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## Michelle Shocked rolls through Texas with her road dawgs

BY DAVE HOEKSTRA

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**R**OUTE 45 BETWEEN HOUSTON AND DALLAS—This is Michelle Shocked territory.

Not too long ago, the maverick singer-songwriter learned to drive on these East Texas backroads. Now she's tooling around in a new 40-foot Eagle tour bus, launching her first American tour with a band.

Few have described the liberating feeling of Lone Star transit better than Texas songwriter Billy Joe Shaver: "Movin' is the next best thing to being free."

And the highway is a symbol of the freedom of Shocked, a foot-on-the-floor folkie whose musical ideas run through rock, swing, blues and jazz.

I spent a few days on the road with Shocked and her 18-member "Captain Swing" entourage as they recently began a nine-week American tour. Fans should buckle up for a similar sense of adventure when Shocked and company roll through Chicago. They will appear Friday at the Vic Theatre and Saturday at the University of Chicago's Mandel Hall. The eclectic Austin, Texas, band Poi Dog Pondering and witty singer-songwriter John Wesley Harding will open both shows. Fi-

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# SHOCKED AND AMAZED

## Rollin' along through Texas with Michelle and her road dawgs

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nally, Shocked, Harding and the BoDeans will appear in an acoustic Earth Day show at 10 a.m. Sunday in the southwest corner of Lincoln Park. In between all this, Shocked will fly off to Washington, D.C., for another Earth Day concert.

Shocked, 27, applies a similar restless spirit to her art. In three years she has made three very different albums. Her storied, stark debut "Texas Campfire 'Appa'" (1987) was recorded in one take during a session at the Kerrville (Texas) Folk Festival. The follow-up pop-rock album, "Short, Sharp Shocked" (1988) was a musical clothesline that hung out everything between Texas roadhouse and San Francisco punk. Finally, "Captain Swing" (1989) was yet another departure, delving into audacious Dixieland horns and dicey blues progressions. Shocked is a freewheeling artist symbolic of all that is Texas.

"This is a real famous stretch of highway," Shocked says from the back of the bus after the tour's maiden show in Houston. "Gilmer [her hometown] is halfway between Dallas and Houston. Tonight, people were coming up, 'I'm from Rusk,' 'I'm from Smithfield.' You have to scratch your head and remember those area towns about the size of a dime. Lots and lots of small towns. The way I used to relate to it was the school your school played football with. The funniest team was the Daingerfield Rabbits. Yeah, it was 'Go, You Rabbits!'"

The members of this 18-person team, however, will call themselves road dawgs on the tour, which concludes June 2 in Southern California. What follows is a 24-hour, we-never-close road dawg diary:

**3 p.m., April 5:** Shocked's innocence is immediately defined by stacks of luggage in the hotel lobby. The pile is topped with Shocked's jet black skateboards. It's like seeing Roy Orbison's glasses without Roy.

**4:30 p.m.:** Road trout to the Tower Theater for a sound check, which is on everyone's minds but mine.

I do a bus check. The dawg house features a small kitchen area, front and rear televisions, a VCR, a compact disc player and a color portrait of John Wayne on the dash. The rock band Poison thoughtfully bestowed the portrait of the Duke. It's a 12-bunk bus. There are 14 people making the night run to Dallas. The bus driver is thinner than an icicle in August. He wears an oversized Cleveland Indians baseball cap, which makes him look like a starving version of former relief pitcher Kent Tekulve. Considering what's happened to Gloria Estefan and Willie

Nelson, I decide it's important to get to know this guy.

Justin Wadsworth, 23, works for the Florida Coach bus company out of Kissimmee, Fla. It leases buses to entertainers; the driver comes with the bus. In Wadsworth's three years with Florida Coach, he has driven Bob Dylan, Tom Petty, U2, Yes and Poison.

In a longer tour such as the "Captain Swing" thing, it's common to see temperaments take wide turns. "The first week of a tour, they'll see what they can get away with," Wadsworth says. "I don't yell at nobody. Sometimes I'll pick up their mess, and they get the idea. There are times when you have to say, 'Would you please not put your feet on my couch?' But you gotta have patience. They're paying for the bus. As long as they don't come up here and blow cigarette smoke in my face, it's OK. They can do it back there. I close the curtains."

"That's their world."

**5:20 p.m.:** A sound check is the rock 'n' roll rendition of battling practice. Shocked refines the screeching chimp sounds from "When I Grow Up"; keyboardist Skip Edwards, a former daffy polka-riffs; guitarist Nina Gerber cuts some heavy-metal chords. Someone should record an album of live sound-check stuff.

**7 p.m.:** Dinner at the Bangkok Taste restaurant, across the street from the venue. This is the first chance to relax with some of the road dawgs. Sitting for dinner are Shocked, her boyfriend/assistant Bart Bull, her manager Peter Golden, tour manager Wilbert Terrell and saxophonist Jim Pollock.

Pollock breaks out of the gate as the funniest member of the tour. Over dinner, he designs a dream double bill: The Theater opening for Mister Mister. I offer the opening act: Mel Tillis.

Don't think twice.

**8:45 p.m.:** Poi Dog is coming to the end of an artsy but fun opening set. Bassist Bruce Hughes says, "This one goes out to Michelle Shocked, her band and her entourage." Her entourage? Maybe this counts as the second stage dedication of my life. The other one came from Screamin' Jay Hawkins, although it was too close to "Constipation Blues" for my full appreciation.

**9:25 p.m.:** Edwards' rattlesnake keyboards kick off "When I Grow Up," and the show begins. Shocked's 75-minute set is as unpredictable as her albums. She jumps from the Bowers skat of "Streetcorner Ambassador" to a solo folk cover of "Memories of East Texas" to the naked punk of "Graffiti Limbo." Later, on the bus, we talk about her endless unpredictability.

"I wasn't too slick with my raps tonight,



Photo Reserve/Paul Nalkin

Michelle Shocked: "I'm going through all these changes about politics."

but that's what I was trying to get across early in the show," Shocked says. "I know people were surprised to see me playing with a band. I enjoyed playing solo, but people knew what to expect. Given a choice between preaching to the converted [her description of a solo performance] and entertaining the troops [a band setting], instead of apologizing for it... [Her voice trails off.] There was a time I used to say dancing was a brain disease. Boy, I look back on it now, and I was wrong."

"I'm going through lots of changes in my attitudes toward music, toward using public forums and politics. I'm not ignoring contradictions and I'm not pretending that I'm going to stay a certain way just because that's what I said last year."

**10:40 p.m.:** The concert ends after three encores: a high-rolling "If Love Was a Train," a subtle version of "Anchorage" and the jovial "Strawberry Jam." Shocked, Bull and Golden retreat to the dressing room, where they hold court for dozens of well-wishers. Guitar technician John DeFoore helps put away the axes. The band splinters. Some take showers backstage at the venue; others head for the bus.

**12:30 a.m., April 6:** Capt. Wadsworth cuts a tight corner as the bus lurches out of the parking lot, and we're outta Baghdad by the Bayou (i.e., Houston). Terrell suggests stopping at a mini-mart for beer and food. Terrell and company march out of the bus. Minutes later, they march back in. You can't buy packaged liquor after midnight in Houston.

**12:45 a.m.:** Golden, a former manager for the Eagles, Jackson Browne and Crosby, Stills and Nash, has been thinking ahead. Golden and Terrell have stocked the mini-refrigerator with soft drinks and a bottle of champagne.

The road dawgs toast opening night out of plastic cups.

**1:10 a.m.:** We're screening a concert video from this winter's "Captain Swing" tour of England. The show is virtually identical to the one just completed, but three new players are on the American tour. The most important recruit is guitarist Gerber, replacing Shocked's guitarist-producer Pete Anderson, who has studio obligations. Anderson, an accommodating minimalist known for his work with Dwight Yoakam and Rosie Flores, would appreciate Gerber's bare-bones style. While loyal to traditional blues and folk idioms, it finds space for experimentation.

Pollock, meanwhile, seals his role as court jester. Watching a shot of his long and layered blond hair, he flashes a satisfied smile and says, "Yeah, I had good hair that day."

**1:15 a.m.:** Poetry in motion: Shocked is on the screen, singing about the East Texas land rolling by the bus windows: "I learned to drive on those East Texas red clay backroads/And I mean to tell you my friend, they weren't no easy roads."

Shocked and I are talking about the hitchhiking trip through the mid-South that she took with her father last year. "I don't know how sarcastic I should be, because I'm still dealing with it, but I was approached by a Hollywood producer to make 'The Michelle Shocked Story,'" she says, looking... well, somewhat shocked. "This woman was real interested in having Winona Ryder as Michelle Shocked. [Laughs.] She said a funny thing. She said, 'We're committed to the truth or higher truth and nothing less.' Well, right now I'd rather develop a screenplay of 'The Arkansas Traveler,' based on the old story and

the trip I took with my father. 'I'll tell ya something, I didn't know Hollywood was so screwed up,'" continues Shocked, who just moved to Los Angeles. "I thought it was because you got your Republicans in Washington, and they need some sort of propaganda coming out of Hollywood. Now, after having met them [the Hollywood community], my take on it is, who are all these knee-jerk liberals [who] are no more concerned with telling the truth in a story than the Republicans are in Washington, D.C.? I could be paranoid. But I played my first Hollywood benefit and I saw the same types. These actors from 'thirtysomething' and 'L.A. Law' were all networking. They were real committed and really deep, and I'm so cynical. That's part of why I'm going through all these changes about politics. When I saw the way politics and Hollywood got married, then I said, 'Oh, I'm going to do some thinking about the position I put myself in.' I just wasn't aware of that."

**2:45 a.m.:** With the rain coming down hard, visibility is a problem. Terrell, a miracle worker who has been a tour manager for the Supremes, Marvin Gaye and Lionel Richie, tells Wadsworth to pull over if necessary. "We're not in any hurry," he says. Bus accident horror stories begin to bounce around. Terrell offers a tip: When you go to bed in a tour bus, always sleep with your feet facing the driver. In the event of a sudden stop, that way you'll avoid the hassle of a broken neck. With that in mind, some band members retire.

**3:15 a.m.:** The back of the bus is empty. Two short sofas in the back room have been reserved for Golden and myself, the extra baggage on this leg of the trip. We go to bed.

Now I can say I slept with a rock 'n' roll manager.

**5:10 a.m.:** Arrival in Dallas. The road dawgs stumble out of the bus. The scene looks like an early morning fire drill at a liberal arts school, circa 1969. Our hotel is filled; a library convention is in town. The good news is that Terrell has managed to pull some strings and get some rooms.

**5:15 a.m.:** The bad news is that he didn't pull my string. I have to go back to bed on the bus until a librarian checks out. Somehow that desire was never on my list of dreams, but it's very important now. My eyes look like waffle irons.

**8:30 a.m.:** I finally talk my way into a room. It has not been made, but then, neither have I. I pull some apparently clean sheets over the slept-in sheets and obtain serious sleep.

**3 p.m.:** Back on the bus, Hank Williams Sr. has blessed the CD player, while Pollock and Gerber examine the bond between "Move It On Over" and "Mind Your Own Business."

Shocked inspects a colorful Easter basket left in Houston by a fan. After removing candy and fruit, she carefully places an orange candle egg on the kitchen table. She whispers, "Fans are the nicest people."

I suppose the greatest tribute to the bond that remains long after the bus has left town. After you take away the managers, technical people and snoopy journalists, all that remains is the open relationship between a musician and an audience. And if they are fortunate enough to discover such freedom in each other, then the road, indeed, goes on forever.