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Michelle Shocked sings with passion at Kingsbury

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By John Paul Brophy
For the Salt Lake Tribune
Michelle Shocked got herself in a bit of a jam Sunday evening.

As she exclaimed in the final encore of this concert in Kingsbury Hall, "Music and politics shouldn't be left to the professionals; if you want the best, you have to make it yourself." That said, she launched into "Strawberry Jam," mixing it up with her band as sweetly as the tune's title.

Concert review

The young singer-songwriter from Texas is touring in support of her third album, "Captain Swing," a departure from the previous solo releases. Those who were more familiar with Shocked's solo work were given a good taste of her stylings in that vein, but it was the selections with her well-synched band — keyboards, electric guitar, bass, drums, trumpet and saxophone — that were the main bill of fare in this excellent display

that blended not only swing but blues, jazz, r&b, and rock 'n' roll in a 21-song set.

Fronting the sextet with acoustic guitar, Shocked sang with passion — a sort of young-girl phrasing delirium abounded from the self-described "everyone's little sister." Heeding her doctor's advice, a prescription for a certain posterior malady that required ample pelvic gyrations to the music of Prof. Longhair and Louis Jordan, Shocked exhorted the mid-size crowd to take the cure. They responded enthusiastically, packing the orchestra pit to dance the night away and add an extra dimension of intimacy and welcome to the show.

From the opener, a captivating jazz-blues melange in the style of Carla Bley entitled "When I Grow Up I Want to Be an Old Woman," to the country-flavored r&b of "Anchor-age," Shocked and her bunch provided music that was as much food for thought as it was dance-inspiring. Insightful, biting political and social commentary seemed an ironic con-

trast with the jazzy arrangements, but the whole milieu worked remarkably well — especially "Can You Spare a Little Change" and "Everybody's Playing a Game Called Playing a Game."

Love songs were also included here, "Too Little Too Late" a highlight (Shocked sounding a bit like Maria Muldaur in the big-band days of Amos Garrett and Geoff Muldaur). With a short sailing lesson illustrated by a toy sloop, the New Orleans strut-ter "It Must Be Luff" was a lively entry. "If Love Was a Train" also was a rip-roaring bit of pop. Shocked's vocals expressive and on-target.

Surprisingly (or maybe not so), the three solo cuts packed a wallop nearly the equal of the full-band arrangements: "Memories of East Texas," a beautiful piece of imagery; "Isabel Ringing," a stunning portrait of homelessness; and the scathing indictment of "Graffiti Limbo" (a tribute to black artist Michael Stewart, who died in police custody), chilling in its power. A mandolin duet with her father on Norman Blake's "Jeff Davis" was also a good addition — no state-

ment, just solid picking.

If anything, Shocked's charisma and sheer talent in this show proved that, no matter the form, music is about feeling.

A chap who goes by the name of John Wesley Harding took opening duty. Accompanying himself on acoustic guitar, the singer paid homage to Bob Dylan (Harding took his name from an album title of the composer's) with his instrumental lines, while in lyrical content and vocal delivery he was eerily an embodiment of Elvis Costello.

High volume was a problem in Harding's display (as it was, in part, for the whole evening), but his dynamic performance — full of satire and displaying his own political conscience — was nonetheless intriguing.