

'Folks' thrill Civic Center crowd

By Michael St. John

Music writer

Two proponents of the renewed surge in topical, humorous and stylistically bold "folk" music — that being the stuff most "folks" can get into which is generally accompanied by acoustic instruments — John Wesley Harding and Michelle Shocked thoroughly delighted a youngish crowd of about 1,000 at the Civic Center's Oscar Mayer Theater Sunday night.

MUSIC REVIEW

The former was an amusing dry-witted British smart aleck.

The latter showed herself to be imbued with a social consciousness in the spirit of legendary folkie Woody Guthrie; perhaps moreso than his own son Arlo.

Harding (born Wesley Harding Stage 24 years ago) performed solo and quickly established a playful rapport with the title cut from his Sire Records debut "Here Comes The Groom."

His guitar work was impeccable and imaginative. Lyrically, he displayed a penchant for cramming 127 words to a verse a la Elvis Costello. A prime example was the picturesque diatribe aimed at an apparent acquaintance titled "You're No Good, Nick."

A gifted writer, Harding's attitude allowed a grating quality to surface when he took a shot at fellow countryman Sting and others using music to spur social action in "July 13, 1985" (the date of the Live Aid concert) also called "The Hypocrite Song." His mood took a caustic and cynical turn with a brief but biting send-up of "We Are The World."

Shocked, a couple years short of 30, set the record straight regarding her outlook by opening with "When I Grow Up I Want To Be An Old Woman."

Backed by a six-man band highlighted by two dazzling horn players, the former vagabond and squatter known to hitchhike to gigs in the early days of a three-year recording career set the tone of her show with "God Is A Real Estate Developer," described in an earlier interview as "having fun at theology's expense."

There was plenty of philosophy and pointed commentary — "On The Greener Side," "Cement Lament," "Streetcorner Ambassador" — as Shocked performed all 10 tunes from her new Polygram label release, "Captain Swing."

Big band arrangements and a surprisingly large sound characterized most of the latest material, but few seemed to mind the departure from her one-voice-one-guitar roots. There was snappy boogie, boozy blues and Shocked seemed to be genuinely enjoying the opportunity to spread enjoyment through the auditorium.

Her 90-minute set covered swingtime production numbers, a heartwarming tale of friendship in "Anchorage" and earned two encore calls.

With disarming humor, Shocked closed her presentation on a light-hearted note by declaring, "like politics, music is too important to be left in the hands of professionals."

We need more "amateurs" like her.