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BURRELLE'S

Singer Michelle Shocked Leads Warm And Invigorating Show

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By Louise King

One of the most clever of a new breed of up and coming singer-songwriters, Michelle Shocked, made her St. Louis debut at the Westport Playhouse on Friday. She brought with her two excellent opening acts, John Wesley Harding and Poi Dog Pondering. The cumulative effect of the entire show was heartwarming and invigorating, and I dare say quite a few people left the theater with a "new favorite act."

After going it solo for three years, Shocked is currently touring for the first time with a band — and what a band it is. Friday night the songs from her most recent album, "Captain Swing," were enlivened by a two-man horn section that generated enough energy to power a steamship, especially during "Cement Lament," which featured an infectious marriage of soprano sax and muted trumpet.

When it was time to alter the mood in the room, Shocked picked up her acoustic guitar and sang lovingly about her hometown, her rich, folk singer's voice vibrating with both vulnerability and strength. She let the audience members in on the personal moment, sharing a chorus with them,

and that, more than anything, solidified their close rapport.

Her matter-of-fact sort of humor and natural Texas charm were evident throughout the evening, even when she was delivering a powerful political or social statement, as she did with her own "Graffiti Limbo" and an anti-war tune written by the late Steve Goodman, interpreted by Shocked a cappella.

More than anything, this concert was a well-rounded representation of the entertainer: Shocked the big band singer. Shocked the backwoods daughter. Shocked the militant activist. And the audience loved all of her.

Those who had seen the opening acts before Friday night's show still got to witness a rare treat as Harding, a British folk singer with an outspoken lyrical vision, and the Poi Dogs, an eclectic bunch from Austin, Texas, joined forces on several numbers between the two sets.

While Harding had the audience off-guard most of the time with establishment-mocking tunes and vocal barbs, the Poi Dogs kept them entertained with a unique multi-instrumental approach that included performances on tin whistle and frying pan, among others. It was a fine example of how loose a band can get, especially when it's their last show of the current tour.