

This woman doesn't vote Republican

By Ken Hunt

People love to categorize artists. Just love to stuff them into one narrow little adjectival construct that insults the artist's capacity for expression and creativity. And then there are those who defy any categorization whatsoever, and lately it seems that there's been an explosion of artists who vehemently refuse to be labeled, who go out of their way to avoid such. Even that becomes a cliché after a while. And then there's Michelle Shocked.

No, you can't label her as "folk," "anti-folk," "singer-songwriter," "women's rock," or any of those other rather ignorant sorts of nomenclature. But neither does she present the garish facade of nonconformity currently in vogue. Shocked is a musician and a storyteller, a political activist and a drifter, an opponent and member of "the system." She and her art are inseparable. That is why, when she is lumped in with the New York anti-folk scene with its luminaries such as Roger Manning, Kirk Kelly and Cindy Lee Berryhill, she chafes.

"I think (that label) is something that's been put on me, rather than something I was going for myself," Shocked said. "I don't think it's accurate, and I really don't think it's something I have much respect for." Perhaps it's merely a twist of fate, then, that by path now legendary for its unlikeliness she has become part of the vanguard of the female singer-songwriter and folk revival, along with Suzanne Vega and Tracy Chapman. Her first album, *The Texas Campfire Tapes*, was recorded on a Walkman in a field outside of the Kerrville, Texas, Folk Festival in 1986. She agreed on a whim to allow it to be released as an album in England, an album that charted nationally and thrust Shocked into the spotlight as the rawest, most fundamental of the new generation of singer-songwriters.

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The Texas Campfire Tapes and its studio follow-up, 1987's *Short Sharp Shocked*, present Shocked as folksinger; with an accent on simplicity, a number of deeply personal vignettes are given life and form, with a note of wistfulness that sustains throughout even the happiest melodies. There's the ugly side of San Francisco in "Fogtown," the peaceful, solitary church bell of "5 A.M. in Amsterdam," the hell-bent reminiscence of small-town Texas adolescence in "Gladewater." When Shocked hits that magic turn of phrase, it's synesthesia. These albums, and Shocked's past few tours, have been less musical showcases than conversations; impressions float through the mind as if they were one's own... driving across Texas with the car permanently in fourth

gear...squatting on two coasts and two continents...whooping it up with a friend, now a mother and housewife...misty without being sentimental, the haze of a pleasant longing.

Captain Swing, however, released last year with considerably less fanfare, deals the final blow to any labels diehard bigots have been trying to foist on her. The emphasis of the new album is firmly on the music; whereas *The Texas Campfire*

whereas on this album it was emphasized much more strongly." Indeed, her current tour will be her first long-term tour with a full band — it's even called the "Captain Swing Revue."

Much has been made over Shocked's political stance, radical to the core, and even more about her so-called conversion to "the system," that is, working with the music business. It's a hazy issue, to be sure. She reveals little of her personal life,

message to put in your songs," she said. "But I realized that a lot of times the music gives you the opportunity to give your two cents' worth. You might think a song lasts a lot longer so you want to put your message in, but you never know when something you might say might reach somebody or inspire or touch them — and that's having something to say as well."

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There remains, however, the question of the "system," about which Shocked is admittedly ambiguous. "As a result of being inside the system, I've gone through a lot of changes," she said. "I don't think it's part of human nature to be comfortable with changes, but I was working for a long time outside of the system — my involvement with the squatting movement is an example of that — but when I got a letter from England saying that I had an album that was number 26 on the charts, that's the point at which I started working inside the system. There's been a lot of successes and lots of failures in achieving the kind of goals or agenda I've set for myself by taking that opportunity."

And with the question of her observations or impressions collected since her initial crash into the public eye, Shocked's personal privacy becomes manifest. She speaks of social and musical trends objectively, judging without personalizing. "There's a pretty general consensus that there's a growing 'green' consciousness," Shocked said. "I don't know how to define it beyond that; to call it a politic or a party is somewhat problematic. But I think that there is very much a growing consensus that we've all got to come to some kind of solution to the destruction of our environment."

"Some people see this consensus reflected in music; suddenly it seems like all the bands are singing about the environment," she added. "They think it's kind of a bandwagon, just kind of career opportunist in a sense. But I also think it's one way you could argue that music does reflect society rather than actually change it. It's reflected in music as well as this green consciousness."

There's the complexity that makes Michelle Shocked so damn hard to classify. Privacy and consciousness (and conscience) run parallel lines through her life and art, and it's all presented in a way that just makes you want to swing. Put that in your pipe, and smoke it.

Michelle Shocked performs at the Paramount Theatre Wednesday, May 23, at 8 p.m. Opening is John Wesley Harding. For more information, call 628-0888.

Tapes is just Shocked, her guitar and a chorus of crickets, and *Short Sharp Shocked* places the background instrumentation firmly right there, *Captain Swing* is a big-band blowout, replete with horn sections, numerous guitarists, backing vocalists, the whole kit and kaboodle. As the title implies, the album romps through 11 tunes that sound more like theme songs from old World War II movies than the straight-from-the-aorta geysers implied by the term "folksinger." Even the songs with depressing lyrics make the urge to jitterbug deathly strong. For Shocked, this unexpected shift in emphasis is merely a natural step in the creative continuum.

"It's a pretty basic force of my inspiration to write music," she said. "I used to sit around with my father and his friends and play traditional tunes, and although I realize that the swing style is the kind of thing you sit around playing on banjos and mandolins, it has a lot more to do with the nonverbal communication, the eye contact, the interaction of playing with other people."

"I didn't have that chance to represent that side of myself with *Short Sharp Shocked*," she added, "because I was touring solo, and the emphasis was on the stories and the content of the song; the music played a secondary part of the song,

but her political activities have gained almost as much attention as her music. She participated in the squatters' movement in New York and Amsterdam, rallying around the cause of artists who wanted to occupy old buildings and make a home out of them. She protested and was arrested at the 1986 Republican convention in Dallas — the cover of *Short Sharp Shocked* sports a picture of her arrest, a mustached policeman grabbing her in a chokehold, her face contorted with rage. She declared herself expatriate in the early '80s, at the height of the Reagan administration's symbolism of everything swinish and decadent about America, and drifted about Europe. Politics hasn't completely escaped her music; "Graffiti Limbo" tells the story of Michael Stewart, an African-American beat to death by subway police in New York in 1966, and in concert she has delivered traditional "protest" folksongs dealing with the Vietnam War and economic rapacity. Yet unlike the issue saturation of the music of Roger Manning or archetypal neo-protest folkie Billy Bragg, with whom she has toured, Shocked's political messages retain surprisingly little hold over the general lyrical themes of her music.

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