

'Dissident' Michelle Shocked

By HARMEN MITCHELL
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She describes herself in her press kit with a long list of adjectives, beginning with "squatter," "feminist" and "anarchist," summing up her childhood in Texas with "army brat," "run-away" and "Mormon Fundamentalist," and moving to the present with "psychiatric hospital patient," "rape victim," "expatriate" and "storyteller."

Singer/songwriter **Michelle Shocked**, who will come to Ann Arbor's Power Center on Monday on her second U.S. tour with Billy Bragg, also uses a term some Americans might take as a joke — "dissident." Dissidents don't come from the United States, do they? They go there — to find freedom, right?

Shocked (a phonetic spelling of her surname "Schacht") has lived in London for almost two years, and one might naively assume that's because it was a British record label that first showed interest in her work. "Are you gonna be surprised when I tell you it's political?" she asks in a trans-Atlantic phone interview. "It's true. I left during '85 to live in Amsterdam for a year as a dissident — I said the only trouble was that no one knew I'd left in the first place!"

The second time she left, quite a few people knew — and the story is one that has so quickly become record industry legend that one is tempted to ask if it's true.

At the Kerrville Folk Festival in Texas in 1986, Shocked was sitting around a campfire swapping songs with friends when a British man who claimed to be a record producer asked if he could tape record her on his Walkman. Later he contacted her in New York to ask if he could make the crude recording into an album. A couple of months later, it was the number one alternative album in Great Britain.

"The Texas Campfire Tapes" breaks every rule of music industry logic. It is a rough, primitive recording, just Shocked and her guitar; it is also a haunting collection of songs that are clearly not meant to be heard by anyone but the songwriter and a couple of friends. The effect is like eavesdropping on someone's brain.

But not, thank goodness, because she's so personal and strange, but because she's so accessible. And that accessibility carries over to her second album, "Short, Sharp, Shocked." Made in a real recording studio with a real producer

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(guitarist Pete Anderson), the album is sonically clean as a whistle.

"I've managed to not be too cryptic," says Shocked, "like (songwriter) Guy Clark, I just manage to tell the story and it's pretty much on the surface. And you can assume from that that I'm a pretty open person. You don't have to read too much into it."

Shocked, who says she doesn't take compliments well, will be the

first to tell you that she wasn't the only one at that campfire who deserved to be discovered. "I guess that's an attempt to keep from being made into some sort of icon," she says, "or — what I think is worse — a one-off phenomenon that can't be explained. I come from a tradition and it's a *living* tradition.

"I've got a real strong feeling about establishing my roots, but I like to say that I don't even know where I'm going. I know where I've been."