



MORE SCENE

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RUSSELL BAILLIE talks to folk-rock-country singer Michelle Shocked about touring, recording, performing and, ahem, sport.

Shocked serve

SOME performers toss out sweaty towels York and thanks, I'll match the bathroom decor nicely). Other thrown souvenirs of affection by musicians to audiences include drumsticks (ouch my eye) and guitar picks (Oh food, an inch of thin plastic to get sentimental over) and for the really enthusiastic, themselves probably a way of checking crowd numbers are what the promoter says they are.

A fairly bonny stage presence, folk singer Michelle Shocked isn't that prosaic crazy. Don't know about the towels, but her guitar style is more finger-picking and she's not bringing a drummer.

But if she had the tossing habit, the Auckland audience, who gave her such a rousing response a year ago and will probably again next week, would be pelted with a volleyball or two.

A volleyball? Bear with us while Strange folk singer meaplor coming right up. Shocked is explaining what goes on in her mind before heading on stage alone with just that cap, guitar, and those songs for protection.

"You know I've had this, I'm going to call it a methodology, that has haunted me all my life and it goes back to my traumatic high school years and I'm sure many of us have this experience. We were forced to

take a physical education hour which I hated. I was really skinny and didn't look right so we had to play volleyball and we had to dress up in shorts and all this stuff.

"I would get up to serve the ball and I had this serve that . . . it was really really, I guess the net. Because if I got it over the net it was such a weird serve that no one could ever return it.

"But there was never a way to control it, so half the time I would get it over the net and that has haunted me in a lot of these kinds of areas. When I get up on stage to perform, I just feel so out of control of my circumstances.

"If it works, it works really well. But if it doesn't I'll be up that night . . .

So there must have been a night or two when things hit the net.

"A worst case? It seems like it would come to mind right away, but it doesn't," she laughs.

Shocked is returning to dates in New Zealand and Australia without a new album in tow. That starts reworking up on her return to the US. She seems to relish the role of global troubadour.

"The opportunity came up," she says, of the chance to break away from pre-production of her new record taking place in Nashville.

"There's also an opportunity to work out the material for a live audience also. It's been a year . . . I don't know if those

are brilliant reasons, but for me my reason is good.

"I love to be on the road. Something I think I am honest to the end of the honesty, but it's not even for the financial side of it. I just want to keep in touch with an audience.

Now there very diverse albums out — *The Texas Compiler Pages*, *Short Swing* — Shocked and *Captain Swing* — it sounds like the new album is hobnobbing her in another direction again.

"The last one was an emphasis on the musical roots — the swing influence and the previous one to that was an emphasis on my story-telling roots. This next one will hopefully be an emphasis on my DIY (do-it-yourself) influence that was given when my father taught himself and me to play music almost at the same time.

"So I will be taking a lot of the fiddle tunes that he taught me, some of the first music I learned and I've put my own original lyrics to them. Then I'm going to travel around to different parts of the country and record with some of my bluegrass heroes."

There's a broad range of themes in the words she's putting to those tunes.

"I have one song I am really pleased with which was inspired by an old fiddle tune and it is called *The Fossilized Dragonfly*, and I also have a song that was inspired by a fiddle tune called *Soldier's Joy*, which was a term used during the Civil War over

here to refer to morphine, and I have kind of adapted that one and written my own song and it's called *Shaking Vain*.

Another year, another war. As Shocked put it rather blackly: "War is really good for the folk singing business" and that is also going to provide some lyrical ideas.

The big acoustic bluegrass style she says will complete a sort of trilogy with its two immediate predecessors. But the stylistic jumps could be confusing to fans, she admits, especially the brassy big band Texas swing sound of her last *Captain Swing*.

"For an audience that is attracted to my authenticity, it sounds very confused. I'm sure, I personally felt. I was true to my influences. I just wasn't allowed to tell the whole story at one time.

"But I'm certain it had a very beneficial aspect to it in that I had been turned into a category that I was very uncomfortable with and that album really helped me break away from that pain."

The category she speaks of is the catnip-starting New Age women folkie.

Shocked has long maintained an allegiance to the modern Texas school of balladry. Like Steve Earle, Nanci Griffiths, and Lyte Lovell, she considers herself a musical offspring of the likes of Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark.

"I think it's a very true comparison. Much more

appropriate than comparing a bunch of women because they happen to be women."

Still, it's hard to be a new good old gal, among the new good old boy school.

"I don't know that women are given as much rein in that sort of style. If you come on strong you can kind of make your own opportunity. I think you kind of have to be stronger and smarter to be an equal."

There's a similar philosophy to her guitar playing.

"I am very loyal to the idea of traditional picking and I love to see it progress. But so long as that's in a way that is respectful of the tradition.

"On the other hand, one of the happy consequences of being a woman is that there's not as much opportunity to trade guitar secrets with the boys, so you do have some idiosyncrasies."

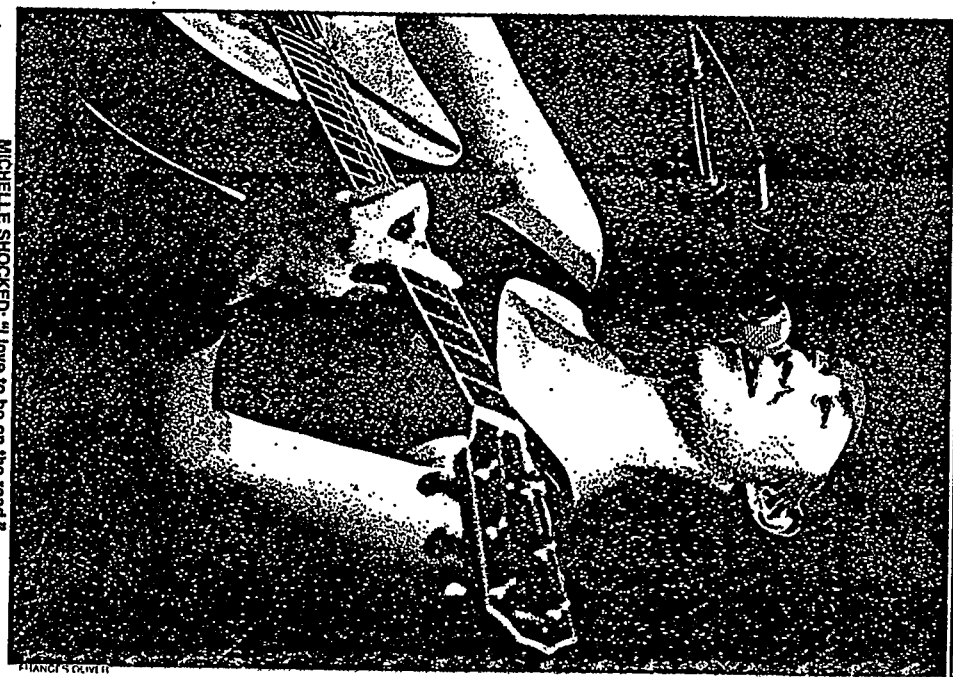
Shocked is bringing a guitar player with her on tour just who she didn't know at the time of interview.

"Actually a fella that was nominated was from the Chills but I don't think that is going to happen." (The Chills' Martin Phillips denies it also, something about not being able to play while holding a piece of

straw in his mouth.)

Maybe next time she's down this way there'll be a whole band. Or even a volleyball team.

Michelle Shocked plays the Auckland Town Hall next Wednesday, supported by Guy Wilkiant.



MICHELLE SHOCKED: "I love to be on the road."