

Michelle Shocked's Style

By KAREN SCHOEMER

On Thursday night at the Lone Star Roadhouse, Michelle Shocked introduced "Woody's Rag," a Woody Guthrie song, by inviting an audience member onstage. She put a mandolin in his hand and announced that she was going to teach him the chords so he could play along. When the audience good-naturedly heckled his lack of expertise, Ms. Shocked laughed too; for a moment there she had crossed a fine line and become just another spectator at the show.

A lot of rock and pop music professes a populist ethic, but few singers take the concept as seriously as Ms. Shocked. Her debut album, "The Texas Campfire Tapes," was literally recorded around a campfire with just an acoustic guitar and crickets chirping in the background. Her songs dig past contemporary folk into its roots of country, blues and Western swing, and her lyric sheets name what key each song is written in, just in case listeners want to pick up a guitar and play it themselves.

Ms. Shocked's two sets at the Lone Star — one acoustic and one accom-

panied by a mandolin-slap bass-fiddle trio called the Bad Livers — were also founded on the principle that music belongs to everybody. Wearing a black tank top, black stretch pants and black sneakers, looking more like a bike messenger than a folkie, she would sometimes stop a song in the middle to explain what it was about. When it came to a key word or phrase in a song, she would speak it instead of singing it, as if she wanted to be seated at a table with all the members of the audience, gazing straight into their eyes.

Ms. Shocked's second set consisted of early American fiddle tunes to which she had set her own lyrics, and which will make up the bulk of her coming album, "Arkansas Traveler." She unveiled a front-porch stage set, complete with a hanging lantern, moonshine jugs and a screen door. Such a blunt literalization of her populist ethic at first seemed unbearably hokey, but Ms. Shocked and the Bad Livers tore into rewritten Americana traditionals like "Prodigal Daughter" and "Blackberry Blossom" with such fervor that the stage set almost seemed real.



Michelle Shocked performed on Thursday at the Lone Star Roadhouse. Photo by David LaChapelle.