

MICHELLE SHOCKED LONDON HACKNEY EMPIRE

MICHELLE SHOCKED is greeted like a homecoming queen by the vegetarian social worker community of Hackney. More wiry and waifish than ever, and sounding equally weedy, she begins by picking nervously through an acoustic 'Anchorage'.

Roars of recognition are followed by the sort of dancing rarely seen outside Christian rock festivals, with the same unhealthy air of preaching to the converted.

Rambling autobiographical monologues preface a ukelele duet between Michelle and her dad(!), Dollar Bill Shocked. Touched by the sight of a simple country gal who lurves her family, everyone in the audience hugs the nearest stranger in an atmosphere of cockle-warming camaraderie. Entertainment? Hell no!

Just as I consider abandoning this *Waltons* scenario, Michelle gets serious by rocking out with bass and drums. This bigger sound takes her on a whistle-stop tour of influences,

from shuffling Willie Dixon blues to scatty Stray Cats struts, all delivered with an elfin Elvis sneer. Nearby, bootleggers are compiling the Hackney campfire tapes.

Infinitely superior to these formulaised foot-stompers are the new songs. 'Grass Is Always Greener On The Greener Side' heralds a new complexity, while 'Looks Like Mona Lisa Is Having A Bad Day' sounds like Sade refreshed by an Eastern European package tour.

Employing the Happy End horns to brass up 'When I Grow Up' and 'If Love Was A Train' is a masterstroke, allowing Michelle more mobility and stage spectacle. The bleeding heart ballad 'Sleep Keeps Me Awake' – cheered for its lesbian overtones – is triumphantly transformed, and the big band bravado of 'Fairy Tales' launches a final salvo at "politicians everywhere".

Whether anchored in 'Anchorage' or bogged down in 'Fogtown', Michelle Shocked has reached a mature sound without resorting to rock convention (see The Proclaimers) or losing her amiable and honest live persona. I arrived distrusting and left loving her. That woman made a hippy out of me.

Stephen Dalton