



# Shock TREATMENT

On the eve of her Australian tour, Michelle Shocked talks to Tony Fletcher in New York about moving back to America, her new big band sound and mixing anarchy with the big boys in the system.



**Everybody calls you a folk singer, but your new album, *Captain Swing*, is not folk - it's more of a big band, swing sound. How do you feel about being categorised?**

"They're the folks who built that situation, so I'm going to make them live with it: yeah, this is a folk album! The only time I think a category is fair is if it comes out of a sense of movement, like punk or new wave. I was much more comfortable in England identifying with the roots music scene. I like that a lot. It felt more natural, it could include a lot more styles. In a roots music category I could do *Short Sharp Shocked* and *Captain Swing* and it would still make sense."

**Was there an inclination to deliberately move away from what people expected of you?**

"Only in the sense that I got really sick of being compared to people, in that it didn't go beyond a very superficial image of things- being a woman, playing an acoustic guitar, singing personal songs- because by looking so close at certain aspects, other aspects of the music were ignored. The fact that it's rooted in things like the blues. So in that sense, yeah, it was an opportunity...But it wasn't that deliberate. I feel like I'm being true to my muse (laughs). Oh God I sound stupid..."

**When you got involved with Peter on *Short Sharp Shocked* weren't you really wary about working with a producer?**

"Definitely, I was trying to keep him at arms length. It was my first time in a studio, and I just felt there was a lot of potential to be manipulated. But then working with him, I got the sense that, "hey, we've got the same kind of goals - cut the bullshit out of music, get the integrity back." And at the heart of it, I think we both share a love for live music."

**Talking of which, Michelle Shocked with acoustic guitar would have problems playing songs from her new album live. How are you going to do it?**

"It's going to be a big band - drums, bass, keyboards, guitars and two horns as well. It's going to be from one extreme to the other, but I'm real confident in my skills. I've missed the interaction of working with other people. The earliest source of musical inspiration was playing

with my father and brother. And that's because music is about the interaction, the little signals that you pass from player to player."

**Do you feel you are being co-opted by the system?**

"Yes. In some ways I've made compromises. Sometimes I'm aware of the compromises I've made, and other times I've just gotten pulled along by the current. This tour involved a very large compromise for me. Coming out with a band the calibre of the musicians I have, I'm actually losing money on the tour, which means turning to the record company for tour support. And the conditions on which I receive the support and so forth, it feels like a very big compromise. On the other hand I have a choice between playing larger venues and higher ticket prices or staying on a scale I think my audience is comfortable with."

**This record seems more personal, there are more love songs.**

"Yeah...I don't really think of the love songs as personal. I was more committed to having a snappy lyric, and the rhymes almost justify the subject, which can be kind of cliché sometimes. Otherwise, if you look hard enough, you'll find what I call a homeless trilogy on the album- *God Is A Real Estate Developer*, *Street Corner Ambassador* and *The Cement Lament*."

**How do you divide your time between Britain and America these days?**

"That's another one of those compromises. I was always very afraid of living in America, especially once I was working inside the system, 'cos I felt like there were even less institutions to support you if you wanted to take a radical position. In Britain I always felt there were institutions to support my point of view. In spite of that, I've pretty much moved back to America. Some of it had to do with the sense that there was a lot of hypocrisy involved in being outside, the place I wasn't working in. I live in Los Angeles, I know that's a shock. If I had thirty minutes I could present a point of view that gets overlooked- that LA is not the great melting pot of America but the great polyglot, where so many cultures come and they mix, but what you end up with isn't really American, it's something altogether different. It's a real privilege to be around that sort of stuff."

**How do you feel about the mood of America now that you're back there?**

"I don't feel much enthusiasm about it. As a matter of fact I'm quite nostalgic for Europe, because so many exciting changes are going on there, so many shifts and changes that I really regret not being more actively a part of it. But now that I've lived in Europe and England I feel I am able to have a little more insight. They really worship their isolation in America, they think that it's a good thing. In England I feel I have to be a little more on my guard. People are more informed and aware politically there so you can't just rant and kind of talk out your arse."

**Did you think *Short Sharp Shocked* would do as well as it did in the States?**

"The fact that the album's received the acceptance it has has given me a real confidence that people want to hear what I have to say. Which means I can say just about anything. That's a real good position to be in."

**Michelle Shocked plays the Sydney Town Hall, Monday January 8.**

**D**ressed in her regulation outfit of all black, Michelle Shocked saunters through the lobby of a downtown New York hotel and everyone spins round in recognition. Which is not surprising, considering the hotel is home to a convention of college radio delegates for whom Shocked is a heroine. Despite the respect afforded her by her peers and the confidence with which she carries herself, the 27-year-old singer/songwriter admits to being a mass of contradictions and compromises these days.

It is now over three years since Michelle was discovered by Pete Lawrence, an English roots music fan attending a Texas folk festival, whose private recording of a private performance on his Sony Walkman wound up as the now-fabled *Texas Campfire Blues*, a collection of contemporary folk songs imbued with the experiences of Michelle's travels through America and Europe, political pragmatism in her heart and an acoustic guitar on her back. The success of that original independent release led to a worldwide deal with Polygram, and the follow-up *Short Sharp Shocked* catapulted her to a cult status in America akin to that of Billy Bragg in Britain.

As a self-confessed anarchist, Michelle is understandably ill at ease working for a major multinational conglomerate. And she is no more comfortable on this winter's morning having just won a trophy at America's New Music Awards for Best Folk Singer. It is an honour, but one she has outgrown.