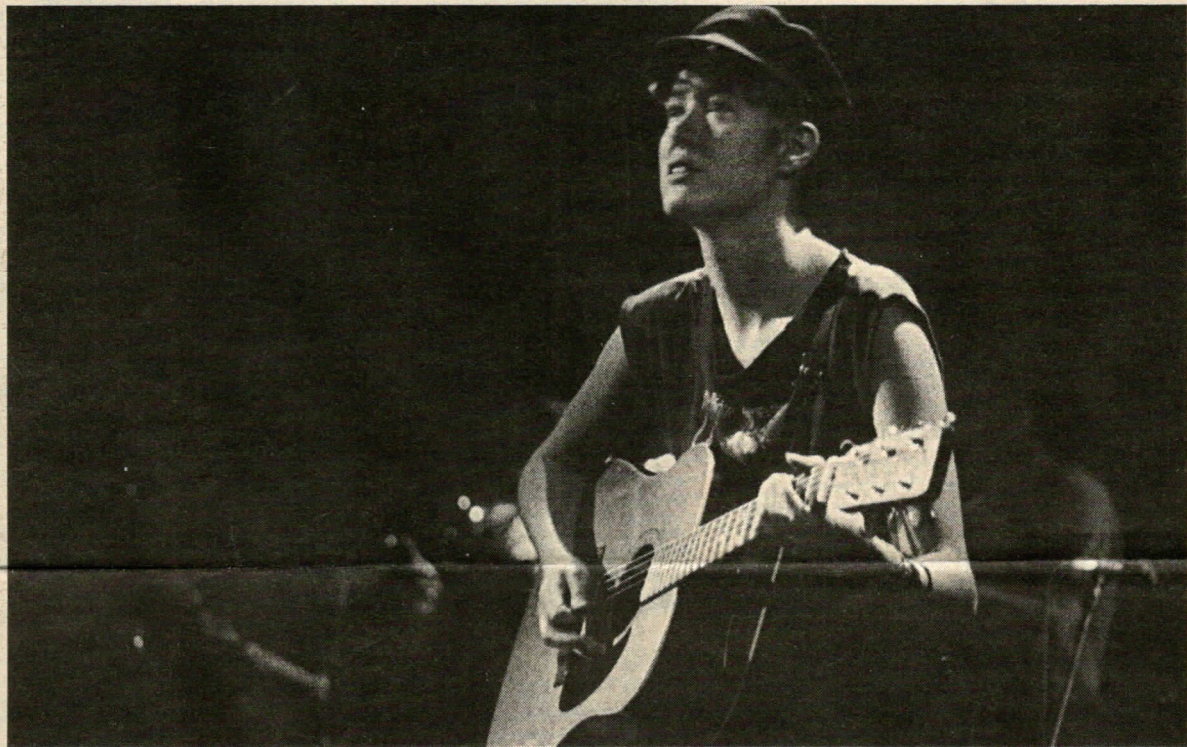


STATE OF SHOCK



MICHELLE SHOCKED

Hackney Empire, London

AWARENESS. That's what it's all about. Michelle Shocked, you see, insists on *explaining* every song before it's sung. Sometimes this means enlightening tales of atrocities that, y'know, I always *thought* went on but never knew for sure actually occurred (N.Y. cops who murdered a black graffiti artist getting acquitted, and so on). Other times it's just embarrassing (like when she spells out *exactly* why she sees beggar-tramps as "Streetcorner Ambassadors") or patronising ("I don't know whether you've heard of a drug called crack..."). I can see why such explanations are necessary. All too frequently, they are there to hide an essential *weakness* in the songs themselves.

Now and then her desire to raise our collective consciousness comes dangerously close to stating the obvious: "Whatever the solution to the Irish question may be, it must involve the total withdrawal of British troops." Preaching to the converted, perhaps, but for Michelle, to disseminate information is to sow the seeds of revolution.

The issue of politics-in-pop, of course — the sugared pill — is an unhappy affair, invariably meaning politics *tagged* on to pop, music as a pretext for rhetoric (whereas truly subversive pop is *inherently* political, anti-social rather than socialist). But the worst enemy of

agit-pop is inconsistency. Wednesday night was a women-only show: apartheid in action (imagine if she'd played a *whites-only* show!) It's saddening to see the Left (No platform for racists! Ban page 3!) adopting the methods of the Right (segregation, repression and censorship). Shocked dismisses the whole problem with a one-liner: "Music and politics have one thing in common: they're far too important to be left to professionals". *Tacitly*, however, she (like Bragg) legitimises her position by adding herself to the historical lineage of the travelling bard.

I also detect something of the self-dramatist in Shocked. The cover of her last LP (picturing the singer being dragged from a demo by riot police) seems to scream "Look! I'm being oppressed!" And tonight she almost *shows off* about the squalor in which she once lived (rats drinking from a pool on her polythene roof), being *seen* to have suffered.

All that said, more often than not she *gets away with it*. At best, Michelle Shocked reminds me that an acoustic guitar needn't be an albatross-and-chain (if you get my meaning), constantly smiling as her surprisingly powerful voice soars over the wholesome, jolly country/folk/jazz/blues/skiffle/swing (all "real", *authentic* forms that need no amplification), clearly—uh—getting *into* it, man. There are worse ways to spend an evening. As far as I'm aware.

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