

# Country girl with a radical voice

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**ROCK**  
BRUCE ELDER

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**MICHELLE SHOCKED AND  
THE MESSENGERS**  
Enmore Theatre  
March 22

**T**HERE are two schools of thought about live rock and pop performances. One school argues that all the audience wants are note-for-note versions of the hits and an opportunity to gawp at the "star". The other school says that a live concert is an opportunity to re-interpret familiar material and to offer an audience something which differs radically from the fixed-for-eternity recorded versions. Michelle Shocked subscribes to this latter school.

Thus, on her second tour of Australia, Shocked concentrated almost entirely on the Texas swing and country rock songs in her repertoire. Her acoustic numbers — most notably *Anchorage* and the beautiful *Memories of East Texas* (which she sang in harmony with a very tuneful audience) — were kept to a minimum while the harder material like *Graffiti Limbo* and (*Don't You Mess Around With*) *My Little Sister* were delivered as up-tempo country rock dance tunes with the assistance of Paul Kelly's excellent backing band, The Messengers. This was Michelle Shocked in exuberant, rocking dance mode.

It really doesn't matter whether she's supported by an acoustic guitar or a four-piece rock band, Michelle Shocked is, by any definition, a remarkably natural and effortless per-

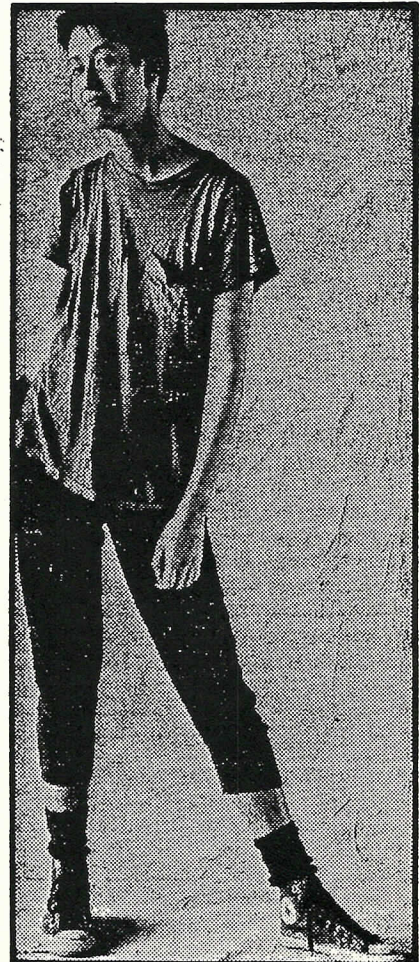
former. Her on-stage personality is a blend of down-home country warmth and hard-edged ideological commitment. The result is that rarest of combinations — a radical voice which never sounds carping or self-righteous. In fact, at the beginning of the concert, she happily dissociated herself from political earnestness, arguing that, like Emma Goldberg, "if I can't dance you can keep your revolution", to which she later added the line, which she jokingly attributed to Marilyn Monroe, "don't preach to the converted — entertain the troops".

This doesn't mean that Shocked has suddenly sold out. In fact it gives her political material an additional power and poignancy. Because most of her songs are infused with whimsicality and *joie de vivre*, when she turns to her political material — a wonderful cappella version of Steve Goodman's anti-Vietnam classic *Penny Evans* and a haunting rendition of Paul Kelly's *Everything's Turning To White* (much better than Kelly's original) were the highlights — the songs benefit from the contrast.

It is easy to forget, especially when listening to the simple folksiness of hits like *Anchorage*, that Michelle Shocked has moved from folk singer to country rocker to Texas swing performer in the space of three albums. She is an experimental and innovative performer who is determined not to be constrained by the narrow dictates of the music industry.

Her experiment with The Messengers (this was the last concert of an Australian tour) had clearly worked. At times it seemed as though they'd been playing together for years.

The likelihood of an album, partic-



Michelle Shocked ... experimental and innovative.

ularly if it includes *Everything's Turning to White* as well as new songs such as *The Prodigal Daughter* and *The Weaving Way*, is a tantalising prospect.

Michelle Shocked has few peers. Her on-stage persona, her rich and moving voice, her enthusiasm for her material and her easy and witty patter all combine to make her an irresistible live performer. I doubt that there will be many better concerts this year.