

Shocked shines at BPAC

By Seth Rogovoy
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LENOX — Michelle Shocked dazzled and astonished at the Berkshire Performing Arts Center Saturday night, and raised one very important question: Why isn't she a superstar (yet)?

Shocked is familiar to most as one of the slew of female singer/songwriters who have recently gained prominence; her name is often tossed in with those of Tracy Chapman, Suzanne Vega and Shawn Colvin.

While she certainly shares some similarities and sensibilities with these other musicians, Shocked is light years beyond them as a performer.

Indeed, judging by her show Saturday night, Shocked is one of the most vital, exciting, entrancing and effective performers of our times.

Whatever it takes, Shocked has it, and then some. She is effortlessly at ease establishing a rapport with her audience. She is funny, graceful and personal. She presents each song to the audience as if it were a gift, or a child of hers she's letting us hold and hoping we like.

And we do. Her songs — mostly self-penned, some with music borrowed from traditional bluegrass tunes — range from detailed portraits of life in her native East Texas to autobiographical reflections of her life in America's underground, through which she wandered for much of the '80s as an observer and participant in street life like some latter-day Woody Guthrie. In these songs in particular, she mines a territory similar to that of Tracy Chapman, and sings in a voice laced with a similar vibrato. Shocked, however, brings an added element of first-person integrity to her material that eludes her more famous, Tufts University-educated, peer.

Folk-protest song

Particular standouts of Shocked's acoustic set included a song about her street-stint in Amsterdam and a modern-day, urban folk-protest song dedicated to graffiti artist Michael Stewart, who died while in the hands of the New York City transit police. Shocked's effective, dynamic finger-picking was more than matched by her big, bluesy voice



Polygram / Peter Miller

Michelle Shocked
Songs like gifts

Rock Review

that seemed to be able to do anything she wanted it to.

And this, perhaps, foretold the greatest surprise of the evening. Midway through her set, Shocked was joined on stage by Tower of Power, the 10-member outfit that warmed up the crowd with an energetic set of '70s-era funk and R&B.

Where weaker mortals may have been blown away by the Tower's instrumental assault — indeed, sometimes the Tower's lead singer is victimized thusly — Shocked was simply egged on to further heights, and she proceeded to barrel through a rollicking set of country blues, R&B and rock 'n' roll numbers.

Shocked termed it "the most politically correct chance you're going to have to dance all year," and instantly the BPAC hall was transformed into one big dance hall, with Shocked leading the charge with her own energetic vocals and enticing dancing. By the time she was rocking out on "Don't Mess Around With My Little Sister" it was clear that Mick Jagger and Bruce Springsteen have nothing on Michelle Shocked.

Waiflike, plainly androgynous, straightforward, Shocked presents a most unlikely picture of a rock star, especially in this video era of choreographed lip-syncing and computer-generated dance-noise. Shocked is a remarkable throwback to an era when a performer entertained through sheer talent and personality.

All the more reason to look toward Michelle Shocked as the savior of rock 'n' roll for the '90s.