

Michelle Shocked at Chestnut Cabaret

By Tom Moon
Inquirer Music Critic

Singer-songwriter Michelle Shocked unveiled her work-in-progress, a musical diary called *Arkansas Traveler*, Saturday at the Chestnut Cabaret. She described the project, which features collaborations with musicians from all over the world, this way: "Imagine taking your favorite record and putting yourself right in the middle of it."

More accurately, imagine Shocked taking a number of old fiddle tunes — along the lines of "Cotton-Eyed Joe" and "Soldier's Joy," which was featured on the recent *The Civil War* PBS-TV mini-series — and writing new lyrics for them. Imagine her singing them with the same tentative, walking-on-eggs delivery that hampered her swing sendup, *Captain Swing*. Imagine a sound somewhere between country and folk and bluegrass, but lacking the specific traits of any of these styles.

As is true of some of her previous work, Shocked's new material is accomplished, but not thoroughly compelling. She gets the notes, but rarely relaxes enough to communicate the essential feeling of the songs. She sounds, at times, like an earnest student who wants desperately to achieve authenticity — but is reluctant to make the necessary emotional

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investment. When singing her own compositions, Shocked can be utterly clear and bracingly honest; when the melodies are not her own, her focus suffers.

Backed by a bassist, a guitarist who doubled on mandolin and dobro, and (for the second set) a fiddle player, Shocked opened with the first-person "Over the Waterfall," an account of one survivor's experience. She transformed "Cotton-Eyed Joe" into a vivid declaration titled "The Prodigal Daughter," and turned "Soldier's Joy" into a bitter and poignant addiction song, "Shaking Hands."

But each of these successes was offset by more tedious adaptations. The show ground to a halt while Shocked taught a member of the audience the second mandolin part for "Woodie's Rag." "The Weaving Way," a sure-fire single she recorded for *Arkansas Traveler* with Australian rockers the Messengers, dragged on too long. And "The Cement Lament," one of the wry songs from *Captain Swing*, was rendered with heavy hands where an easygoing buoyance would have been welcome.

Shocked's best moments came when she used her acoustic guitar as



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a percussion instrument. She understands that since her voice is delicate, wispy and only remotely blues-like, the guitar must compensate — by defining the rhythm with total conviction. This she did on originals "Graffiti Limbo," "The Secret to a Long Life (Is Knowing When It's Time to Go)," the excellent commentary on Los Angeles titled "Come a Long Way," and the clever new anti-censorship message "33 RPM Soul," which she's recorded with Pops Staples. With perfectly measured chopping strokes that recalled the zeal of legendary gospel guitarist Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Shocked showed that she has that fire within her. Too bad she doesn't let it loose more often.