

# MORE MUSIC

## ADRIAN GOLDBERG finds echoes of Steinbeck in Michelle Shocked's powerful performance at the Hackney Empire

IN A week which witnessed a further Top 40 surge by 'Americanos' (Holly Johnson's glib hymn to the US), London audiences were treated to a coruscating alternative view of life in the States, courtesy of the feisty Texan exile, Michelle Shocked.

Appearing in the second of four consecutive benefit shows at Hackney's magnificent Empire Theatre, Shocked was revealed as a kind of singing, swinging Steinbeck. Her barbed neo-folk narratives depict a land of curdled milk and poisoned honey, where the seeds of hope and trust have yielded only a dustbowl crop of bitterness and despair.

'Graffiti Limbo', for instance, is a tale of casual savagery relating the death in police custody of a young, black street artist. 'VFD' depicts the destruction of farmland acres through the persona of an estranged child arsonist.

Yet disaffection has rarely sounded so sweet or inspiring, not least because Shocked's normally sparse, blues-tinged arrangements were supplemented for much of this set by a powerful and uplifting brass section, together with clarinet and evocative Dixieland banjo.

Thus 'Streetcomer Ambassador', which parallels begging in New York with Third

World poverty, was performed with the style and panache of a New Orleans wake, making a musical mockery of the refrain, 'Brother, can you spare some change?'. And her classic anthem of sexual dissatisfaction, 'If Love was a Train', paraded a glorious cacophony of brass, bass and bluegrass harmonica.

Shocked herself was a revelation — black clothes and gawky physique belying a performance which was relaxed, confident and positive. Jokes were cracked, banter exchanged. And when she invited her father on stage to sing — a gesture which in most other circumstances would have reeked of showbiz sentimentality — here it was nothing less than a joyous affirmation of Shocked's original 'songs around the campfire' idiom. Their duet was a cover of Leadbelly's glorious song about boxer Jack Johnson, refused a trip on the Titanic because he was black, but ultimately able to enjoy the last laugh at the captain who shunned him.

Its gleeful celebration of poetic justice, and mockery of the self-destructive rich, set the tone for an evening when Shocked's always affecting but sometimes world-weary drawl was enhanced by warmth.