

MUSIC REVIEW

Pleasantly Shocked

By Paul Robicheau
Special to the Globe

Michelle Shocked probably never lived through rural teen-age misadventures in Texas, left-wing demonstrations and chronic homelessness across the country, forced asylum in a psychiatric hospital and chosen asylum in Europe with plans to perform to soldout concert halls brimming with mainstream pop music fans.

But last night at Berklee, that's what Shocked found herself doing, and the 26-year-old folksinger's years of honing her songs on the underground circuit held her in good stead.

It was a mixed crowd that attended Shocked's first of two soldout shows, but many fans were older and more sophisticated than the grassroots alternative crowd that first supported her.

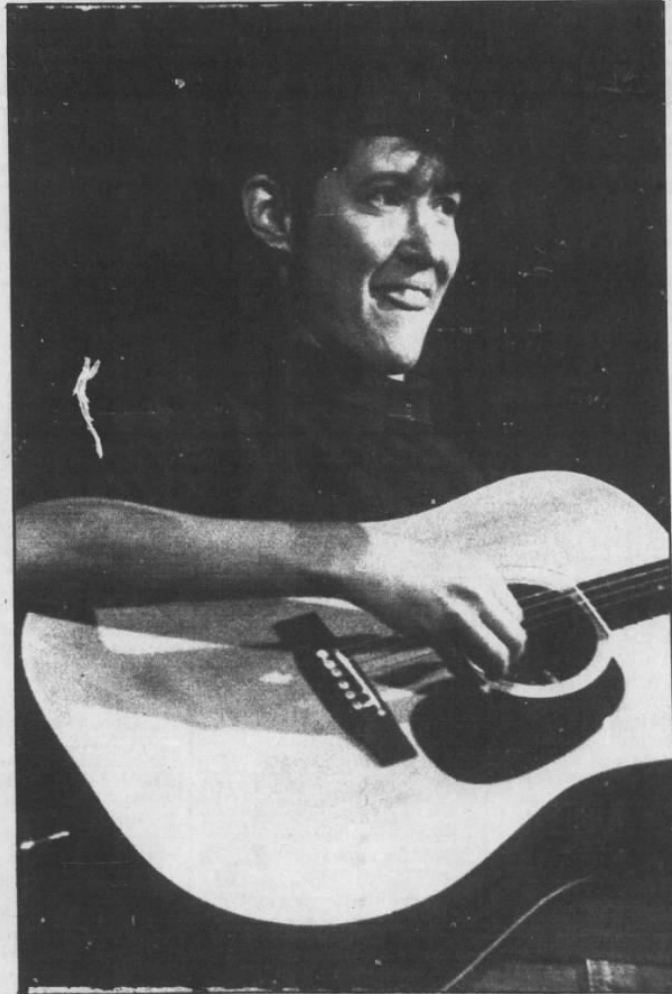
There was polite, enthusiastic applause, not chummy catcalls, and Shocked's mid-set request for volunteer folksingers to come up front for a song went unheeded ("Oh well, another time," the singer said wryly. "We'll do lunch"). This crowd was more into observing this folk-pop sensation than in participating.

In any case, new fans and old were both treated to a crisp, confident 70 minutes of Michelle Shocked, flowing with both easy and frisky moments that left no doubt of her musical maturation.

She was preceded by journeyman folk-rock from England's Oyster Band, whose half-hour set flowed from a spirited reel to a heartfelt song about migrant workers, and left-wing political satire from Boston-based Barry Crimmins, who got caught filling time with a few extra pat Bush and Quayle jokes when Shocked's set (which was broadcast by WBCN-FM) began a little late.

But when the short-haired Shocked, wearing her usual black turtleneck and cap

REVIEW, Page 12



Globe photo/Justine Schiavo

The folksinger last night: A crisp, confident 70 minutes.

Pleasantly Shocked

■ REVIEW

Continued from Page 9
recalling a young Bob Dylan) strode on stage already strumming her latest single "When I Grow Up," cheers made clear who was the main attraction. And Shocked didn't miss the absence of a backing band. She ad-libbed monkey screams on "When I Grow Up" and a guitar roadie added acoustic slide work on her encores, but mostly she went to the heart of her songs.

She deftly dispensed with another popular hit, "Anchorage," as her second number, then casually wove through an "East Texas trilogy" ranging from a tale of a sweet-potato "yamboree" (a tune she admitted sounded like "Alice's Restaurant") to her brassy "V.F.D.," about setting fires for a Volunteer Fire Department to chase. "There's a fine line between a good story and a bold-faced lie, and I ask you to remember that fact," Shocked said with a smile, and her storytelling rode that line with poise.

Her subjects changing like her past travels, Shocked moved from the San Francisco-inspired "Fogtown" to the reflective "5 a.m. in Amsterdam," marked by her sweet guitar picking.

This didn't seem like a show by a political rabble-rouser, but

MICHELLE SHOCKED - With the Oyster Band and emcee Barry Crimmins, at Berklee Performance Center, last night.

Shocked periodically injected her viewpoints. She stood up for gay rights, crediting broad-based groups in England for defeating legislation to curb positive imagery of gay sexuality, saying such support would be lacking in this country. And she brought on stage Joey Johnson, whose case for burning an American flag is before the Supreme Court, to model a T-shirt with an optical illusion which allows fans to visualize a flag in the air and torch it with lighters. "First they come for the flag burners, then they come for everyone else," Johnson warned.

But this wasn't necessarily a crowd apt to buy T-shirts and raise their lighters. One of the biggest ovations followed Shocked's cappella cover of Steve Goodman's "Ballad of Penny Evans," about a Vietnam widow who sings "They say the war is over, but I know it's just begun." Shocked was in fine voice, but it had an angry edge. And one had the suspicion her left-wing political convictions were beginning to find new listeners who like her music a lot and her message only to a degree.