

# ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

Edited by WENDY TUOHY

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ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE

## From racism to rape, songs to shock you

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### PROFILE

**M**ICHELLE Shocked's publicity blurb lists all the things she's been — squatter, feminist, anarchist, Texan, pirate radio DJ, rape victim...

Rape victim? Is that the sort of information you want alongside what brand of cereal you eat?

"That whole list of things came out with the release of Short Sharp Shocked," says the soft southern voice. "The album was very personal stories and, at the time, I had a desperate feeling that I had some stories to tell that needed to be told. And I wasn't really sure that I was gonna get that chance again."

Shocked says the incident proved the turning point of her political consciousness, making her aware of racism and other issues that had somehow slipped her by, even though her race relations during her Texan childhood were akin to South Africa. "I became suddenly aware of the same sorts of oppression of people who are victims of racism experience... I was a victim of something because I was a woman. It was not 'cos of what I said, not 'cos of the way I looked, not the way I dressed, where I was. The place — a San Francisco squat, sometime after 1983, when she left Texas to see the ocean.

Galvanized into political activism encompassing squatters' rights, conservation, anti-racism, and to a lesser extent, feminism, Shocked changed her name by deed poll and recorded her first album, 'The Texas Campfire Tapes' on a small cassette player. Its batteries were run-

ning low, and an unexpected soundtrack was provided by chirping crickets.

Then Polygram Records approached her. Juggling a hatred for the industry's profiteering ethos, and what she saw as a once-only chance to spread her message from on high, she signed. All sorts of provisos in her contract guaranteed her artistic control, but a clause banning South African sales came undone — a mistake for which Polygram paid US\$75,000 to the African National Congress.

But the company has overlooked what she calls her "arrogance", probably because it has fallen in love with the cult of the female folk singer/political activist.

Shocked hates her reputation as a guitar-strumming waif singing odes to idealism. She hates comparisons with Tracy Chapman, Edie Brickell, Suzanne Vega. The record industry, she says, has stolen feminism from its creators and is selling it back to them.

"What I resent the most is that music's become a commodity. I'm looking forward to the opportunity to put into people's heads the idea that you don't have to be great at it, but that it is so much more rewarding to play your own music badly than any record on album that you'll ever buy."

Shocked was born in 1962 in Dollars, Texas, to a Mormon mother and a "hippy, atheist" father. They separated and Shocked spent most



Michelle Shocked: 'Don't ever say I look like Billy Bragg'

of her time trying to reconcile the twin realities of fundamentalism with an army stepfather, and summer visits to her Dad marked by bluegrass festivals and guitar pickin' on the porch. She ran away at 16, and left Texas at 21.

"There was no middle ground for me in their house; but then my Father didn't really take me in. So I was pretty much alone. In a way he's become something of a role model. He's a mellow cat... but he puts so much value on reason and logic, and in the long run I don't think that's wholly effective.

"I really don't talk to my mother. She told me once that if I wasn't a Mormon it didn't matter what I did with my life."

Shocked's mother probably turned the other cheek when Michelle was arrested at a 1984

Republican convention for cussing about Contragate. Reagan's America also prompted Shocked to live on a London houseboat for a year, because "there was a very strong commitment on my part to have nothing to do with the country while Reagan was in office.

"Now I feel there was a bit of hypocrisy in my position, coz I was most effective in my perspective on American culture and politics, but I was on the outside looking in."

'Captain Swing' has less politics than former releases, and the old voice and guitar, with not much else added, has given way to a busier instrumentation.

Shocked is reluctant to talk about her songwriting process, pleading voodoo. Inspiration — surprise — was responsible for 'Anchorage', the single lifted off Short Sharp

Shocked, she says. Craft plays a smaller part, and she says nebulously that the song has "gotta swing".

That fits in neatly with the album's title, primarily a paean to the leader of a South England laborers' revolt who encouraged arson attacks on farms. She found out about Captain Swing, folk hero, through a close friend, Billy Bragg.

Although the two call themselves "the Donny and Marie of the left", Shocked doesn't take to the suggestion that she and Bragg look somewhat alike, even if it is just the way they dress. "Visually?" she says, incredulously. "Oh — that's an insult."

Next year, Shocked hopes to collaborate with Paul Simon on an as yet undefined project. She puts the likelihood at about 10 per cent, breathing "he's God".

Now, during her UK tour, she's on a heavy publicity trip, and admits she's finding it difficult to answer questions about herself when all she wants to do is talk politics. "I'm quite shy and lacking social skills, but if the subject turns to politics, I'm fascinated by what other people think, and I'm fascinated to express my own ideas and get into debates. I just don't feel that way about my own personal life.

"I don't know why, but I like telling stories. I feel that I have a lot to say, that makes me unique in comparison to people who have nothing to say, but can't seem to shut up."

Michelle Shocked plays Dallas Brooks Hall on Wednesday 3 January. Tickets through Bass.