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Shy Michelle's songs are her message

MICHELLE Shocked is talking about late-to-bed nights and early-in-the-morning publicity performances.

She's waiting for her turn to sing on Ray Martin's *Midday Show* as part of her Australian tour, but you get the impression she'd rather be snuggled under a doona.

"I'm a dreamer," says the soft voice on the other end of the phone.

"I wake up at nine or 10, but I can stay in bed for another couple of hours scheming and dreaming and just thinking about things."

Michelle Shocked has been hailed as one of the most talented folk singers of the '90s, but the mild-mannered performer shrugs off such tags. She is still coming to terms

By
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with being a public personality.

"I'm pretty shy," Shocked says.

"I mean, I can do a great show and go backstage and meet people afterwards and say something that's really embarrassing and be up all night worrying about it."

"I think I'm much more comfortable with being a private person, but it's been a contradiction all my life."

"I'm so much about creating community spirit and I come from a big family, so I'm used to living in communal situations."

As the story goes, Shocked — the eldest of eight children — hails from Texas.

She ran away from home at 16 to search for her father, whom she describes as "one of those hippie, atheist guys".

He coaxed her to play the guitar and she listened to his collection of old bluegrass and blues records.

After a while she started performing at folk festivals, just for fun. That's when a record producer from England stumbled upon her and taped her singing songs on his Walkman.

With her approval, he put together *The Texas Campfire Tapes*.

Lots of people liked the album, including record company Polygram.

It signed Shocked, and two albums followed — *Short Sharp Shocked* and the recent *Captain Swing*. It all sounds too mapped out

for a performer whose music is charmingly spontaneous.

She may be on the inside of the music-industry system, but Shocked is still loyal to her beliefs, especially those on social injustice.

Homelessness, poverty and racism are issues that find their way into her music, which is an offbeat mix of rock, jazz, Texas swing and blues. It's all part of being a folk singer, she says.

"When I think of folk music, I tend to parallel it with grassroots politics — you know, people worrying about the ecology and taking a stand against the government and its policies."

Shocked will perform at the University of Queensland's Mayne Hall on Wednesday with The Messengers, Paul Kelly's backing band.



Michelle Shocked: issues in her music.