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Singer shifts slightly back to mainstream

Michelle Shocked puts new swing in her music

By Robert K. Oermann
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Who says intellectuals can't dance?

They don't come much more articulate or politically astute than Michelle Shocked, but the leftist folk singer proves on her current album that she can swing, too.

In fact, "Captain Swing" is the title of her new collection, and it's as far from her early folk work as Count Basie is from Woody Guthrie.

"It's more important to play music that you enjoy, rather than what is political," Shocked said during a phone interview. "And there's no reason you can't do both.

"Certain things I do make people think I'm addressing their agenda. I'm not. I'm addressing my agenda. It's my music."

Shocked, who will appear Sunday at the Catalyst in Santa Cruz, caused quite a ripple in the music world when she burst upon the scene with "The Texas Campfire Tapes" in 1987. She was not only a gifted troubadour, but was also a self-described "activist-feminist-anarchist."

She gave away her money to political causes. She crusaded for environmental issues. She embraced the cause of homelessness. As a protest against the U.S. system, Shocked was an expatriate living on a London houseboat at the time.

Three years and three LPs later, she has eased more into the mainstream.

"I'm living in Los Angeles now," Shocked says somewhat sheepishly. "I had to 'swim real fast' to justify the move because I had taken a pretty strong position that I was an expatriate.

"But I did say I wouldn't live in America as long as Reagan was president," she adds with a laugh, fully aware that few policies have



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changed under President Bush.

She credits her musical shift to producer-guitarist Pete Anderson, whom she has learned to trust "in spite of his car phone and satellite dish."

The two first worked together on 1988's "Short Sharp Shocked." The first album, as its title suggests, was recorded live at a Texas folk festival while sitting around a campfire. "Short Sharp Shocked" was her first real brush with professionalism.

"Pete has really been the architect of my sound. I don't know how much of a bandleader I am, but I don't feel like I'm being treated like the 'chick singer.'

"This whole music career thing has never ceased to be an education."

On the strength of her second LP, Shocked became an international celebrity, having top hits in England and performing on the Berlin Wall in Germany.

Neither of the first two collections contained much overtly political material. In fact, she prefers to describe what she does as "entertaining the troops," rather than political haranguing.

Shocked's lilting speaking voice, wry sense of humor, sweet melodic sense and deft image-making ability make her seem nothing like the humorless leftists of yore. At age 27, she's much more a product of the '70s and '80s than of the activist 1960s.

"Captain Swing" has big-band horn arrangements, a jazz feeling and a rhythm-happy mood that shouldn't come as all that much of a surprise. As if to underscore the fact that she's become a swinging, danceable live entertainer, Shocked has just issued "Michelle Shocked Live," a five-song sampler of her new sound.

It percolates with even more energy than "Captain Swing."

On a previous tour, she said, "I felt very much like a commodity. This is a process I'm still in the middle of, and I feel like for the first time it feels natural. I have a life now."

□ MICHELLE SHOCKED will perform Sunday night at The Catalyst in Santa Cruz on Saturday night and at The Warfield in San Francisco.