

The returning power of the lonely troubador

By Duncan Wright *TECBA*



Michelle Shocked debuted her back-up band the Captain Swing Revue.

Michelle Shocked headlined at the Ventura Theater, with John Wesley-Harding opening the show. In a striking piece of irony, both parts of the show combined, even contrived to show how much more powerful a lyric-oriented singer can be when accompanied only by a single acoustic guitar. Ironic because it was headline artist Michelle Shocked who had deserted this form which established her, now playing with a whole band, while John Wesley-Harding, who has recorded his first album with a band, has started his touring career as a solo act.

Tri-counties concert-goers first witnessed the troubadourial style of Wesley-Harding at State Street's Carnaval earlier this year. There, he displayed an excellent spontaneous wit and the ability to create a real rapport with an audience. He filled the stage with his personality, talking very fast, cracking jokes (often of a typically British self-deprecating kind) and improvised slightly recklessly with his songs. In the large-capacity auditorium of the Ventura Theater, it was obviously going to be a harder task for him to reach the audience in the same intimate

way. So he tried to create the intimacy he thrives on by bringing people down to the front to fill the soulless space created at the front by the dinner-concert table seating. Eventually a sympathetic crowd moved through the tables to fill the gulf.

Wesley-Harding's style is to move around the stage, strumming his guitar furiously at times and generally showing that he is a natural at taking up a lot of space. His songs are wordy stories that make you want to listen and understand what he is singing. It is a narrative songwriting style that involves the individual listener in the plot. How does the story end? Does love succeed? Who is politically right or wrong? Is he singing about someone like me (in one of his more socially critical songs)?

Some of his self-condemning songs serve to condemn us all, such as "The Devil in Me," which lists a number of modern sins anyone of us could have committed. Indeed, many of his songs contain a strong moral current that is only occasionally offset by love songs such as "waiting for an audience with you."

It was a short set highlighted by the long narratives of "When the Beatles Hit America," a comedic satire on the ability of the music

business to exploit a successful act endlessly, and "The Live-Aid Song" which criticizes the self-congratulatory smugness of western musicians and the naive youthful followers who gave for one day during the world-wide concert.

Finally and briskly, the young English singer who has recorded with Elvis Costello's Attractions (and, at his worst moments sounds like a copy of that singer) said in one long sentence: "Now for Michelle Shocked time for the B team to go off I'm John Wesley-Harding buy my record good-night!"

Michelle Shocked came on in her new incarnation, "Captain Swing," with her back-up band the Captain Swing Revue. It was immediately apparent that this whole guise is a mistake for two reasons. First, as this show revealed, her use of Western swing is quite clearly a self-conscious wrenching away from the thoughtful songs of her early solo days. It looks like an almost desperate attempt to either reach a wider audience or simply take the pressure of expectation away from her formerly political songwriting talents. Perhaps she feels that she doesn't always want to have to be a political spokesperson for the

disenfranchised of the Reagan/Bush era. Whatever, the switch to swing seems like a crass blundering into commercialism.

Of course, we all liked her, anyone would. She was always a likeable honest soul, even to those who would disagree with her politics. Now she is more upbeat than ever, perhaps a little too anxiously, badly wanting the audience to like her new material, to accept her. To me it seemed that she felt rightly insecure about this new direction. Certainly she spoke to the largely politicized audience in an almost pleading way. She asked them to bear with her while she played more of the new stuff, her hired hands plowing through the heavily rhythmic swing of songs like "The Grass is Always Greener," "Some Things are Better Left Unsaid," "Everybody's Playing a Game Called Playin' a Game," and of course her single, the one that goes "When I grow up I'm goin' to have me a hundred and twenty children." All these songs are heavy on the beat, lighter on the lyrical side. They just don't have the thoughtful reflective quality of her solo, folk singer's style.

One of Michelle Shocked's prob-

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lems is that she didn't start out playing with a band. It is almost as though she can't see that a hired band does not have the identity of a real band. Brought together around her, they haven't fought and disagreed and sweated over the arrangements and dreamed of success and hammered out a product that contains the best talent of each musician. These guys are hired to do a job. Hey, swing? That's easy, what are the chords? They play with the confident knowing professionalism of the session musician, not with the feeling of the band member whose life is wrapped up in the music.

And so Michelle Shocked's new fun, fun, fun songs are packaged in a sort of shallow universal musical wrapping paper, which renders them functional, danceable but — so what? Most of us would rather hear an artist do what they do well.

Shocked used to sing personal songs with a political cut and thrust, but also with the human personal voice of experience. She remembers her background and old friends in East Texas, her life on the road, being homeless, in trouble with the law, the world from the point of view of a young wary but fully alive young woman.

These songs were far more pointed, focused intelligent, sensitive and emotive when she played them on Friday night. The band

left the stage, and alone again with her guitar, she showed how she could really best sing a song. The words to "Memories of East Texas" are moving, personal and clear as daylight in their meaning. They are not wrapped around a convenient tune, instead they take the tune with them, up and down according to phrase. So it is with "5 a.m. in Amsterdam" and (after some more "swing") the really beautiful and human "Anchorage," played with the band thankfully in subtle abeyance.

Everyone loved Michelle Shocked because that's the kind of personality she has. She is warm, friendly and charismatically communicative, but I suspect that most of us wished she would be reminded of her own solo performances by John Wesley-Harding

and his lone acoustic guitar, and realize that that is where her true talents lie.

It is almost as if we have come full-circle. We have been through every type of rock format, and it seems that the time is right for spokesmen and women to echo the uncertain moods of the '90's generation.

In the footsteps of Bob Dylan, Michelle Shocked is one of the few songwriters who could really carry this responsibility well, if she would only return to the direction she originally charted.

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