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Michelle Shocked

ENTERTAINING THE

MICHELLE SHOCKED used to be almost too easy to pigeonhole — she lived as a squatter, sang with a guitar and kept the Green politics coming. A folk-protest singer? No question about it.

She still does some of those things — she performs solo at the Powerstation tonight — but her current *Captain Swing* album sees her with a big brass band and ripping through Texas swing and blues charts. She's

MICHELLE SHOCKED, who plays at the Powerstation tonight has a reputation for political involvement. But she is also a musician. She talks to **GRAHAM REID** about Texas blues, World Music and the politics of swing.

obviously enjoying herself but her political folk following have had some difficulty coming to terms with what Shocked now calls "entertaining the troops," and her recent tour to England had her on the sharp end of critics who thought her "politics can be fun" and sugaring-the-pill attitude condescending. A lot of people missed the point, really.

"In England I was swimming against the stream," she says with quiet determination. "I was trying to explain that this album was not such a radical departure from *Short Sharp Shocked* but very much in keeping with the Texas tradition. But I suppose they were looking at the image, not the substance."

In retrospect, it is hard to see how so many people could have read Shocked so wrong — her '88 *Short Sharp Shocked* had clues to her current direction, littered "around for anyone who cared to look or listen."

While many got hung up on the agit-prop front cover picture of Shocked being hauled away by the throat from a demonstration, few noticed the two-word dedication on the back cover, "... for Guy."

The Guy, in question is country artist Guy Clark (who performed in Auckland last year) and the back cover shot of Shocked and producer/guitarist Pete Anderson was a direct lift from Clark's '75 *Old No. 1* album artwork.

It's that Texas lineage she is plugged into, always has been, and is coming out now in her music.

"The most obvious comparison I would make in what I'm doing now is to the recent Lyle Lovett album," she says, referring to country singer Lovett's recent *Large Band* album which also featured a swinging horn section.

"He's a useful reference because he gives some indication of the way Texas songwriting is taking and he, too, uses Guy Clark as a lighthouse in the night."

Short Sharp Shocked also sounded a long way away from the folk label she was tagged with. On *When I Grow Up* she resurrected the same old heavy blues riff Led Zeppelin appropriated for *How Many More Times* back in '71 for their debut album, on *Memories of East Texas* she

stalked the Guy Clark territory and on *Glade-water* kicked up a Western swing sound which was closer to Commander Cody or Asleep At The Wheel than Suzanne Vega or others on the folk axis.

Shocked also had a sly sense of humour, which seemed to go right by a lot of listeners. *If Love Was A Train* ("I think I would ride a long slow one"), for example, took a raunchy poke at macho blues.

In the context of all those non-folk influences, the new *Captain Swing* album makes much more sense. It was all that went before which created her folk image.

SHOCKED was "born in Dollars, Texas in 1962" (according to her own account) and ran away from her mother and stepfather's fundamentalist home at 16 to live with her father. It was at his house she first heard Guy Clark, Randy Newman and the folk songs which shaped her musical identity for the next few years.

She became politicised and drifted off to California, where she lived as a squatter in vacant buildings and, growing increasingly uncomfortable with America under Ronald Reagan, moved to Amsterdam via New York and a short skirmish with the folk scene there.

She comments on the flourishing New York folk scene with the same bluntness she brings to her political observations. The group, which has formed around Kirk Lee Berryhill, Roger Manning and Cindy Kelly, is one she acknowledges, favourably — others aren't so lucky.

"I spent some time with them but that was as an outsider. I like their motives and prefer their scene to what I saw in the West Village, where the idea was to get a record deal at all costs — they would spend their time in the scene but would have sold it down the river for a deal.

"It was like the New Wave thing in the 70s in New York where it was 'let's build a scene, then let's sell it!'"

Shocked's entry into record deals was almost accidental. At the Kerryville Folk Festival in '86 she was working as a volunteer and, as she sat around an open fire one night, some of her songs were caught on tape by Englishman Pete Lawrence. The songs —

complete with background sounds of crickets and fire crackling — appeared as *The Texas Campfire Tapes*, an album which not only sold exceptionally well but set her up with a recording contract.

Shocked is now back living in America after a time in England and, while not entirely comfortable with America under George Bush, says things are a little different.

"Under Reagan there was a covert war going on in Central America, yet by all accounts this was just not happening. I feel a lot more optimistic now — Bush declares war and can't even pull it off. With Reagan there was no war, but how many people were dying?"

"Bush is much less the demagogue and people don't have the same need to believe his lies. To the left, his previous involvement with the CIA was a concern, but I did a lot of reading about him, because that made me paranoid — although I was much more paranoid that an actor could become president. Bush seemed to stay out on the loose with the CIA much as he's trying to stay aloof as president."

Shocked has chosen Los Angeles as her home base. Her management is there, but the political motive is: it gives the opportunity of pointing out how influential the city is, "not for the commonly held stereotype of white, middle-class affluent

All Farka Toure of America." WOMAD is successful to the point of bringing those people over and letting them speak for themselves. I'd like to see that carrying on.

"Peter's WOMAD festivals are very influential but in LA you feel that (profile) has already been achieved even though it doesn't have the glamour of a title. All those musics and cultures are imported and it's up to me to take advantage of it — I hope I can."

But that notion of taking advantage and assimilation can lead to dilution and, at worst, hijacking of others' traditions?

"In some ways I've contributed to that in that I tried to invoke the spirit of palm-wine from another source, for *On the Greener Side*. Peter has gone a lot closer to giving people the opportunity to speak for themselves. He's encouraging that rather than taking the culture and translating it. That (accusation) has got some validity — that's what I'm familiar with as a white Texan girl claiming the blues as my heritage. It speaks to me and I can draw from it."

TRONICALLY for a musician, however, it has been Shocked's political positioning which has gathered her so much attention — and deliberately so. She admits she likes being interviewed because it allows her to articulate ideas outside the context of a song, and that a lot of artists overlook the interview forum.

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society — that's only a small minority.

"The 'unseen majority' is in the ethnic communities which move there and keep their identity. They make Los Angeles a melting pot, not in the sense of everyone wanting to be that affluent white American, but they bring their own culture to a country and don't back down.

"You can't even talk about the Hispanic community as being a unified one. The Guatemalans, El Salvadoreans and Mexicans don't even like each other's cream cheese. My local grocery store has to stock three different types because it's so significantly different for each people.

"I live on the edge of Creertown, where there is an exciting ebb and flow of various cultures."

AS A musician, Shocked has also picked up on the music which swirls around her (she evokes a West-African sound on *The Greener Side* on the new album) and says for too long rock 'n' roll has been the model for understanding other cultures. She sees the World Music Movement which emerged in the 80s as giving validity to all musical cultures.

She has particular praise for Peter Gabriel who inaugurated the WOMAD (World of Music and Dance) Festival at Shepton Mallet in '82. Financially Gabriel took a bath to the tune of nearly \$500,000 but has recovered to launch his Real World record label to promote artists as diverse as The Orquesta Reve — a Cuban dance band — and All Farka Toure from North Africa.

"All Farka Toure came to England while I was living there and people were calling him the John Lee Hooker of Africa. He was saying, 'hardly that, John Lee Hooker is the

Her "politics can be fun" attitude distances her from the earnest *We Shall Overcome* plaintive mourn from some activists and she doubts the mass concerts by big-name artists make people aware of issues. She suspects the audience already knows the problems but lacks the tools and resources for change. The accusations of preaching-to-the-converted are easy to make but she cites Billy Bragg, with whom she recently toured, as finding that balance between educating and entertaining the audience.

"He has relied on his sense of humour and the idea that people are going to come to a show for a good time. That's my new motto: 'entertain the troops' and that's a worthwhile thing to do — entertain the people who are out there fighting the issues."

Those who expected Shocked to articulate the ideologies of causes on her *Captain Swing* album have been disappointed, however. Where *Short Sharp Shocked* sang of "the Cold War Institute" and the death in police custody of graffiti artist Michael Stewart, the new album sidesteps such specifics but opens up ideas of personal liberation.

Shocked says she believes people too often assume politics is about a Cause.

"I believe that as much as I believe people think the blues is about singing about being depressed. I think it's about singing from the depths of your emotions.

"I don't know why people feel the need for something so obvious in politics. People say they need protest singers now and there's a lot of encouragement for people to take on that role of spokesmen for their generation.

"From my experience, I know where the change lies — in encouraging people to speak for themselves."

