

'Modern' singer Shocked carries on rich tradition

By Neil Strassman

Staff writer

7880

Warning the crowd that "the age of McCarthyism is not yet over," British pop star Billy Bragg brought his unique brand of politically conscious music to Los Angeles Saturday night at the Wiltern Theater in a show that featured one of the hottest new American singers, Michelle Shocked, and the 7-piece Nicaraguan-based band, Mancotal.

"I'll try not to bash you over the head with my Woody Guthriesque music," Bragg told the audience in his thick Cockney accent, before launching into nearly two hours of non-stop rock and folk music peppered with love ballads, country and western songs, political songs and humorous monologues. He even sang a song written by William Blake.

Bragg and Shocked come out of the folk tradition and seemingly have had an easy time crossing into the pop/rock market, and they were warmly received by their fans Saturday night. Both performed solo, accompanied only by their guitars, though Bragg was joined by a pianist for several numbers.

The east Texas-born Shocked, a self-described feminist-anarchist-skateboard punk rocker who, despite her allegiance to the modern world, truly hails from the rich tradition of American women folk singers. She is a great singer, guitar-picker and a superb story teller.

Her humorous, rambling introductions to her songs recalling the red clay backroads of her Texas home, often drifted into talking blues. Shocked's lyrics, full of wry sarcasm and memories of work, love and life in the south, describe a rural America caught between southern tradition and the modern world. Talking about a sweet potato pie bake-off she sang:

Yamboree Queen, come sit by me,

I'm your sweet-potato man, Yes I yam.

She did a bluesy love song, "If Love Was a Train," from her new album:

If love was a train

I think I would ride me a slow

Music review

Billy Bragg, Michelle Shocked, Mancotal. Saturday night at Wiltern Theater, Los Angeles.

one

One that would ride through the night

Making every stop.

The 25-year-old Shocked brought down the house with an a capella rendition of a Steve Goodman song about a Vietnam-era wife whose husband had been killed in the war.

Bragg, at times sounding like a one-man version of the early 80's Clash, strutted on stage and strummed his electric guitar like a rock 'n roller. At other times, he sounded like a modern-day Phil Ochs or Pete Seeger, singing songs with blatant political messages.

A prolific song writer, Bragg opened with a Woody Guthrie-type ballad he said he wrote in the Wiltern dressing room, entitled "Waiting for a New Deal Now." Several times during the show, Bragg stopped his monologue almost in the middle, got close to the microphone to sing with surprising intensity and play some serious guitar. Just as quickly, he would drift back into talking about the election and how important it was to vote.

"Here is an everyday song about domestic violence," said Bragg, introducing "Valentine's Day is Over," a song from his new album.

From love ballads to militant songs railing against injustice and political apathy, Bragg thrust his guitar and his songs toward the audience challenging them.

Peace, bread, land and freedom

It is the best we can achieve.

But wearing buttons is not enough,

In times like these.

Bragg praised the Amnesty concerts aimed at freeing political prisoners around the world and the efforts of musicians to help imprisoned South African leader Nelson Mandela.

"It is something if we can add to the debate with this flimsy thing called pop music," marveled Bragg, "If you got a blast list, I want to be on it."