

# SHOCKED TREATMENT

*Michelle Shocked takes her politics personally*

BY BRIAN Q. NEWCOMB

**“W**hat do you do,” gloats the William Hurt character in *Broadcast News*, “when your real life exceeds your dreams?” Or some such folderol, and the obvious answer was, “Keep it to yourself.”

Michelle Shocked, a folksinger with a big Texas voice, is not so easily quieted. She has ignored such sound advice, to the point of saying in a *Spin* interview, “Just because I don’t know what I’m talking about doesn’t mean I’m going to shut up.”

On the surface, which is where most of pop culture lives and moves and has its being, Shocked is chock-full of contradictions. A musician with no aspirations to commercial success in the recording industry, Shocked had some of her songs recorded at the 1988 Kerrville Folk Festival in Texas by a passing Englishman with a Sony Walkman. She was a volunteer — not a performer. After hearing some of her songs around the campfire the night before, Paul Lawrence asked if she’d play some of these so he could tape them. The rest, as they say, is show business. Well, sort of.

Lawrence released those very recordings on his own indie label, *Cooking Vinyl*, and by the time he got a hold of Shocked to let her know it was out, *The Texas Campfire Tapes* was at No. 26 on the independent British charts, on its way to No. 1. This led to Shocked’s signing to Polygram and to two fine releases, *Short Sharp Shocked* and her latest, *Captain Swing*.

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experiences have colored a lot of my decisions on these issues, and writing those songs is directly from my experiences of my time.

“After the ’84 elections I went to New York, took awhile to earn enough money to buy a ticket, went to Amsterdam, which is where I got honestly involved in the squatting movement. I encountered not just squatting as a means to an end, people doing it just so they had shelter, but they had managed to build an entire culture and economy around squatting, and that was very exciting for me to see. It gave me the logic behind squatting which I never would have gotten in this country, which is, ‘It’s easier to ask forgiveness than it is to ask permission.’ Also, it’s that you don’t go to the government that created the problem and ask for help. You take charge of your own life. You create the solution in your own community. In a lot of ways squatting is just a continuation of the anarchist approach to economy and culture, which is you stand together, you fight for your rights together. As long as you do that, you’re going to have your basic needs met.

“Now, I’m facing a pretty big contradiction because the way squatting works most effectively is when the homeless people are fighting for their own rights, and I’m really cynical about advocates for homelessness; you don’t have the self-interest involved. Yet a lot of my justification for being in the media spotlight while I’m on tour and releasing albums is so that I can address issues that, while I was a squatter, I never got that side of the story told.”



*Michelle Shocked*

screen with a bright green guitar, while a harem of statuesque male models stands idly by. Shocked explains that “the ‘Greener Side’ video was definitely having fun at Robert Palmer’s expense. When that video (“Simply Irresistible”) first came out, it was sensitive; it sort of got under my skin; but it was after he sold that commercial to Pepsi that I really decided he deserved whatever he got. It was bad enough that they had these women looking like bimbos, but when they cut off their heads and just turn (them) into torsos . . . I understood very clearly what is the message behind that image, which is sex used to sell a product.”

Of course, some whose only experience of Shocked was her “Anchorage” video thought, “Hey, she has legs”; others saw it as a sellout. Shocked recognizes that some may have seen her video as the same thing as Palmer’s, only reversed, but she was willing to take the risk: “For me the agenda has

treated as some kind of new ideology, as if by this little effort we will all be set free. It kind of nurtured the cynicism that I already had, actors in light roles using this involvement to prove that they’re deep, and deserve better roles.”

**B**ut shouldn’t we encourage public responsibility in our celebrities, shouldn’t we be grateful for their attempts to make a difference in the world? Shocked doesn’t think so: “I’ll tell you why I don’t feel that way: They use it as a justification for putting out propaganda that holds up their side or position, and I think propaganda is the real ethical issue here. Because they’re left-wing, they think their propaganda is good, but they’re in a position in the media where it doesn’t matter. They tell lies just like the right-wing tells lies. People need information so they can make up their own mind; I don’t think it gives enough credit to people’s ability to draw their own conclusion.”

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Shocked's history is one that informs her music with a distinctive political agenda. Raised by strict Mormons, she describes herself as "a feminist in a very strong way that was in defiance of the efforts of my fundamentalist upbringing to indoctrinate me otherwise. It makes me wonder if there's such a thing as feminist by nature, but I can't think of too many things in my background that would have encouraged that in me; I just was feminist. And then, there's my having been a runaway, (which) affected my thoughts on homelessness, being a young woman . . ."

Shocked avoids expressing an ideology over communicating from her own life: "My political agenda addresses a lot more to do with my personal experiences. That's the place where my music and my political agenda can meet, speaking from experience. I can give them a level of feeling that no amount of ideology can provide."

But before you toss Shocked into that left-wing folksinger box inhabited by the likes of Tracy Chapman and Billy Bragg, she is quick to express an individualism steeped in anarchist political engagement. Homeless most of the years from 1979 to 1987, Shocked had first encountered "squatters" in the San Francisco Bay area and then received a full education in the squatter movement after moving to Amsterdam in 1984. Her success has raised some difficult issues for the artist.

"I've been involved in the squatting movement for the last four or five years, directly involved out of a need for shelter. And now I'm in the interesting position in that I'm not homeless anymore; I could well afford to pay rent, probably even buy a house. But my past

rights together. As long as you do that, you're going to have your basic needs met.

"Now, I'm facing a pretty big contradiction because the way squatting works most effectively is when the homeless people are fighting for their own rights, and I'm really cynical about advocates for homelessness; you don't have the self-interest involved. Yet a lot of my justification for being in the media spotlight while I'm on tour and releasing albums is so that I can address issues that, while I was a squatter, I never got that side of the story told."

It is not just Shocked's wariness of the "advocate for the homeless" role that has caused some to question the integrity of her convictions. *Short Sharp Shocked* followed in the musical path of her indie effort, ostensibly a folk album. Some have seen the bluesy, Big Band swing of *Captain Swing* as succumbing to traditional pop-music values. Shocked begs to differ.

"It's going from a naive folk to a more informed folk, or a folk that has more choice, but I really honestly consider this album to be folk material as well. Stylistically, I'm using swing, but by my definition it's still folk. For the most part it has three chords and something to say. This music is intended, and it serves its best, when it's done live.

"I've also heard that this music is less political, which I find amusing. If anything, it's more political. While the last cover was very political, you would be hard pressed in the material to find anything that fell into the definition of a protest song. In fact, it gives me an opportunity to redefine the difference: I'm not a protest singer, but I'm very much a musician with a political agenda. You get a very clear perception of me by the choices I make, by the way I present my material."

One such decision, which, again on the surface, led some to be suspicious, was the video made for the song "On the Greener Side," in which Shocked in a tight black mini-dress dances across the

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Of course, some whose only experience of Shocked was her "Anchorage" video thought, "Hey, she has legs"; others saw it as a sellout. Shocked recognizes that some may have seen her video as the same thing as Palmer's, only reversed, but she was willing to take the risk: "For me the agenda has been subversive; I want to subvert that whole 'the medium is the message' kind of thing. That's where I'm going at it from. Secondly, I'm dealing with a fairly low form of humor, parody, so it's a double-edged sword. But it's like the album cover [of *Captain Swing*] and the wink, you know — can you imagine a rock star in the '90s saying, 'You gotta trust me.' Yeah, right. I'm really just going after the subversive angle."

Recently, Shocked experienced the role of speaking out for the rights of others and it left a stale taste in her mouth: "I can't get past that basic contradiction that I have become a spokesman or an advocate. My experience with politics is that whenever you've got that situation created, you've got leadership, and leadership is always going to take you down its path, and it generally tends to be a dead end for meeting your needs.

"I came into this with 'Of course you use your position in the media to address political issues.' But I've recently been affected by some cynical insights into careerism, as it regards political opportunism. I was recently invited to do a benefit where I'm living in L.A. for medical aid to El Salvador, and there was the list of usual suspects on the bill: myself, Kris Kristofferson, Jackson Browne, Billy Bragg, John Doe from X. And on top of that they also had all these TV actors from *thirtysomething*, *L.A. Law*, *Cheers*; you know what I'm getting at . . . It was the most horrific thing I've seen since I left the Mormon community, where politics is

attempts to make a difference in the world? Shocked doesn't think so: "I'll tell you why I don't feel that way: They use it as a justification for putting out propaganda that holds up their side or position, and I think propaganda is the real ethical issue here. Because they're left-wing, they think their propaganda is good, but they're in a position in the media where it doesn't matter. They tell lies just like the right-wing tells lies. People need information so they can make up their own mind; I don't think it gives enough credit to people's ability to draw their own conclusion."

On *Captain Swing*, Shocked does make lots of statements on the issues of homelessness and personal political power, including a trilogy of sorts: "God Is a Real Estate Developer," "Cement Lament" and "Street Corner Ambassador." In the latter she addresses her concern over her new situation: "Those patronizing liberals took the words out of your mouth." But Shocked is careful to speak of her own experience, and not just shove an ideological worldview down the throats of her listeners. Plus, her fun love and "unlove" songs subvert sexism and cosmetic values in the culture at large.

So how does the politically motivated non-advocate deal with the contradiction of being asked to speak for others? "I call it the Strawberry Jam Revolution. It's inspired by the idea that you can never buy a jar of the stuff that tastes as good as what you make at home. Like I say, all it takes is three chords and something to say, and I'm trying to get this across to people that if I can do it, you can do it. It comes down to the idea where I've found that music and politics can co-exist very peacefully, and that is this: Music and politics, they're both too important to leave to professionals."

Michelle Shocked will be performing at the Westport Playhouse on May 11, with Poi Dog Pondering and John Wesley Harding, whose own brand of political folksinging was the surprising highlight of another triple bill when he opened for the Mighty Lemon Drops a couple of months ago at Mississippi Nights. ■