

SHOCKED, SCHIZOPHRENIC AND SUSPICIOUS

Paul Kelly's Messengers are doing a spot of moonlighting with Texan singer/songwriter Michelle Shocked.

**MICHAEL DWYER reports on one of the most inspired pairings since Bob Dylan and The Band.**

No flame throwers, no acrobatics, no sequencers and no band. Nothing but one girl dressed in black and one acoustic guitar easily one of the best concerts of 1990.

Then came the vanishing act. Backstage afterwards, the beaming, mega-confident singer who'd had 1,200 people in the palm of her hand had mysteriously transformed into a painfully shy and tongue-tied wait.

One year later and safely back in her Texas home, Michelle Shocked laughs long and hard at the memory.

"It's schizophrenic isn't it? to feel relaxed in front of that many people and then fall apart on one...

"It's quite neurotic I admit," she chuckles, "but I've been working on it. I spent the holiday season going to parties and practising how to be relaxed. I didn't do too well but at least I'm trying."

And at least she's meeting the right sort of people. At one such gathering in America she got to talking with another shy singer/songwriter from Melbourne called Paul Kelly. One thing led to another and, well, she kind of nicked his band.

On her second tour of Australia, The Messengers have been willingly enlisted as Michelle Shocked's backing band, mainly to play her substantial repertoire but borrowing a couple of Paul's songs as well.

"I really kind of resent the fact that Paul Kelly and The Messengers haven't had more of an opportunity in America," Michelle laments, "but the fact is that they've always been the first to admit the mechanisms of stardom are out of their jurisdiction. Reconciling her personal deals with the smug and grab approach of the recording industry has long been a major obstacle."

"I feel like a fish out of water in this business most of the time," she says, suddenly sounding incredibly weary. "I really get overwhelmed sometimes."

"I read this book recently called *The Hit Men* and it confirmed my suspicions about why certain apparently talentless boozers



Michelle Shocked.

end up with phenomenal success. They basically bury their way into the radio and culture of the country!

"Anyway, I feel like I've swallowed the bitterest of the pills now in terms of the contradictions that exist," she sighs. "There's always that fine line between accepting the way things are and changing things that are so transparently corrupt that no one with a conscience or ethics could agree to work with."

"I think I've gotten over the shock of learning. Now it's a much milder job of accepting some of the realities that exist."

**CAMPFIRE FOLK TO CHICAGO SWING**

For those who come in late, Michelle Shocked's first recording was made on a Sony walkman, complete with chirping crickets, in 1986.

Released as *The Texas Campfire Tapes*, it topped the UK independent charts the following year.

Shori Sharp Shocked, her first "real" album, was released in 1988. It endorsed Michelle's image as the folk/protest singer, an image that was blown out of the water with last year's *Captain Swing*.

Whatever stylistic shifts have come her way, the common thread has always been

a superb grasp of the art of songwriting. Both as a skilled tunesmith and an incisive observer, Michelle Shocked has more than The Messengers in common with Paul Kelly.

"The next album I do will complete the trilogy, so to speak," she says enigmatically. "In the pop medium that I work in I couldn't really represent all the facets of myself in one picture. Pop oversimplifies the matter, it wants to put you in a certain category. Whereas it can understand 'Protest singer' or 'Blues roots' or 'Traditional music', it simply can't deal with the concept that you could be a folk singer, blues singer, political activist all in the same person. So I kind of chose the emphasis I wanted to use each time."

The next time, then, will fill in the blanks?

"I believe so. It may not describe where I'm going but it will do a very good job of describing where I've come from."

As yet album number four in the 'trilogy' is unreCORDED, though a few of the songs will be aired during Michelle's current tour. Having covered the realms of folk, protest and blues/swing with exceptional flair, the style providing the missing link this time around will be based in traditional fiddle music.

"I know it's powerful because it's been around in oral tradition for so long," she says. "I'm just taking a ride on the strength of that."

Michelle Shocked and The Messengers play The Perth Concert Hall on Thursday March 14.

The Messengers, on sabbatical from Paul Kelly.