

Streetwise she grew up, and stage-wise she now creates her own remarkable style of music and performance. TRACEY WALKER met the US singer and songwriter Michelle Shocked in Sydney when she was preparing for her second Australian tour.

# From the streets of Texas to the highways of folk

At least in affairs of the heart, America's outspoken folk singer and writer Michelle Shocked is changing her mind.

The 29-year-old Texan, who confesses she's had a tough life since running away from a strict Mormon upbringing at the age of 12 and again at 16, now has some new goals, such as marrying her fiancé Bart, an American journalist, and perhaps doing something she would not have done — raise a family. "I always said I wouldn't get married, but I am, so maybe I'll have a kid or two," she says in a soft, warm voice.

On a rainy day, she says she'd love to have children — if she had a solid and

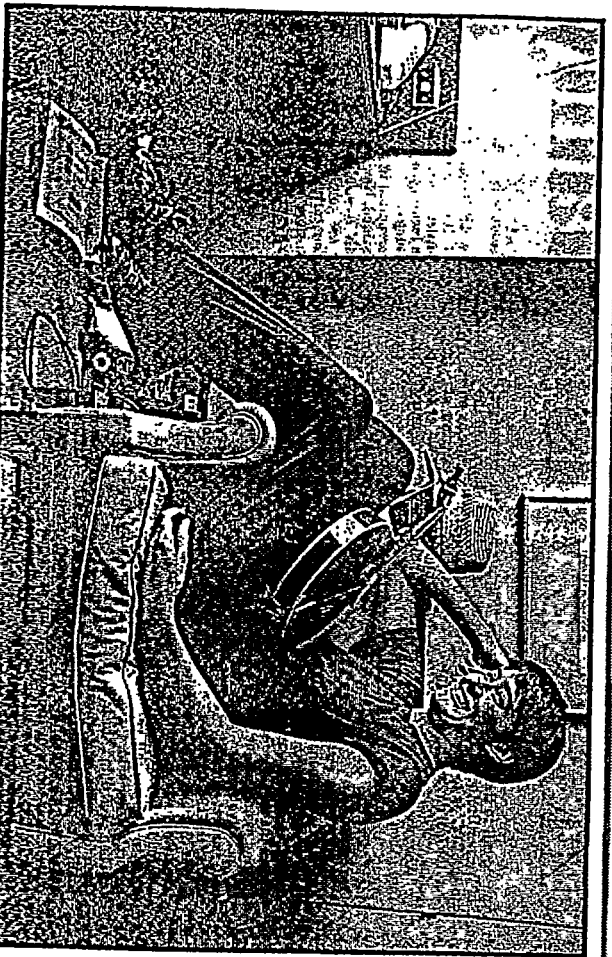
stable home life, something I didn't really have," Shocked speaks quietly when talking of her family. She has only one sibling of the same parents, and more than seven half brothers and sisters.

Teaming with the Australian band the Messengers, she is now at the start of her second Australian tour.

On her first tour of Australia, last year, she was accompanied on stage by her father. One Dollar Bill is highlighting songs from her first two albums, *The Texas Campfire* and *Short Sharp Shocked*.

The pair then fulfilled Bill's lifetime dream by sailing around

the Whitlunday Islands in North Queensland. This might conjure images of a close family and happy upbringing, but she says her childhood years were full of frustration and confusion.



Until she was 15 she spent her years travelling around army bases with her mother and step-father.

At 16 she ran away from home for the last time and later went to live with her father in Dallas.

"I had always spent summers there with him going to bluegrass festivals and back-porch picking sessions," she says.

"By time there was my introduction to music beyond the fundamentalist environment of my mother's house."

She was plucked from obscurity into fame five years ago while singing folk songs around a campfire at a volunteer folk festival.

"An English chap by the name of Pete Lawrence requested a few of the tunes he'd heard me play at a campfire the night before," she says. "I recorded them into his Sony Walkman."

Lawrence recorded it on his *Cooking Vinyl* series as an album, *The Texas Campfire*, and she was invited to London for a short tour in January 1989.

Recorded on weak batteries and complete with chirping crickets, it went to number one within a few weeks and remained in the charts for almost a year.

Its success created the opportunity for Shocked to record her second album, *Short Sharp Shocked*, released in 1988 by PolyGram.

Her stage name was coined before her first album. In 1984 she was arrested at a Republican Party convention in Dallas. As the

story goes, a friend at the rally asked her, "How do you feel, Carter?" Back came the reply, "Shocked."

"I did not adjust well to Reagan's America," she says. "From my first days as a runaway I continued to exist close to the edges of homelessness. Later, in San Francisco, I joined ranks with squatters who settled into buildings left vacant by real-estate speculators."

"In New York and Amsterdam my involvement grew as I saw hope for solutions to developers' redlined ghettos."

It was while she was still an activist in the squatter movement that she learned that her first album was number 26 on the British charts.

Her liking for black clothes, she explains, is not because she's a slave to fashion — "In my earlier years I was — but because black doesn't show the marks."

The only sign her music shows of her earlier life on the streets is that the songs she writes have underlying political messages addressing the problems of society including poverty, racism and degradation of the environment.

Now with her third album, *Captain Swing*, to her credit, her reputation as a talented and outspoken entertainer has put her in the same left-field league as Tracy Chapman, Steved O'Connor and Billy Bragg.

Although the album is far less political than the first two, it denotes class struggle in Britain. "Captain Swing" ups the ante.

she says. "The title has a double meaning, and that's the reason for the wink on the album cover. I have a boat and I play swing, and that's the obvious take."

"But probably pretty obscure is that in the 19th century a movement called Captain Swing arose, where peasants would rise up and burn the threshing machines of the wealthy landowner. They left notes signed 'Captain Swing'."

"They would throw their sabots — their wooden shoes — into the weaving mills. That's how the word sabotage came about."

Music, she says, should flow like the Mississippi River.

In her own work she sees influences from Otis Rush, Bob Willis, Fats Domino, Jerry Lee Lewis, Dixieland, NYC Bebop, Delta Blues and even African palm wine.

"It's a little bit of rock, lot of roots," she says. "And recently I've started drawing on the inspiration of traditional music — Middle times that originally came from Africa. I write my own lyrics."

Her most political songs do not appear to be political.

"Take *On the Greener Side*," she says. "Although it's about environmental groups, the song is about a way to achieve the swing vote."

And the song *Don't You Mean* Around with *My Little Star* is about my little sister Sara's 16th birthday. It is, but it's about the States in America."

Michelle Shocked will perform at the Rasmussen University Union Activities Centre on Saturday night.

HOBERT MERCURY  
Hobart, TAS.

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