

# MICHELLE SHOCKED: VOTING WITH HER FEET

*Singer/ songwriter talks about homelessness and being pigeonholed*

interview by MICHAEL BERGERON

Just when you have Michelle Shocked pegged she switches her trademark acoustic sound for a swinging band, including horns. A song off her new album *Captain Swing*, like "(Don't You Mess With) My Little Sister," takes on a new sophistication, with bluesy guitar riffs and honky-tonk piano, when compared to the same song performed solo off her debut, *Texas Campfire Tapes*. *Campfire* was acoustic, recorded on a Sony Walkman at the 1986 Kerrville Folk Festival, enhanced by crickets and highway sounds.

An artist who rose from homelessness to a Grammy nomination over the period of a couple of years, must have some conflict with the entertainment business over artistic control. For Shocked, most of that problem is eased by her chameleon-like ability to transform her voice into more styles than just the solo guitarist/ performer. Also, Shock's pairing with producer/ guitarist Pete Anderson helps her find the right mix of instrumentation and voice. The most commercial example of their collaborations is "On the Greener Side." With its post-Little Feat beat and slick video, it goes a long way in establishing Michelle Shocked as tough — more than a neo-folkie.

I spoke with Shocked at her home in Los Angeles last week by phone about a number of subjects. To talk with Michelle is like talking with your pleasant country cousin. There's a definite twang in her accent, but her approach to her career suggests the guided professionalism of one who breathes the air of the big city.

PN: Where does 'Captain Swing' come from?

doms and rights and think that by voting once every four years things are okay. It's not exactly my idea of a democracy. I'm cynical and I'm not justifying the fact that I don't vote. I'm having a hard time with the census, I tell you.

*You lived as a homeless person for part of the '80s.*

I just saw the movie *Roger and Me*, and I was real inspired by that. It hit on a lot of important issues and provided a couple of pieces of the puzzle to me. We've stopped talking about unemployment, and now we're talking about homelessness. There's a boycott directed at the census by those that feel that the government would use the figures to minimize the problem. In L.A. about two weeks before the census began, someone came up to me with a flyer asking me if I needed a job. It was counting the homeless for the census. They want to know how much money to give them [the homeless], which I think is ironic. They created the problem and now they want to throw money at the problem they started.... From four in the morning until six in the morning they were going to stand outside of abandoned buildings and count people coming and going. My idea, and what I told people to do, was on that night [March 20] to go down to the shelter, lay down and be counted. And again that's my idea of politics — you can vote with your feet that way. Lay down and be counted.

*Has your experience provided you with a solution?*

I'll state it real clearly: my solution is a radical one. I stand firmly on the side of squatters. It's easier to ask forgiveness than it is to ask permission. Squatting as a tactic involves you occupying and fixing up a building. While you're disputing your right to stay there, by fighting the



traditional songs. The kind of tune that you hear when you go to a bluegrass festival, where everybody can play along because they all know the tune.

*How do festivals differ outside Texas?*

The Kerrville Festival is unique in that it last three weeks, and it's run by volunteers and you camp out for the whole three weeks. Other bluegrass festivals last up to five days, and what you got there is lots and lots of campground picking. Winfield, Kansas — that's where they have the National Flatpicking Championships. There's a bluegrass festival in

command a swing vote in the German parliament. In a democracy, you don't have to have a majority but you do have to have a swing vote. You don't have to go only left wing or right wing. You find that common denominator. My allegiance lies with any group that seeks solutions within the community.

*What is your degree of artistic control on your projects?*

When *Short, Sharp, Shocked* was released, it had a label on it — 'place in pop rock section.' By the end of the year, I was getting the Grammy nomination for best folk album, written up in the CMJ [College Music Journal]. Instead of being labeled pop, it was labeled folk and I was finding myself on alternative playlists, venues, charts and categories. Now I get a little amusement in going to a record store and seeing *Captain Swing* sitting in the folk bin, next to Pete Seeger and Joan Baez. They made the category, and I'm having a lot of fun at their expense.

*And the video for 'On the Greener Side'?*

The record company acts very much like a bank. They will advance you the money to make the video. I don't like the politics of making the video, and there's a large degree of coercion involved. Video is a very direct contradiction to what I believe in. People should make their own music. Video reduces that one step further. If you can't afford to make a video, you can't afford to make an album. If you can't afford to make an album, you can't afford to make music. That doesn't agree with my politics at all.

The record company, on the other hand, will tell you, 'If we don't make a video for the single, we can't promote it properly. The record won't be successful.' Left on my own, I wouldn't make

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PN: *Where does 'Captain Swing' come from?*

**Michelle Shocked:** It's an obscure reference to an industrialist revolt in England. When I was on tour with Billy Bragg, he gave me a book called *Captain Swing*, and it was a rather dry treatment of this social phenomenon whereby peasants rise up spontaneously and march over to the nearest wealthy landlord and burn the threshing machines. They would leave a note signed 'Captain Swing.' As a self-described knee-jerk anarchist, one of the tactics I'm familiar with is sabotage. When I was in Australia, I learned that a lot of those Captain Swing rioters were deported there.

*You champion that cause, and yet you admittedly don't vote.*

I know... it's like voting with your feet. I work real hard every day of the year, and the one day I take off is election day. And then to contrast that to people who won't exercise their free-

Lay down and be counted.

*Has your experience provided you with a solution?*

I'll state it real clearly: my solution is a radical one. I stand firmly on the side of squatters. It's easier to ask forgiveness than it is to ask permission. Squatting as a tactic involves you occupying and fixing up a building. While you're disputing your right to stay there, by fighting the eviction, you've got a roof over your head. It's radical because it fucks with the idea of private property in a major big way. In a major big way.

*Houston is the first city on your tour.*

I was on David Letterman, and he announced I'd be starting a nine-week tour in Houston. He said that was an awfully long time to be in Houston.

I like the Texas people, and if I lived anywhere else I'd like those, but the heavy-handedness of the politicians, of the society, makes me think I won't live in Texas again.

*Your lp's have the key of each song indicated in some way. Do you want your audience playing along?*

Definitely. Much to the dismay of my manager, I have the fantasy of fans playing along on stage.

I'd like to do an album made up of

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Texas has a real hybrid. At some campfires they're playing John Prine, at other campfires they're playing Irish tunes. There's hardcore gospel bluegrass, and then people like my dad and his group of friends who would be blasphemous to the whole thing and play "Plastic Jesus" on Sunday morning and Red Clay Rambler songs.

*In your own handwritten biography, you state a belief in the Greek philosophy of "unity through diversity." Could you elaborate?*

It's a political principle I learned through the Greens [West German political party]. The Greens had a success a few years ago forming a coalition based on people with all kinds of alternatives to the system. When they came together, they formed a coalition strong enough to

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The record company, on the other hand, will tell you, 'If we don't make a video for the single, we can't promote it properly. The record won't be successful.' Left on my own, I wouldn't make them. But, it's a compromise working within the system.

My latest video I had pretty complete control on. There was one video I made where I was having fun with the stereotype of little girls playing with dolls. I had the little girl smash the head. I know little girls who do that. They decided it promoted child abuse, so I went along with having it taken out. 'On the Greener Side,' the video, is a parody of Robert Palmer's video. It was my idea. My wearing a mini-skirt is a means to an end. It was like one of Palmer's models turning the tables on him.

*The Captain Swing tour kicks off in Houston this Thursday, April 5 at the Tower Theater. Poi Dog Pondering will open this leg of the tour.*

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