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Date

NEVILLE JEFFRESS/PIDLER PTY. LTD.
Box 4276, G.P.O., Sydney 2001

We were there at the campfire

REVIEW

Concert

SUZY FREEMAN-GREENE

Michelle Shocked (Dallas Brooks Hall,
Wednesday; again at Old Greek Theatre,
Tuesday).

SHE has portrayed herself as many things — squatter, feminist, skateboard punk rocker, picker/poet — but none of the tags could have prepared fans for Michelle Shocked's utterly disarming stage presence.

Wearing the familiar peaked cap; carrying only a guitar and her East Texan drawl, Ms Shocked wandered on stage with a huge grin plastered on her face and positively yelped with joy as she opened with the surreally promising song 'When I Grow Up'.

The sparseness of the performance was the perfect foil for her eerily elastic voice and idiosyncratic brand of music. Ms Shocked calls herself a folk singer, but she is much more than that. Her songs are variously touched by country, blues, rock and swing; her laconic humor and wry observations are an endearing companion to her strident non-conformism and political activism.

It is her storytelling that best embraces the folk tradition and as she peppered her music with cheeky asides and anecdotes it was easy to imagine we were picking strings around the campfire. She asked us to sing along and we did. She sang the moving story of a Vietnam war widow; then leapt minutes later into a hilarious song about a pair of evangelist campus crusaders.

Over 90 minutes, Ms Shocked sang the best tracks from both 'Short Sharp Shocked' and her new album 'Captain Swing'. If anything, the songs from the latter album gained stature when sung unaccompanied by the big band sound that dominates the record, enabling both her voice and the biting lyrics to shine through.

A highlight was her 'Texas Trilogy' (of four songs), ending with a rollicking version of 'Making the Run to Gladewater'. At times her face contorted into a grimace as she moved into a quiet fury on songs like 'Graffiti Limbo' and 'On The Greener Side', but the warmest reception was reserved for her faintly melancholic hit 'Anchorage'.

The biggest surprise of the evening was the appearance of Ms Shocked's father, who wandered on stage quite unfussed by the occasion and played two sweet mandolin tunes with his daughter. "It's nice to see the old man feel appreciated," a slightly bashful, ex-skateboard punk-rocker drawled.

It was exactly the sort of gesture that