive perspective on life, her right and ripe sense of humor, but that doesn't make them fans of Mancotal, Slick-Kantner, or even Bragg.

Bragg's fans, on the other hand, are dedicated to his passionate delivery, his sometimes punklike rhythmic lines and his usually tough, even abrasive, lyrics of protest. Whereas Shocked, from East Texas (Kerrville) by way of New York's lower East Side and a houseboat on the Thames off London (England, that is), still has a winsomeness, an abstract perspective, a sort of plain good humor to her observations, Bragg is more like an electrified post-punk combination of Phil Ochs and Bob Dylan.

Slick looks marvelous and is somewhat less distracted these days. Although she often sang lightly (dealing for the most part with untried lyrics — mostly within the Central American Mission Partners theme) she showed, to-

ward the end of the pair's second short set, that she can still wail and moan, and shout out her songs with magnificent power and assurance. Lots of the 400-plus in the crowd demonstrated noisily when she finished — they'd come for her.

Kantner was an admirable host and narrator, explaining — along with Bragg — what the Mission Partners movement is all about (simplistically: people-to-people aid) and strumming his guitar, sometimes singing original themes, with assurance and dedication.

Shocked — moderately tall, lean, close-cropped hair, boyish with a Greek seaman's cap on her head — looks like Julian Lennon. She sings and talks — about the same — of sweet potato pie, red-

clay back roads, feminism, country preachers, fires-firemen-fire trucks, Fogtown (that's us!), and also of Michael Stewart in "Graffiti Limbo," and of growing up, in the quite wonderful "When I Grow Up (I Want To Be an Old Woman.)"

Her manner is disarmingly attractive, her pure, flexible voice indescribable, her way with words most unusual; there's a bit of Steve Goodman in her. Some in the audience might have learned a bit had they listened rather than talking. Shocked plays a good guitar — on "Fogtown" she was joined by Dave MDC, a familiar San Francisco punker.

Mancotal, nine-strong, kicks up a wonderful, syncopated dance beat



Michelle Shocked offered poetic lyrics and a ripe sense of humor



Billy Bragg, folk-punk protest singer, joined the show

in backing its songs; the audience was wiggling and swinging in their seats at the crowded benefit. One song stuck with me driving home — "I'm from the Pacific and I love

the Atlantic / I'm from the Central America Caribbean, I'm Nicarafri-canico."

The music community is world-wide.