

## **MICHELLE SHOCKED**

### **Hackney Empire**

HAVING SPENT an unenviable afternoon at the London Arena, Dockland's latest designer warehouse, I can sympathise with Michelle Shocked when she sings 'God Is A Real Estate Developer'. Not only is life, as depicted by Shocked's right-on asides, hard and harsh, but there's rarely more than one exit and it's almost impossible to change course.

This is Shocked's problem. She seems trapped, just another awkward girl with a guitar, this year's Suzanne Vega or more leniently Phranc, with no hope of an escape from the acoustic cul de sac.

Still, even when she is *just* another girl guitarist, Shocked is enticing, a league ahead of Tanita and the rest. She's a good time, camp fire girl, getting the audience to sing along to 'Memories Of East Texas' – the first part of her East Texas trilogy – before coolly asking them if they're "ready for 'Kumbaya'?".

Yet Shocked isn't content to remain the thigh slapper, and even as she completes the Texas trilogy with 'VFD' and 'The L & N Don't Stop Here Anymore', she's moving on to San Francisco and New York, distancing herself from her roots by using drums, bass and finally an entire Dixieland style horn section (her Unfeasibly Large Band).

Just as the band's name is a witty tribute to Lyle Lovett and his Large Band, so Shocked's transition echoes Lyle's move from country to the mainstream.

Joined by her band, she's uncaged, free-floating, blending her rootsy blues songs with the impressive sound of their New Orleans jazz. It's particularly effective on the encore, 'Fairytale', which sees Shocked take on the mantle of Billie Holiday. Even when she's joined early on by her father, in a scene reminiscent of *The Partridge Family*, it's still effective.

God may not leave that many exits but it seems Shocked has found one.

**SAM KING**