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Michelle Shocked handles her setbacks

BY DOUG PULLEN

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Michelle Shocked lived up to her stage name when she released her latest album, the musically diverse "Captain Swing," late last year.

"Well, for people with a sense of adventure, it's been great, but for people who expected more of the same, it's been rough," the 28-year-old Texas native confessed in a telephone interview.

"Captain Swing" is a huge departure from the personal, country-blues inspired folk-rock of "Short Sharp Shocked," her 1988 major label debut, a Grammy-nominated critical and commercial hit.

She wanted all the new songs to swing, but wasn't committed to a big band concept. So with producer Pete Anderson in tow, she recorded each of the record's 12 songs (one of which, "Russian Roulette" is not listed in the credits) in a different musical style — rock 'n' roll, Chicago blues, Texas swing, Dixieland jazz, big band, honky tonk. There's even a poignant neo-baroque song about the price of fame, "Looks Like Mona Lisa."

In a day when such diversity is anathema in the record business, Shocked has had a hard time selling her new album.

The first test was England, where she debuted her new stage show.

"The reactions were mixed. With most of the people that went in uncertain, I felt like I'd done a good job of winning them over. And there were some who kind of gave me the Rob Dylan at Newport reaction," she said, referring to the 1965 folk festival at which Dylan was booed for playing an electric guitar.

At one gig, audience members shouted down one another — strange stuff in a country known for its reserved audiences.

"That one night did hurt my feelings," Shocked admitted. "Some



Michelle Shocked

in the crowd) were yelling at me, and the other people were yelling at them."

Even her video of "On the Greener Side" has been criticized as a sell-out because the usually tomboyish Shocked wore a form-fitting dress in it.

"It was my idea completely," she explained. "The whole gag was about turning the tables on Robert Palmer," the dapper Englishman whose videos typically feature clone-like models performing zombie-like choreography.

"I was taking a potshot at what I thought was a very misogynist" group of videos, she said.

An itinerant Army brat,

Shocked's family settled in East Texas when she was 15. Fed up with her mother's fundamentalist preaching, she ran away a year later, hooking up with her pot-smoking free spirit natural father in Dallas, where she was exposed to folk and blues music.

She's lived in San Francisco, where her political awakening began to flower (that's her being arrested on the cover of "Short Sharp Shocked"), New York, and Europe, where she was raped while hitchhiking.

Returning to Texas, concerned friends contacted her mother, who committed her to a mental institution. She was released when the

insurance ran out (her incarceration inspired her stage name).

A chance encounter with a British record producer at Texas' Kerrville Folk Festival resulted in her first album, "Texas Campfire Songs," taped on a Sony Walkman and released independently in England.

She was living in a houseboat on London's Thames River when Polygram Records came calling with a recording contract. Skeptical of joining a major corporate entity, she decided it would provide her with a massive platform for her left-of-center political views.

Shocked moved to Los Angeles last year after completing the

"Captain Swing" sessions, hired new management and started putting together a new band for touring.

But life in the land of glittering contradictions has made her cynical about stars touting causes — she thinks there's a fine line between commitment and opportunism.

"I've always said that my music is a means to a political end, and having the experiences I've had the past couple of years, I've had the opportunity to speak out on my political views," said Shocked, who numbers homelessness, sexism, racism and the environment among her numerous causes.

"But I've done my first couple of Hollywood benefits and that's a strange animal. Because of that, I'm going through a change in which I'm becoming even more concerned about the role of an advocate ... I see these little starlets towing the political line like a fashion. Maybe that's where the problem lies."

She's-trying-to-figure-out-where she stands amidst all the confusion.

"I'm still confused on this question," she admitted. "But otherwise, why am I out there? What else would I do with these opportunities?"

She's also coming to terms with her religious schizophrenia.

"It seems all my life I've half always believed and half thought it was a load of crap ... I'm starting to feel like I've found a real natural solution. I thought I had to fight and struggle with the question, but it's kind of fallen into place."

So, despite the setbacks, has her career.

ON STAGE

Who	Michelle Shocked
Where	Royal Oak Music Theater
When	7 p.m. Sunday
How much	\$17.50
Info	TicketMaster