

# Shocked mixes folks feel, political flare

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## Concert review

Michelle Shocked's two sets Tuesday at the Texas Union Ballroom mixed enough corn to keep a backwoods still running well into the next century with enough political pointedness to mount an angry campaign against a Supreme Court nominee. Offering a preview of her forthcoming *Arkansas Traveler* album, the performance reaffirmed her conviction that music and politics are the stuff of everyday life rather than the provinces of slick professionals.

The music is steeped in rural rootsiness which attempts to recapture a human quality that has been lost under layers of show-biz sophistication and American homogeneity. With a backdrop of a tin-roofed shack, a clothesline and a still for her second set, Shocked showed that hokum had a history well before *Hee Haw*, and that there were livelier styles of dance music than you'll ever see on MTV.

Much of the material found Shocked putting original lyrics to old-timey fiddle tunes. Most of the recording for the album took place anywhere but in a recording studio — from a barn to a Mississippi riverboat — with spe-

cial guests ranging from Doc Watson to Taj Mahal to Uncle Tupelo, and further afield with sessions in Dublin with the Hot House Flowers and in Australia with Paul Kelly's Messengers.

Such a collection could seem impossibly eclectic, but Shocked and Austin's Bad Livers — her backing trio for the monthlong tour — rose to the challenge of pulling it all together. The array of multi-instrumentalist Danny Barnes, bassist Mark Rubin and accordionist/fiddler Ralph White is the sort of musicianship that Austin too often takes for granted, but their versatility in backing Shocked demanded a fresh appreciation.

Rubin's full-bodied bass provided all the swing Shocked need-

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ed for *On the Greener Side*, while White and Barnes made their traditional instrumentation come alive. Since it was the first date together for Shocked and the band, the interplay was occasionally a little tentative, lacking the aggressive edge that must have attracted Shocked to the Livers in the first place, and which will likely sharpen itself on the road. For all of Shocked's sincerity, there's a contradiction at the core of what was offered as uncontam-

inated musical purity. Her *Strawberry Jam*, which suggested Guy Clark's *Homegrown Tomatoes* with a political agenda, insisted that homegrown is always better than store-bought, that corporate products are inevitably inferior, which is kind of a peculiar position to take for an artist whose own albums are products of an international corporate conglomerate, and whose career is packaged by high-powered management and promoted through expensive marketing campaigns.

Still, if Shocked is a product, she's a determinedly human one, an artist who views folk process as something living and expansive rather than static and dated, and whose voice on such material as *Anchorage* conveyed feelings that go beyond words. For all the regional diversity that *Arkansas Traveler* celebrates, Shocked makes music that transcends boundaries and brings people together.

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