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Michelle Shocked and friends entertain Burlington crowd

By Josh Barnes
Michelle Shocked brought her Arkansas Traveler Revue, a concert that included Taj Mahal, The Band, and Uncle Tupelo, to the Burlington Memorial Auditorium on October 2. To begin the show, Shocked explained that the tour was so called because of her most recent album, "Arkansas Traveler," but also because of the official Arkansas Traveler certificate given to each member of the tour, signed, Shocked said, "by the next president of the United States."

Finished with her subtle endorsement of Bill Clinton's candidacy for president (she would go on at length about her personal politics later), Shocked introduced Uncle Tupelo. The band has recently released their third album, "March 16-20, 1992," a collection of acoustic originals and a few traditional songs, a startling departure from the raging guitar power of their two previous albums. Fortunately, Uncle Tupelo's energy and the grim reality of their lyrics have not been diminished, and the band's brief set highlighted their talent on "Grindstone," "Still Be Around," "Shaky

Ground," the Carter Family's "No Depression," and the moving traditional, "Moonshiner."

Next out was Taj Mahal—make that the criminally under-appreciated Taj Mahal. From his entrance to his exit at the end of his set, the tall, hulking Mahal, full of humor, had the devoted attention of the entire audience. Choosing to begin at the electric piano, Mahal put the audience firmly in his back pocket with "The Blue Light Boogie," a barroom blues number that Mahal turned into a fun sing-along. Moving to guitar, Mahal treated the audience to a history lesson by way of the country blues songs of Elizabeth Cotten and Elsa Baker.

Mahal brought on a full band for the last song, which he described as a blues strut but "urbanized little bit." Whatever that meant, Taj Mahal captured the sound that Robert Cray has been unsuccessfully searching for, and did some jazz-inflected scatting that made Al Jarreau look like an amateur. After his recent experimental albums (he actually let Hall and Oates sing on the last one), it was a special thrill to see Mahal stick to the rootsier material on

which he built his career.

After Mahal's performance, it would have been hard for any band to look good. Call it bad luck that The Band was on next. With only three original members remaining, The Band came off as only a capable group. The spirit of The Band seemed to lie with drummer and vocalist Levon Helm, whose distinctive voice was at times able to cover up the fact that their glory days are well behind them. For example, after storming through the classic "Caledonia," bassist Rick Danko look over to sing "Crazy Mama," a song he said would be on their new album. It served only to kill whatever momentum The Band had going, turning into a pointless and overlong jam session, led by a guitarist who annoyingly mimicked departed guitarist Robbie Robertson's playing and physical gestures.

The Band then lunched into a ridiculous cover of Bruce Springsteen's "Atlantic City," a song that didn't deserve another version—if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Perhaps sensing the crowd's growing disinterest, Helm took over for the final two songs, "Shapel In Ln," and "Life Is A Carnival," which were sad reminders of what once was for this

band that most thought had gone out in grand style with "The Last Waltz" in 1976.

Following a short intermission, Michelle Shocked and her band took the stage, ripping into "When I Grow Up (I Want To Be An Old Woman)," from the album "Short Sharp Shocked," and from "Captain Swing." "Don't Mess With My Little Sister." With these two songs, Shocked came off as both a hipper-than-thou folk singer and a waiting rockabilly whirling dervish. Shocked then shifted gears into material from "Arkansas Traveler," a collection of traditional fiddle tunes to which she wrote lyrics. It is a practice to which some folk purists have objected, accusing Shocked of, as she said, "gilding the lily."

Unfazed by the criticism, Shocked, playing guitar and mandolin, ran through two songs before bringing out Taj Mahal to help with "Jump Jim Crow," his cameo from the album. The crowd responded by rushing the stage, while Mahal and Shocked fed off each other's hysterical antics. Wielding their electric guitars, Uncle Tupelo joined Shocked next, blasting their way through "Shaking Hands (Soldier's Joy)," a Civil War lament gone thrash.

After successfully stirring things up, Shocked retreated into the mellower confines of "Prodigal Daughter (Cotton Eyed Joe)," and brought the mood down into serious thought with the always stunning "Graffiti Limbo," a song about the strangulation death of subway artist Michael Stewart at the hands of New York City policemen in 1986.

Following with her radio hit "Anchorage," Shocked now held the audience rapt, when she went into a monologue that laid bare her own political stance, saying she last voted in 1980 (for Carter), but is definitely voting this year, for Bill Clinton. The speech may have been slightly ill-planned for delivery to an audience that had come to see and hear a concert, not a political rally.

Shocked and company then jumped into "If Love Was A Train," before coming back for an encore that saw the other three acts take the stage as well, to perform "Secret To A Long Life." "She Caught The Katy," and an amazing version of "The Weight." Even on the crowded stage, the versatile and remarkable talent that is Michelle Shocked proved she was the star of her own show.

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