

Black-clad Shocked begins tour at Tower

BY DENISE WENNER

Michelle Shocked launched a nine-week tour here last Thursday night at the Tower Theater on Westheimer. The native east Texan played to a beer-toting, collegiate crowd that danced in the aisles and begged for repeated encores.

Dressed in black from her cap to her combat boots, Shocked led the audience through a series of musical moods. By the third number, Shocked had warmed up enough to shove back her cap and grin and wink as she sang the hit from her latest album, "On the Greener Side" from *Captain Swing*. "Just a love song," Shocked called it, but it's lines reveal a cynicism that seems to sustain much of her recent work. Halfway through the 90-minute set, the singer changed pace.

Shocked has never been reticent about a past that has shaped her music as well as her attitudes. She mentioned bouts of homelessness and psychiatric consultations (a la Dr. Isabelle "Ringing Pierce") as background material for songs she performed. Shocked remained at least one step ahead of her audience during these songs, using the unexpected to compel the attention of her listeners.

As a prelude to another work, she narrated a history of a personal acquaintance of hers, Michael Stewart, a graffiti artist from New York City. Cheers from her fans punctuated her story, until the revelation that Stewart lost his life as a result of a confrontation with the police. Rather than downplay her own ideas about society, Shocked takes risks in such a forthright way that she sets herself apart from many of her peers.

Perhaps nowhere else did she demonstrate more control than while playing her folk music. At times, her songs assumed a lyrical quality as she sang of learning to drive on the red clay back roads of Texas, for example. From the attentiveness of her audience, it seemed that she touched them with her experience in a much more direct way here.

The music of Shocked contains wit as well as social messages. In another song from the *Swing* album, "Silent Ways," she sings of a broken relationship:

"Silence is golden/Words are made of lead/And in the alchemy of love/You know some things are better left unsaid."

Perhaps. But in the alchemy of music, Shocked says it all.