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Woman with a vision sings it her way

Shocked's music runs gamut from country to funk

By JORDAN LEVIN
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Michelle Shocked is weaving her way through the entire fabric of American music, and if people are confused by her path from folkie singer-songwriter through Texas swing to Southern country all the way up to '70s and '80s funk, that's their problem.

"Damn the commercial wisdom," Shocked said from her home in California. "I didn't ask for this job, but some guy made a bootleg and they decided I should be making records. Well, fine. I'm a woman with a vision, and if you don't like it, you don't have to buy it."

Shocking words, but people do buy Shocked's music. Since a bootleg recording of her at a Texas songwriter festival yielded a contract with Polygram, and 1988's popular *Short Sharp Shocked* earned her a Grammy nomination, plenty of people in both the folk world and the alternative and college music scene seem to like Shocked's musical wisdom.

South Florida gets a "general introductory offer," as Shocked calls it, when she makes her first Florida appearance Friday at the Stephen Talkhouse in Miami Beach.

She's a rebel

Shocked is feisty and independent, born of a rocky and rebellious life. A Mormon Army brat ("that's a double negative") from a family of eight, Shocked says she ran away from home in Texas in her teens, lived with friends, put herself through the University of Texas, then lived in a series of abandoned buildings in San Francisco, New York and London. She was camping out in cities, deliberately living outside the system, until the bootleg became an underground hit in Britain, and she "decided to work in the system, be mainstream with integrity — which is a contradiction in terms — but there's a reason why I'm doing what I'm doing."

What she's doing is digging into every area of American music that connects to her life. *Short Sharp Shocked* was a singer-songwriter album more or less about her own adventures, with songs like *Anchorage*, about old friends reconnecting, and *Graffiti Limbo*, the story of a New York City subway writer who was beaten to death by transit cops. The second album, *Captain Swing*, was a tribute to Texas swing, music from her childhood.



INTRODUCTION: Michelle Shocked, who is appearing Friday at the Stephen Talkhouse, wants to tell her personal stories through music.

For her latest record, *Arkansas Traveler*, Shocked packed a portable recording studio, her father, grandmother, husband and cat into the back of a truck and went driving around the country to record with blues and country greats like Clarence Gatemouth Brown, Taj Mahal, Doc Watson, Pop Staples, Jimmy Driftwood, the Red Clay Ramblers and fiddle prodigy Alison Kraus.

Sweet and wry

The result was a wonderful album that wove traditional folk melodies like *Frankie and Johnny* and *Soldier's Joy* into Shocked's own songs; it's sweet and wry, joyous and melancholy, and never too self-important.

Shocked's music has a sense of guts and wonder. She digs down into the everyday and turns up the mythic, telling about the magic in people's daily lives. "I do think as a value the thing to do is making songs that talk about people's lives," she says, "and therein lies the biggest clue you might have about Michelle Shocked being a political songwriter. People's lives are political. And that's as big as it ever has to get."

Her next area of musical exploration, '70s and '80s funk with her new band, might seem like a far reach from country fiddling, but it makes sense to Shocked,

western to the slickest hippest freshest in-your-face R&B to everything in-between. I think it's such a waste to be an American and limit yourself to being a genre."

For her that's the trail of black music, from its roots in gospel and spirituals all the way up to funk and R&B. Playing this music will allow her to tell stories from her generation's adolescence. Like this one from her Texas high school days, where blacks and whites spent "four years eating on separate sides of the cafeteria. . . . I remember this one party during senior week, this girl crossed the color line, she went over and started dancing the Dirty Dog, and all these black kids are watching this white girl dancing the Dirty Dog. Then she comes and drags me over and I start learning the Dirty Dog. I want to tell these stories in my shows."

Where this incarnation will take her, and whether her folk and alternative music audience will follow her there, doesn't seem to concern Shocked much. "I am a bit arrogant," she admits, "but I do have a few causes or visions or whatever, and I feel I'm entitled to them."

Michelle Shocked will perform at 8 and 10 Friday night at the Stephen Talkhouse, 616 Collins Ave., Miami Beach. Tickets are \$23 and \$18; call 531-7557 for information.

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