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## Michelle Shocked startles on musical and political counts

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By Bill Wyman

It was a startlingly different Michelle Shocked who greeted 1,200 fans at a sold-out Vic Theater Friday night—different on two quite crucial counts.

First of all, on the musical front, the Texas-born, international drifter-turned-folk-singer now presents herself, as the title of her new album puts it, "Captain Swing."

Shocked, whose two previous Chicago engagements have seen her accompanied onstage with little besides an acoustic guitar and her prodigious charm, now fronts a seven-person band, complete with sax and trumpet. And, yes, they swung.

The other new Shocked front—whether it was improved as well depends on your taste—was the political one. The old Shocked was a militant radical; her last Chicago appearance, at Cabaret

### Rock

Metro last spring, nearly turned into a free-for-all when she brought Art Institute school cause celebre "Dread" Scott Tyler onstage and started preaching revolution.

Still, the diminutive singer—still waitlike in tank top, close-cropped hair, and fisherman's cap—told her fans Friday night that after three years of such antics, "I got the feeling people knew what to expect. I felt like I was preaching to the converted."

Shocked stuck to entertainment after that, putting her hand through its paces on jazzy, swingin' numbers from "Captain Swing."

The story would have a happy ending if that new album could be said to be an advance for Shocked. Unfortunately, whatever its musical efforts, the album falls on the much more important level of songwriting—and that weakness carried over into the show.

Shocked's major label debut, 1988's "Short Sharp Shocked," dazzled fans and critics with its extraordinary grasp of the folk idiom, drawing chiefly on the story of her alienation from her West Texas upbringing and later world travels. With a knowing humor and searching use of metaphor—like the distant friend in the moving "Anchorage"—Shocked seemed a promising new talent.

But there's hardly a song on "Captain Swing" that bears that stamp of her personality, and, in concert, songs such as "On the Greener Side" and "Silent Ways" went by without making an impression.

The Shocked show was actually a 4½-hour extravaganza, with two opening acts: young British singer-songwriter John Wesley Harding and the ebullient Austin, Texas, band, Poi Dog Pondering.

Poi Dog Pondering delivered a typically enjoyable show, and the crowd loved it.

Harding is an acid-tongued devil who is aware he has to work hard to overcome four initial strikes against him: He sings like Elvis Costello, writes songs like Elvis Costello, uses (on record) Elvis Costello's old rhythm section, and looks like Elvis Costello to boot.

Things could be worse. (He could look and sing like Donny Osmond.) But his debut album, "Here Comes the Groom," is a delight. On stage, he was appealing and energetic, singing songs from the record, making jolly fun of everyone from Phil Collins to Don Henley, and closing with a very funny cover of Madonna's "Like a Prayer."