

Expect the unexpected from Michelle Shocked

By Steve Morse
GLOBE STAFF

Michelle Shocked has fashioned a career that truly follows the dictum: Expect the unexpected. As a folk ingenue, she burst on the scene five years ago through campfire tapes made at a rural Texas music festival. She then became an urban folk darling with the escape-the-city anthem "Anchorage," followed by an out-of-left-field album of swing music.

Her latest project is a folkie's dream - taking a 48-track mobile studio on the road, recording with the likes of Doc Watson, Pops Staples, Alison Krauss, Levon Helm and Norman Blake in their natural habitats, from Woodstock to a riverboat on the Missouri River.

Music Review

MICHELLE SHOCKED
At: Sanders Theater on Wednesday

Tennessee and an antique store in Georgia. "I went to see all of my heroes. It was like putting myself in the middle of all my favorite records," Shocked told a capacity 1,200 crowd at Sanders Theater Wednesday.

The trip's object was to unearth old fiddle tunes and write new lyrics to them. The album, "Arkansas Traveler," won't be out until February, but she previewed most of it at Sanders. Some tunes were insubstantial, hobbyist exercises ("Blackberry Blossom," "Strawberry Jam"), but others were profoundly moving, such as the Cajun-spiced "Prodigal Daughter," based on "Cotton-Eyed Joe"; and "Shaking Hands," based on the fiddle standard "Soldier's

Joy." The latter was a Civil War term for morphine; and Shocked added these chilling lyrics: "What the bullet would not kill, the needle will."

Occasionally, she became preachy, saying of Pops Staples that "Creedence Clearwater Revival stole everything from him." That kind of extremism was unbecoming. But more often than not, she was in jolly, enthusiastic form, whether discussing her new marital engagement or asking the crowd to lock arms and square dance when Boston percussionist Mr. Bones joined in. She also played solo and with the three-piece Austin string group the Bad Livers, serving up a few early hits and, during a second set, adding a theatrical backdrop of a country cabin and wood stove for down-home flair. Expect the unexpected, to say the least.