

# Shocked delights in subversion

By William R. Macklin  
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A young man calls from Los Angeles, identifies himself as Bart Bull, and offers to set up an interview with Michelle Shocked.

OK, fine. Happens all the time. Managers, publicists, record company representatives, they all call from time to time hoping to set up interviews. But Bull isn't any of those.

"I'm just a friend," he insists. "Michelle asked me to arrange some interviews for her."

The situation seems suspicious, a little spooky — a hoax perhaps — until one remembers that this is Michelle Shocked.

The same Texas-born, folk-singing Michelle Shocked whose first major album carried a cover photo of the singer in a police headlock; the same Michelle Shocked who writes her own publicity releases — in longhand; the same Michelle Shocked whose second major album, "Captain Swing" is filled with gentle politicisim, played to a swing-jazz beat; the same Michelle Shocked who sends a "friend," to do a publicist's work.

This is the same Michelle Shocked who clearly delights in beating the system.

"Subversion is the log I hold onto as I'm flailing along in the mainstream," says Shocked, 27, calling from her Los Angeles home, 15 minutes before the time arranged by her friend Bull. "I've tried, but I haven't always been successful in getting things turned around a bit."

Shocked probably underestimates herself.

Espousing environmentally oriented Green politics and singing her subtle, ironic prose in a soft, slightly accented Texas twang, Shocked's very presence in pop seems a triumph of substance in a style-obsessed world.

She is, in music industry terms, an accidental tourist who happened into the business after a collection of songs she recorded one night at the Kerrville Folk Festival went to Number One on the British charts

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## Michelle Shocked

**WEDNESDAY**

Michelle Shocked with opening act, Poi Dog Pondering in concert at the State Theater in Kalamazoo starting at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$16.50 at Believe in Music, the Grand Center Box Office and Hudson's in the Woodland Mall. For credit card orders call 456-3333.

# SHOCKED

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as the appropriately titled, "Texas Campfire Tapes."

Shocked, who had lived as a squatter in San Francisco and New York, packed what bags she had and headed for England and a short tour in 1987.

While there she was noticed by Polygram Records which agreed to release her major label debut album, "Short Sharp Shocked."

## Always shocking

Shocked explained that she used the stark, black and white headlock photo (taken during a rally to protest restrictions on protest in San Francisco) to provoke listeners and the recording industry.

"The standard belief is that you use the image of the artists to sell the music," said Shocked, reflecting on the un-glamorous grimace she wears in the photo. "That idea has been responsible for so much that's wrong in the music business. I believe that if you do music that's honest, it will make a statement about the artist."

As to the title of "Short Sharp Shocked," Shocked said she came up with the idea while sharing a London "squat" with some impoverished political activists.

"I was living with six black men and one of them was arrested," said Shocked. "The police wanted to harrass him, so they arrested him. You've heard of those behavioral psychologists who believed they could change a rat's behavior by giving it a series of short sharp electrical shocks. Well, that's what

this was like. They wanted to change his behavior, so they kept arresting him — short sharp shocks."

Shocked's identification with the oppressed is much more personal than it first seems.

She was raised by her mother and Army officer stepfather, who eventually settled the family in tiny, conservative Gilmer, Texas.

Many of Shocked's songs reflect on her difficult childhood.

"I've drawn quite a bit on the fact that my mother and stepfather were fundamantalists," said Shocked. "I was indoctrinated from an early age, coerced. It was, 'accept this life, or get out.' I ran away from home at 16."

## Musical move

Moving in with her "liberal" musician father, Shocked spent her 16th summer taking in various bluegrass festivals, gorging herself on a record collection that included Randy Newman, Ledbelly, Big Bill Broonzy, and Texas-based musicians like Guy Clark, and learning the basics of musicianship during informal family jams.

Some of the lessons Shocked learned that summer seem to surface on her latest album, "Captain Swing."

The record seems less ostensibly political than "Short Sharp Shocked," but the singer denies that, pointing out that the best political songs are those that hide their true nature.

"My tendency is to look for the line where music and politics sleep together," said Shocked. "That's where some truly fine things can happen."