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# Michelle Shocked still shocking

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The Register-Guard

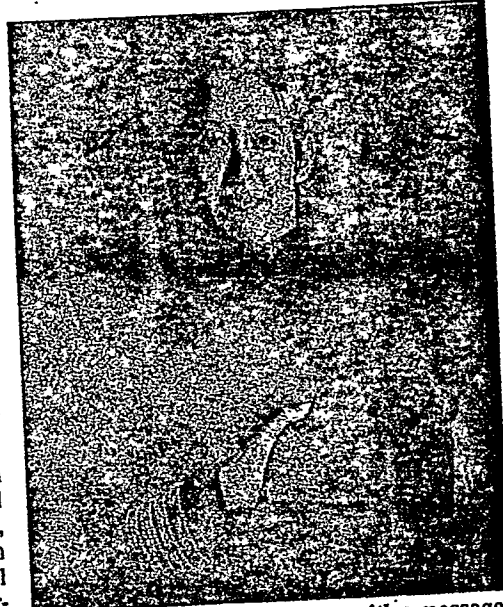
## Defiant musician heading for Hult

**N**EARING 30 NOW, Michelle Shocked is still trying to graduate from the School of Hard Knocks. A runaway from home at 16, she spent the better part of a decade virtually homeless in San Francisco, New York City and Amsterdam. Twice, she was committed to a mental hospital against her will. In Italy, she was raped, joined a women's separatist commune and then was kicked out. Traumatized and radicalized, she survived.

Then better things began to happen. She was discovered and recorded by a British independent record producer, and her "Texas Campfire Tapes" reached No. 1 on the British indie charts.

This led to a contract with PolyGram Records and even greater success with a second album, "Short Sharp Shocked." The cover was a photograph of her screaming as she's subdued by police at the 1984 Democratic National Convention in San Francisco.

"I can always defuse anger with a song. I'm free and I haven't been defeated," Shocked said in a 1988 Newsweek article by Pete Axthelm, who cited her concern about "sexism, racism and runaways" and saw in her unconventional style "the populism of Woody Guthrie, the literate storytelling of Tom T. Hall and the wit of her



Michelle Shocked sings songs with a message.

friend and mentor, undervalued songwriter Guy Clark."

Late last year, Shocked shocked those who had her pegged as a protest folkie by touring Britain with the Captain Swing Revue, a big band that sounded like the second coming of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys.

Her third album, "Captain Swing," drew high marks from some critics and put-downs from others for its sassy swing style, even though many of the songs are socially conscious ("God Is a Real Estate Developer," "Streetcorner Ambassador," "Cement Lament").

"Her down-home direct approach has been severely compromised," sniffed one London critic, while Steve Pick of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch hailed her as "one of the most exciting new voices in pop music." In Shocked's home state of Texas, Claudia Perry of the Houston Post rapped "Captain Swing" in a piece headlined "Big, dull Shocked; ex-squatter seems to have eye on pop's high rent district."

Shocked was undaunted. Unlike most musicians, she included both positive and negative review excerpts in her press kit, along with a handprinted note in which she defends her

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swing to swing and attacks music industry pigeonholers.

"No one who truly loves music wants to see it divided into the segregated cultural demographics of the current commercial wisdom."

As a performer, Shocked is no more adventurous in this respect than kindred spirits such as K.D. Lang and Lyle Lovett (another Texan), but she is more outspoken about it.

In a telephone interview from Minnesota earlier this week, she compared "black" and "white" music formatting on radio to separate drinking fountains and segregated schools.

Now living in Los Angeles, Shocked is involved in efforts there to organize a WOMAD (World of Music, Art and Dance), a portable multicultural music festival along the lines of those organized by Peter Gabriel and others in the mid-1980s.

"The idea's to bring musicians from all five continents together on the same stage so people are exposed to their music and politics in an appropriate way," she says. After a decade of "cause rock," she says, people need consciousness-raising less than they need "resources and tools to do something" about social, economic and environmental problems.

The WOMAD being organized in Los Angeles may play Seattle's Bumbershoot Festival and some Canadian festivals this fall, Shocked says, but she probably won't go along because she's



John Wesley Harding

Opens Hull Center show

"You can buy different brands of strawberry jam, but nothing tastes as good as homemade."

Another goal is to preach what she calls pragmatic feminism, "something you can put in the hands of women who need it just to get through the day because of problems with bosses, children, husbands, economic circumstances." This runs counter, she says, to more militant feminists who are more interested in "purifying" feminism.

**"It's just my two cents' worth. I'm not speaking for others, like a preacher or a politician."**

—Michelle Shocked

"not commercially strong enough" to be useful.

As a matter of principle, Shocked says, she is running her current U.S. tour without financial backing from PolyGram. The principles are to avoid overreliance on fickle money men and to protect touring as "the sacred right of the performer." The practicality of the matter is that she has to work five or six nights a week just to break even.

On the road since early April on a tour that won't end until June 2 in Los Angeles, Shocked clearly was tired and dispirited during a telephone interview Monday. Her view is that albums should sell tours, not vice versa, but she believes that PolyGram has slacked off on promotion of "Captain Swing" and it's slipping on the charts, which doesn't help her tour.

Traveling by bus with "five musicians and a drummer — an old joke," Shocked is headed for a May 24 performance at the Hull Center for the Performing Arts.

British singer-songwriter John Wesley Harding, who just made his Sire/Reprise Records debut with "Here Comes the Groom," will open the show at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$17.50 at the Hull Center ticket office (687-5000) and its outlets.

If her style switch between "Sharp Shocked" and "Captain Swing" took some people by surprise, Shocked says, it's because they mistakenly assumed she was following their agenda instead of her own.

Her agenda has several points, she says.

One is to keep her music simple enough — "three chords and something to say" — so people will realize that they can do it, too. "I call it the strawberry jam revolution," she says.

In a sense, "Captain Swing" may be Shocked's protest against the tendency of fans and record labels to stuff musicians in palatable and marketable little boxes.

"The root of the feeling," she told a magazine interviewer, "is that you're a pawn in somebody's game. You're out there being yourself and saying what you think you feel, and at the end of the day you end up being just another little thing to fit into a category that's already been constructed. I don't know whether it's insecurity or ego that makes you not like that feeling, but I know the feeling's terrible."

Shocked says she has worked hard for a chance to swim in the musical

mainstream, and would like it to work out. She says her years as a homeless runaway were "a powerful kind of conditioning that affects a lot of your thinking processes," but she's not looking for guarantees of material security.

"My goal is to stop recording, buy a sailboat and travel around, pulling in here and there, examining local politics and seeing what I can do to improve the situation," she says.

"There's not much security in that, but I hope that by the time I'm able to try it I'll have more confidence, a sense of self-worth that nobody can really shake. That's a really valuable thing to possess."

Shocked's sense of humor may help her keep on an even keel in the music business. One of the slyer, lighter songs on her "Captain Swing" album is built on a jauntily nautical pun:

"You hauled in and called my bluff. You took the wind out of my sails. It must be luff. It must be luff."

One day earlier this week, Shocked sounded very much like someone who'd temporarily had the wind taken out of her sails. But she also sounded like a seasoned sailor who can change her tack to get where she's going in a world with few truly safe harbors.