

Music

No shocks, just bliss of perfect accomplices

Michelle Shocked and The Messengers
Old Lion Hotel
Wednesday night

MICHELLE Shocked: the name says a lot about the Texan singer's political exasperations but nothing about her music. Her folk-tinged songs aren't jarring. They're homely, friendly and oozing humility.

Sure, Michelle never misses an opportunity to expound wry pearls of her leftist-Greenie philosophies from the stage but most of her simply-stated messages are wrapped in gentle melodies which ring with a warm familiarity. In essence, she's more about rockin'n'rollin' than rocking the boat.

She found perfect accomplices for this task in The Messengers, familiar to Australian audiences as Paul Kelly's erstwhile backing band.

Musically, the union of Michelle and The Messengers was a marriage made in heaven. Her gently swinging blue country rhythms on acoustic guitar were smartly built upon by the sturdy but flexible rhythm section, with guitarist Steve Connolly cleverly peeling off from his Stratocaster crisp, melodic solos, which were tailored appropriately for each song.

Still, Michelle's audience seemed at odds with the fresh presentation of her songs. Having been charmed by her solo performance in Adelaide last year, the faithful followers were most enthusiastic about her brief mid-show bracket of solo offerings — including the powerful songs Graffiti Limbo and Penny Evans — yet the singer was more excited by the prospect of fleshing out her songs with the sensible and sympathetic backing of The Messengers.

The fruits of this collaboration were most evident by the end of the night, when the five players cooked up dynamic, muscular renditions of Secret to a Long Life, the Irish-flavored jig The Weaving Way and the plaintive Paul Kelly vignette Everything's Turning To White.

Even Michelle's most famous solo songs, Anchorage and The Ballad of Frankie and Johnny, benefited from a more rounded accompaniment.

Curiously, The Messengers' opening bracket of five songs (with all four members contributing lead vocals on separate tracks) lacked the fire and dynamic thrust of their accompaniment for Michelle. Under her lead, they embellished and harmonised to perfection, above and beyond the capabilities of mere sidemen, yet still not quite a powerful entity on their own.

David Sly