

MUSIC

A shift by Shocked

On her new album, Texas folkie picks up the tempo

By Shermakaye Bass Michael

Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

Michelle Shocked learned to drive on the East Texas red-clay backroads. Somewhere along the way she learned to play guitar.

Two years have passed since the Dallas-born picker-poet was catapulted into public consciousness, and as Ms. Shocked readies for a concert Friday at the Arcadia, she finds herself riding the roads of her childhood's recollection.

Only they're no longer backroads. The former punkster and Kerrville Folk Festival regular has steered herself onto smooth pavement. With a mere trinity of albums to her credit, Ms. Shocked has already been nominated for a Grammy for Contemporary Folk Recording (in 1988) and won the 1989 New Music Award for Folk Album of the Year.

You'd think she'd found her niche. But with the evasiveness that is her trademark, she's already deserted it. Her new album, *Captain Swing*, is a departure from the wrenching, poignant political manifestos of *Short Sharp Shocked* and the *Texas Campfire* days. With the shift in sensibilities — from pensive folk to swinging blues — Ms. Shocked proves to be as diverse as she is original.

"I feel like a horse at the gate waiting to run. It's, for me, the big payoff," she says of the album and her current tour. On previous outings — solo and with Britain's Billy Bragg — she performed alone, an acoustic guitar her only tool. This time she will work with a band.

On her last swing through Dallas, Ms. Shocked shared the Clearview stage with her brother and father. Bill Johnston, the father, who plays mandolin and owns a carpentry business in town, will likely be there Friday night. So will another important guest.

"Usually my grandmother comes," Ms. Shocked says

via telephone, the languid murmur confirming her Texas roots. "She brings the five aunts; they're my great-aunts actually — they're all standing up front. Even when I played at (Club) Clearview . . . there were these little ladies with blue hair."

The balladeer with the boyish hair says her grandmother was a role model. "She — in the '50s — got divorced," Ms. Shocked explains. "She's Roman Catholic. She knew she was facing a lifetime of being alone — she raised two kids that way." She talks about the "courage and spirit" that inspired her as a girl and still amazes her today as her grandmother battles cancer.

Courage and spirit are words some might also use to describe Ms. Shocked. She was arrested at the Republican and Democratic national conventions in 1984 for protesting Cold War politics, and she's a vociferous defender of the homeless. After running away from Gilmer, Texas, and her fundamentalist upbringing at age 16, Ms. Shocked spent years on the streets, eventually ending up in San Francisco amid the "squatters" movement.

She later ping-ponged around Europe, writing anti-capitalist anthems, buying a houseboat in London. She was raped in Italy and institutionalized in Santa Cruz. At one point, she says, she almost began to believe she was crazy.

Luckily a therapist convinced her she wasn't, saying: "You ain't crazy, you're just poor." This was like a lightning bolt to the shell-shocked artist.

As she explained to a reporter for the magazine *Spin*, "That's a real valuable thing to tell somebody. Someone tells you that, they give you insight: 'It's not you, baby, it's the system.'"

Since then, she's poured a lot of effort into trying to change the system. Her music speaks to that. "I try to be subversive," she says. "That's my goal. You want people to realize that there's more than meets the eye."



Michelle Shocked's *Captain Swing* does just that.

The details:

What: Michelle Shocked in concert, with Poi Dog Pondering opening

When: Friday at 8 p.m.

Where: Arcadia Theater, 2005 Greenville Ave.

Admission: \$22 (plus service charges). Call Rainbow Ticketmaster, 787-2000 or metro 787-1500.

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