

CONCERT REVIEWS

Michelle Shocked; John Wesley Harding**(Ventura Concert Theater; 850 seats; \$21.50 top)**

One of the earliest of the current group of youngish female folk singers to hit the marketplace (all of four years ago), Texan Michelle Shocked may be among the very best. She's certainly one of the most adventurous and liveliest, and she was the first to break through the acoustic barrier in a manner reminiscent of Bob Dylan's 1965 Newport Folk Festival appearances, backed by a rock & roll band.

Shocked's first album, 1986's "The Texas Campfire Tapes," was recorded live on a portable cassette machine. While her next Mercury/Polygram album, "Short Sharp Shocked," employed a producer — Pete Anderson — and backing musicians, Shocked continued to perform her concerts in a solo, acoustic format.

Her local debut of the "Captain Swing Revue" came early last year at the Country Fest in Irwindale; the current tour, which included several Southern California stops, is her first opportunity to really expose the horn-driven, electrified Shocked to local fans. The show's a stunner.

The "Captain Swing" title that she's appropriated for herself and her most recent album is a bit of a misnomer: While the music ranges from blues to Dixieland, it doesn't really swing, that much, in a jazz sense. Caught in concert last Friday night in Ventura, though, Shocked — even more than on the album — rocked.

With only a brief acoustic interlude, Shocked and her seven-man band roared through a set of songs from her earlier albums and "Captain Swing" as well as some material she hasn't recorded yet, including the original "Everybody's Playing A Game Called 'Playing The Game'" and an unaccompanied version of Steve Goodman's Vietnam War protest, "The Ballad Of Penny Evans."

The band music was heavy on shuffles, with forays into New Orleans-style rock & roll (a rumba on "On The Greener Side," an arrangement of "Too Little, Too

Late" that might have been inspired by Allen Toussaint), rockabilly and, as mentioned earlier, Dixieland. All went over very well with the audience, causing some of Shocked's between-songs justifications of her switch from acoustic to electric to sound unnecessarily defensive — this wasn't Dylan at Newport, and her audience seemed more than ready to fill the Ventura Theater's dance floor.

Switching to mandolin, Shocked was joined near the end of her set by her father and younger brother on mandolin and fiddle, respectively, for an effective, bluegrass number.

Shocked is a terrific singer: strong, in tune and with lots of character. Too, she's an invigorating live performer; her exhilaration is more than contagious.

High marks should be given to the entire band, which included trumpeter Lee Thornburg; Jim Pollock on tenor and soprano and tenor saxophones; Dwight Yoakam's rhythm section of Jeff Donovan and Taras Prodaniuck on drums and bass, respectively; Skip Edwards on piano and organ, and a guitarist identified on material supplied by Shocked's label as Nina Gerbert — but that list credited Max Haskett as trumpeter, so who knows?

Producer Anderson was absent from the stage, but his influence was clear throughout the show; his contribution to the sound is incalculable.

Opener John Wesley Harding, a British acoustic offshoot of the Graham Parker/Elvis Costello school of Angry Young Bleaters, opened with a set that picked up increasing approval as the audience became familiar with the singer, signed to Sire/Reprise in the U.S.

Perhaps surprisingly, Harding's affecting version of Madonna's "Like A Prayer," performed without obvious irony, didn't seem to reach the audience at all. Perhaps Shocked's audience and Madonna's are too remote from each other for anyone to have recognized the tune.

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