

ROCK / Stephen Pope reviews Michelle Shocked at the Hackney Empire, London

Where egos dare

AGAINST a giant CND backdrop and sporting a Dylanesque "folk singer's" peaked cap, scruffy black Boho gear and shouldering a battered acoustic guitar, Michelle Shocked cut an image that could have come straight from 1963. A quick glance at the dress sense of a section of her audience, however — dungarees, rainbow motifs, beards and plimsolls — suggested that, actually, it was 1973. Will the equivalent cultural Luddites be so nostalgic about the Eighties in 15 years time?

With the blanket-coverage shopping-list of right-on causes that Shocked selected to profit from her London shows (from pit politics to Gay Pride to Troops Out), the ideal composite audience would consist of homeless lesbian miners from Northern Ireland. I'm sure there were a few in on Thursday night.

"It's a funny sort of job I've had now for two and a half years," Michelle Shocked confided at the end of her opener, "Anchorage", in an exaggeratedly cultivated Texan drawl which seemed to suggest that we were lucky to have been privy to that exact moment when the thought had occurred to her. Discovered busking around a campfire at a folk festival — an impromptu Walkman recording from that session became her 40,000-selling debut album — only to be shot to fame and forcible categorisation with Suzanne Vega and Tracy Chapman soon after, Shocked can be forgiven for feeling a little dislocated. All the same, she tends to labour the contradiction between her hobo

past and her recent transformation into oh-so-unwilling pop property.

As befitted the ideological purity of the occasion, Shocked's every utterance (she talks as much as she sings) was greeted with rapturous applause and yelps of approval. And while her songs more often seem to dwell on memories from her East Texan childhood rather than dealing in the overt polemic of the Sixties protest singers, she offers up her material — particularly through the glosses she gives during between-song intros — for alternative readings. "It's really about the small towns in people's lives — you know, that don't you?"

Starting the evening solo, Shocked gradually added extra musicians, even bringing on her father for a Leadbelly-penned duet ("Titanic went round a curve/ran into a big iceberg..."), until she was fairly powering along with bass, drums, harmonica, Dixieland clarinet and banjo, not to mention a mighty brass section behind her own chirpy talking blues.

Underneath that radical, sensitive singer-songwriter-by-appointment-to-the-Left exterior, Michelle Shocked clearly possesses the same kind of monster-sized ego that powers a Holly Johnson. Her constituency, which requires a different kind of heroine, chooses only to register the alternative credentials, and in the process overlooks what a consummate star she is. It's not the kind of mistake record companies make any more, only socialists.