

UNION-NEWS
SPRINGFIELD, MA
DAILY 110,442

FRIDAY
MAY 4 1990

225 BURRELL'S PC



FIVE-STAR PERFORMANCE — Michelle Shocked turned in a brilliant set Tuesday before approximately 1,600 at Smith College's John M. Greene Hall.

Powerful performance pleases Shocked's troops

By KEVIN O'HARE

NORTHAMPTON — She's down from her pulpit, she's kicked off her shoes and she's quoting Marilyn Monroe instead of Karl Marx.

Oh what a difference a year has made for Michelle Shocked.

The dramatic change suits her well as could be seen and heard, during the Texan's five-star performance at John M. Greene Hall on the Smith College campus Tuesday.

A crowd of approximately 1,600 turned out for one of the year's best concerts thus far in the Pioneer Valley. It also featured a brilliant set by acerbic newcomer John Wesley Harding and a delightfully offbeat performance by the wildly eclectic Poi Dog Pondering.

Yet the night belonged to Shocked, whose double-encore show marked a 180-degree turnabout from her most recent area appearance, last March at the Paramount Performing Arts Center in Springfield. While musically satisfying, that concert was practically destroyed by the singer's pretentious and incessant political monologues.

This time around, Shocked included a bit of politicking, but primarily concentrated on her infectious brand of folk and swing. The results were outstanding.

In explaining her change of strategy, Shocked quoted Monroe from the stage:

"Don't preach to the converted, entertain the troops," she said to a roar of approval from the audience.

For the past three years the leftist songwriter has stuck to a solo acoustic format in her live appearances, but she brought an outstanding six-piece band along with her this time out. The group was powered by keyboardist Skip Edwards, drummer Jeff Donovan, and in particular, sizzling lead guitarist Nina Gerber.

Much of Tuesday's 21-song, 90-minute performance was culled from the singer's third and latest album, "Captain Swing." Included were riveting versions of "God is a Real Estate Developer," the hit single "On the Greener Side," and the scorching feminist anthem "(Don't You Mess Around With) My Little Sister."

The headliner spent much of her time on stage shakin' up a storm, something that would have seemed unthinkable a year ago. She provided an even bigger surprise when she brought out her father as a surprise guest. Known simply as "Dollar Bill," dad joined her for a beautiful mandolin duet mid-way through the show and

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also supplied some background vocals during the second encore.

His appearance was one of the night's high points, but it wasn't the only one. Shocked's a cappella rendition of Steve Goodman's "The Ballad of Penny Evans," was eloquent, as were "Memories of East Texas," and the moving encore version of "Anchorage," both off of 1988's "Short Sharp Shocked."

Twenty-four-year-old Englishman John Wesley Harding, who stole his name from Bob Dylan and his style from Elvis Costello, has nevertheless managed to carve out something of an inimitable style on his own.

Combining some sharp melodies with brutal wit, Harding took on some of rock's sacred cows during his 40-inutes on stage. Sting, Phil Collins and Don Henley were among the elite victims. The song that will most certainly gain him notoriety is "July 13, 1985 (The Hypocrite Song)," a scathing attack on rock benefits in general and the fabled Live Aid concert in particular. Unfortunately the song does not appear on Harding's recent U.S. debut album. Yet the singer did offer several selections from the disc, including a strong version of the title track, "Here Comes The Groom," as well as his own "Sympathy For the Devil," called "The Devil in Me."

He also included a couple of offbeat Beatle tributes, "Mother Last Night I Shot a Famous Man," (about the death of John Lennon) and "When the Beatles Hit America." In the latter he imagined in detail what it would be like if the Beatles regrouped in 1993. In case you're wondering, they'd probably sound like the Electric Light Orchestra and be sponsored by Visa according to his theory.

Poi Dog Pondering earned a standing ovation for their 12-song set, which featured plenty of the band's "Afro-Hawaiian" brand of eccentric material.

The eight-piece lineup included an array of instruments including violin, pennywhistle, mandolin and trumpet. The music was as wild as the instrumentation, ranging from folk/pop to psychedelic.

Included were several standouts, most notably "Living With the Dreaming Body," "The Ancient Egyptians," and "U-Li-La-Lu." The latter selection included frontman Frank Orrall's memorable line "If I should die in a car wreck — May I have Van Morrison in my tape deck."