

Shock to the system

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FOLK

"Clayton who?"

Even though Michelle Shocked epitomizes the late-'80s variant of political rocker, she doesn't presume to tell America — or her home state of Texas — how to vote. "I'm sorry I'm so shallow about this Williams guy," she says, "I'm less interested in how

politics apply to the real world and more in how they guide me through ethical dilemmas."

Even so, Shocked became an art-household name in 1988 not only for her sophisticated folk music, but for her political interactions with the real world — as exemplified by the cover of her major-label debut *Short Sharp Shocked*, depicting her being led away screaming by a cop during a riot of some sort.

But while Shocked, the professional hobo and activist for the homeless, captured the media's mondo eye, Shocked the musician chafed under such superficial attention. "I had my feelings hurt by being forced to compare myself to other people who were based simply on image," she says.

The new album, *Captain Swing*, deviates significantly from the ostensibly purist folk of *Short* and the indie *Texas Campfire Tapes*. Full of brass and bravado, the highly orchestrated songs on *Swing* left many reviewers bemoaning the supposed evaporation of Shocked's honesty.

"I had some of the material even at the time of making *Short Sharp Shocked*," she says, "and with that in mind it was kinda the direction I was going in. For example, last January, with my dad [Dallas folk singer "Dollar Bill" Anderson] we kinda hitched a ride on a barge down the Mississippi from Memphis to New Orleans, and when we got there a friend of mine introduced me to that mambo rhythm.

"It got me to thinking that ... it would be hard

MICHELLE SHOCKED, POI DOG PONDERING, JOHN WESLEY HARDING

Where: Austin Opera House, 200 Academy Drive
When: Sunday

to call one style 'swing,' so I really loosened up and went for the feeling. I ate [Anderson, her producer] was responsible for going into the realm of R&B; left to my own devices, I'd have gone for that traditional swing sound."

Anderson came with the package Polygram presented to an extremely dubious Shocked. The trials of working within the industry — "a system," Shocked says, "that I held responsible for the ethic of putting profits before people." It still leaves Shocked "somewhat on the defensive."

Being a big-time star of sorts also gets in the way of Shocked's eccentric musical ambitions. "I'm thinking about taking another wild left turn on the next album, and I'm now being told that I can't really do that unless I get success for this record. Pete's telling me that I can't be ziggin' and zaggin' on the margins if nobody's paying attention."

The past three years have seen Shocked taking a lot of giant steps — from non-professional acoustic tunesmith to L.A.-based Top 40 hitmaker and bandleader. "I sometimes get nostalgic for the squatting days and the political collectives and hanging out by the campfire, but I'm kinda committed to this now. But not forever — I have this vision of 10 years."

However, the old politically aggressive Shocked is still present, though not as manifest, in her current persona. "I described it once as less political and more subversive. There's underlying meaning that it doesn't bother me if people don't get. It's important for me to know that *My Little Sister* isn't actually about my little sister.

"There's more than meets the eye, but you're just gonna have to trust me on that. And that's a hard thing to do in these cynical times."



The woman in black just *luvs* her Doc Martins.