

Country, folk music uprooted

Michelle Shocked, Junkies plow into new territory

By Barry Walters
EXAMINER POP MUSIC CRITIC

COUNTRY AND FOLK music have always been the place for musical sincerity. Singers are supposed to sing what's on their minds or in their hearts with little regard for the dictates of art and commerce. Style isn't supposed to matter; the things that are real and true are what country and folk have always been about.

If not always obeyed, these ideals traditionally have been upheld. The folk music revivals of the early '60s and '70s, as well as the periodic country crossovers, have had their share of posers and opportunists, but their calculation always was supposed to be hidden. When musicians broke the rules — as when Bob Dylan picked up an electric guitar — their transgressions nevertheless were intended to capture "how things really are."

Last Saturday's double bill at

the Great American Music Hall brought together two of the hippest acts to bring back roots music in an utterly un-rootsy way. The members of the Cowboy Junkies may play country and Michelle Shocked may play folk, but neither act is country or folk.

This discrepancy between acting and being ordinarily would be thought of as a failure, especially in country and folk circles, where what you sing and the person you are always have been thought of as the same thing. Instead, the Cowboy Junkies and Shocked triumph because they bring a new kind of identity and a different aesthetic to traditional music. Their sense of artifice is what makes these musicians "real" in an artificial world.

The four Canadians who are the nucleus of Toronto's Cowboy Junkies — singer Margo Timmins, her brothers Michael and Peter on guitar and drums, and bassist Alan Anton — are essentially an arty post-punk band that discovered country well into the members' careers. Their sensibility is closer to the somber, removed attitude of dark British bands like Joy Divi-



Michelle Shocked's performance changed mood of the evening.

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sion than to Hank Williams and Patsy Cline, two of the country greats whose songs they cover, along with the Velvet Underground's "Sweet Jane." Just that juxtaposition of names — like the name of their group — speaks volumes about the Cowboy Junkies.

For those who have heard their major label debut, "The Trinity Sessions" (now climbing up Billboard's Top 50), there were no surprises in the Cowboy Junkies' Saturday night set. Like the album, there was nothing loud or fast or lively about their performance. Ev-

erything was slow, quiet, and remarkably studious. If the members of the Cowboy Junkies — here joined by three fellows on accordion, pedal steel, harmonica and mandolin — emit little energy, they compensate with focus. These musicians play country as if it were chamber music.

Despite the group's name, the result is more drugged than druggy, closer to a sleeping pill than to heroin. Lit by candles that littered the stage, the six instrumentalists played in the shadows and avoided eye contact with the crowd. Singer Margo Timmins, who sang in a soft, warm, earthy voice, gave off an unearthly presence. Even while singing "Walking After Midnight" (the most spirited song in their set),

Margo Timmins had the all the awareness of a somnambulist.

As spunky as the Junkies were sullen, Michelle Shocked took the stage and with one song completely changed the spirit of the evening. That song, "When I Grow Up" (where she sings that when she grows up she's going to have "a hundred and 20" babies) is one of her best and typically confuses sincerity and irony. Does she want to be a mother, or is the idea of giving birth to one child as ridiculous as having 120 kids? We never found out.

Dressed all in black, her short hair tucked behind a fisherman's cap, Shocked looked more like a goofy punk boy than the earth women of folk's past. She smiled

through almost every tune, as if amused at her own words. She'd make fun at how simple and similar every song is — she dedicated the evening to the D, E and A chords — and then gave political speeches with the same off-hand delivery as she used when telling a joke.

Shocked's self-consciousness can't be separated from her charm. She's serious about not being just another overly serious folk singer and her persona is every bit as important as her protest. She has the charm of a nutty character actress, one who's equally at ease playing the part of a rebel as she is putting on a good show. Any woman who sings about being a sweet potato man in love with a yam queen is no common folkie.