

**MUSIC**

# Revealing her musical roots

*Michelle Shocked's genre hopscotch is her way of showing, and paying tribute to, her influences.*

By Philip Booth

**I**T ALMOST SEEMS like I am shifting styles out of pure whim," says Michelle Shocked, the former punk-inspired acoustic troubadour who was "discovered" at the Kerrville Folk Festival in Texas.

Shocked, if her recorded output is any evidence, has been practicing a bit of genre skipping.

The 31-year-old singer and songwriter has moved from the folk overtones of her 1986 debut, "The Texas Campfire Tapes," to the country-tinged textures of 1988's "Short Sharp Shocked"; from the '40s horns-and-strings wallop of 1989's "Captain Swing" to the roots and blues explorations of last year's "Arkansas Traveler."

Is all of this simply a belabored show of style, a demonstration of musical muscle, a desperate attempt to carve her own niche somewhere, anywhere?

Some critics, including "Trouser Press Guide" editor Ira Robbins, might agree.

"Her strained efforts at self-promotion and political action are dubiously credible and unforgivably distasteful in light of her pretensions of unpretentiousness," Robbins writes in the latest edition of the alternative-music Bible.

Shocked's exploration, though, has been an entirely sincere artistic voyage,

**ON TOUR**

- **WHO:** Michelle Shocked
- **WHEN:** Saturday at 8:30 p.m.
- **WHERE:** Jannus Landing, St. Petersburg; Shocked also plays a free show Saturday at 4:30 p.m. at Music Revolution in Tampa.
- **TICKETS:** \$15, available at the door and at Ticketmaster outlets, which will add a service charge; (813) 287-8844

she declares by telephone from Los Angeles, where she and her manager-husband live in a houseboat on the Pacific Ocean.

"I've just completed a five-year project that shows what my past musical influences are drawn on," she says. "I outlined this trilogy of albums that shows the distinct musical styles that are in my background.

"Now I'm working on a new set of material that has a definite funk/R&B twist to it. This one is about coming into the 20th century."

"Arkansas Traveler," which arrived last year to modest critical and commercial success, had the singer hooking up with mostly American roots musicians, including Doc Watson, Pop Staples, Taj Mahal and Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, among others.

The Texas native since has devoted much of her time to investigating funk music, from its gospel roots to '60s R&B to the Prince school.

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**Continued on Page 28**



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1993

28 FRIDAY EXTRA / A Section of the Tampa Tr

## SHOCKED

From Page 20

spirituals and have come to the conclusion that ... that is the source of all things," Shocked says.

"One of the effects is that I've now realized that a lot of contemporary R&B is the living tradition of gospel music. I go to church and it sounds like R&B. There's a church band with drums, keyboard and bass."

A gospel-inspired side project, due out this year, includes Shocked, Pearl Jam, Soul Asylum, Michael Penn, Maria McKee and others on

an album called "Sweet Release."

The set is a collection of songs written by or associated with Victoria Williams, a Los Angeles singer and songwriter stricken with multiple sclerosis.

"In the long run, even though I may end up becoming known for doing much more contemporary styles of music, I want my audience to know that there is a source for my music, that it didn't spring full-grown from the head of Michelle Shocked," she says.

"You listen to the real source of that music and you hear some real powerful emotions expressed, subtle and powerful."