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# IT MIGHT BE QUIET BUT NOT BLAND

By TOM HARRISON

Music Critic

Michelle Shocked's appearance on the David Letterman show had rolled along like ball-bearings in oil, the singer performing her single, *Anchorage*, with Paul Shaffer's house band providing sympathetic backing.

Then the unexpected happened. David wanted a chat.

A talk with Letterman had not been scheduled and the shy Texan wasn't ready for it.

The host wasn't ready either, apparently, when he asked her why she lived in England.

It was a blunt, simple answer to the effect that Shocked could not live in a country as oppressive as America.

Shocked? David was stunned. He offered her some popcorn and ended the interview. Politics are not on Letterman's menu.

"I really can't understand why," Michelle says. "If you take politics out of life, what do you have but a lot of egomaniacs running around talking about how great they are? It would be very bland."

She was not scheduled to talk to Johnny Carson on last night's *Tonight Show*, either, but this time she went prepared.

Monday, when this interview

took place, she was at the home of her producer, Pete Anderson, rehearsing a band to perform *Anchorage* once again and the next single from the *Short Sharp Shocked LP*, *When I Grow Up*.

Michelle will be solo when she presents two shows tonight at the Commodore with *Cowboy Junkies*. The double bill might be quiet, but it won't be bland.

Shocked came to the folk world's attention in 1986 when an English music writer recorded her on his Walkman and had the results pressed.

The album, *The Texas Campfire Tapes*, was full of the atmosphere of a late night around a campfire with trucks driving past and crickets chirping — but it was Shocked and her mixture of modern folk and rural blues, and comfortable juggling of punk attitude and Woody Guthrie idealism, that signalled a different breed of folk musician.

She since has been plunked arbitrarily among such women as Suzanne Vega, Tracy Chapman, Toni Childs, Nanci Griffith, Melissa Etheridge and even Sinead O'Connor — but her first album for Mercury, *Short Sharp Shocked*, is as eccentrically personal and different from the works of these contemporaries as theirs are from hers.

■ 'The whole thing about being a folk star is very funny,' says Michelle Shocked. 'It's a contradiction in terms.'



"My main motivation in signing with a major label was to be able to put my money where my mouth is and redistribute the wealth a little bit," she says.

"Now my main objective is to maintain this balancing act between working within the system and not being corrupted by its values."

Right. However, *Short Sharp Shocked* — whose cover has a news photo of a screaming Michelle being hauled off by riot

police during a political rally — reveals an expert tightrope-walker.

Songs such as *If Love Was a Train*, *Hello Hopeville*, *Memories of East Texas* and *Gladewater* satisfy the demand for roots-conscious folk music. The more experimental *Graffiti Limbo*, punk holler of *Fog Town*, and guitar strangulation and lyrical twists of *When I Grow Up* subvert it.

Then there is *Anchorage*, a completely captivating personal

accounting told in the form of a letter from an old friend whose life and values have diverged from Michelle's.

"It was a real letter," Shocked says. "I just chopped it up into a song and I know a good hook line when I hear it: 'Anchored down in Anchorage.'"

It's made her a star and made her cautious.

"The whole thing about being a folk star is very funny," she says. "It's a contradiction in terms."