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Shocked value: She took a turn from the words, came out swinging

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Michelle Shocked lived up to her name when her most recent album, "Captain Swing," came out last year.

The crew-cut Texas folkie, who plays Wednesday at the Paramount, shocked and angered many fans by taking a completely new direction. Known for deeply personal, countrified folk tunes such as "If Love Was a Train" and "Anchorage," she abandoned that style for swing and blues.

Her country twang was replaced by brassy R&B. Instead of mandolins and fiddles, she was backed by horns, strings and synthesizers. Many who had championed her earlier records cried foul.

"Michelle, please shut up," whined The Houston Post. "The cacophony of contradictions is deafening us."

"Wait a minute!" echoed the Oakland Tribune. "This is supposed to be a Michelle Shocked record. Where's the acoustic guitar and songs about East Texas?"

But there was also praise from some quarters for her courage in tackling new styles, and for her songwriting, which was still crafty, funny and politically aware.

Shocked says she has enjoyed the controversy.

"It's amusing to me," she said in a phone interview. "I get as



Michelle Shocked
Living up to her name

much of a kick reading the bad reviews as the good."

She made the change, she said, because she wanted to work with a band and wanted the band to have horns, and that's the kind of songs that came out of it.

Her next project is going to shock her folk fans even more, she predicted. She's collaborating on a song with Paul Simon, for an album being put together by renowned bassist Rob Wasserman.

"He's such a hero of mine," she said of Simon. She said she likes him more than Bob Dylan, to whom she used to be often compared.

"I don't really have that much

respect for Bob Dylan," she confessed. "I wasn't even around when he was influential. I have a lot more respect for Paul Simon because, for what it's worth, he's still around. He's still going through changes. I like the idea that someone can get better with age, rather than this tragic rock myth that as you get older you have to decay."

Shocked also altered her image with the first video from the LP, for the song "On the Greener Side." Abandoning her usual all-black outfits of men's clothes, she wore a snug green mini-dress and appeared with a bunch of dancing male models. She was parodying Robert Palmer's videos featuring sexy, blank-faced female models, but some people didn't get the joke.

"Because I wore a dress, that was seen as evidence that I'd sold out," she said, with a soft laugh. "You can't win."

Asked what the audience should expect at her show here, she promised that she would do some of her old folk tunes as well as the new stuff. And she hopes concertgoers will realize that her new songs have important messages, about conservation, tolerance and freedom.

"This will probably be the most politically correct opportunity that they've had to dance in a long time," she concluded.