

Michelle Shocked: Lone Star balladeer

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Michelle Shocked, whose bluesy brand of country rock recently earned her a Grammy award nomination, has come a long way in less than two years — from recording her first album sitting around a campfire at a Texas folk festival to the stagelights of "The Tonight Show."

Shocked, whose 25-city national tour stops in Philadelphia for two shows at the Theater of the Living Arts Thursday, says she's enjoying the ride, but isn't letting the acclaim disrupt her approach.

"My vision is truly to help people speak for themselves and my music, hopefully, promotes the painful growth that's involved in speaking for yourself," Shocked said in a telephone interview. "I want to work toward a sense of community, even if it involves the very finite concept of promotion."

Shocked, 25, a long-time "underground" folk musician who makes her home on a houseboat in Lon-

don, burst onto the music scene last year with the release of her first studio LP, "Short Sharp Shocked."

The album, with its quirky, memorable stories of life on America's moral backroads, is far from the musical mainstream of the late '80s.

These musical tales, which contain a mingling of country, blues and folk, are alternately funny ("V.P.D."), wistful ("Anchorage") and angry ("Graffiti Limbo"). The characters Shocked sings about are painted in detailed description and are brought to life by Shocked's intoxicating soprano.

So, while many people can't relate directly to driving along the backroads of Texas either in search of spiritual redemption or a six-pack of beer, there is something about Shocked's music — something about the way she captures and crystalizes the struggles of everyday people — that has caused critics and listeners to

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On tour: Singer Michelle Shocked appears at the Theater of the Living Arts Thursday.

The singer is on tour following the success of her album, 'Short Sharp Shocked.'

Michelle Shocked in Phila. Thursday

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notice this Gilmer, Texas, native.

A self-described "picker-poet," Shocked's own life story is even more offbeat than the ones she sings about.

Raised by a fundamentalist mother, she ran away from home at 16, was raped while hitchhiking in Europe and spent time in a mental institution, where her mother had her committed against her will.

Avidly involved in politics — particularly issues involving run-aways and squatters' rights — Shocked is articulate, unpretentious and often funny. And with her short-cropped hair and boyish

clothes, she looks more like a local tomboy than an alluring vocalist.

Shocked's first record, "The Texas Campfire Tapes" was recorded on a Walkman by an enthusiastic listener at an impromptu campfire performance. The record shot to number one on the British independent record charts, paving the way for "Short Sharp Shocked."

Shocked says her music is removed from the mainstream of pop and leans more toward the "new traditionalist" movement coming out of Nashville.

"My music is pure roots, rural Texas stuff but I don't think every-

one realizes that yet," she said. "I can claim a musical heritage having been raised in Texas, where country and the blues are so immersed in the songs."

Shocked has spent the last few months touring and plans to return to the studio this summer to record a new album.

And while "Short Sharp Shocked" is jazzed up with the accompanying sounds of a fiddle, a hammered dulcimer and electric guitar, onstage Shocked chooses to face her audience unadorned, with just her voice and her trusty acoustic guitar.

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