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# Michelle Shocked's long road home

**New album has roots in lost art of minstrelsy**

By Casey Seiler  
staff writer

Why is Michelle Shocked playing Jackson Hole? And why a benefit concert for the Teton County School District?

"Aside from my civic-mindedness," she says, putting a dollop of irony on the last phrase, "my reason for coming to Wyoming is that I like to play what New York booking agents call 'secondary markets.'"

"So you can say, 'Michelle Shocked takes the road less traveled.'"

That road will take Shocked and her new band, the Casualties of War, to the gymnasium of Jackson Hole High School Friday (doors open at 7 p.m.).

General-admission tickets are \$18.50 in advance, \$21 on the day of the show. Advance tickets are on sale at Tobacco Row on Cache St. and Global Exchange in the Knart Plaza.

It's been a busy year for the artist. Besides the constant touring in support of her third and richest album, *Arkansas Traveler* (Polygram), Shocked found time to get married—to former journalist and music scholar Bart Bull, who now serves as her manager and publicist—and settle down in Los Angeles.

Shocked describes *Arkansas Traveler* as the third part of a trilogy of albums showing her influences. The 1989 debut *Short Sharp Shocked* and 1991's *Captain Sings* form the two other "legs of the tripod."

More than any real narrative thread running through the records, "I think it's more of a sense that you can't knock anything over that stands on three legs," she said.

*Arkansas Traveler* shows Shocked's talent standing firm. Besides showcasing her best slate of songs to date, the album features an all-star cast of players ranging from former members of The Band to blues whiz Taj Mahal and fiddle prodigy Alison Krauss. Other cameos are provided by Pops Staples, the Red Clay Ramblers, Uncle Tupelo, Doc Watson and others.

The songs effortlessly combine the old and the new. The slightly lascivious "Strawberry Jam" wouldn't sound out of place in a blues joint on Chicago's South Side, while "Blackberry Blossom" comes straight out of the Appalachian hinterlands.

"I've known for a long time that the album would be called *Arkansas Traveler*," said Shocked. "And I knew that it was going to be mainly fiddle tunes that I had played with my father. But I knew as well that it had to be a bridge to what I was going to do next."

Shocked found a thematic center to the album through her exploration of blackface minstrelsy, a subject on which her husband had written a book. Many of the titles that Shocked had become interested in—such as *Arkansas Traveler* and "Cotton-Eyed Joe"—had their roots in the unique, distinctly American tradition of minstrelsy, where both races considered each other through the medium of song.

Shocked was so taken with the concept that she had initially planned to appear in minstrel's black face on the cover of the album.

At the end of recording in Novem-



COURTESY POLYGRAM RECORDS  
Michelle Shocked as the 'Arkansas Traveler.' The artist thought about appearing in blackface on the album's cover.

ber 1991, Shocked embarked on a four-week tour of colleges and cities along Polygram's distribution chain. ("I've learned the wisdom of doing things like that.")

"At that point I was talking to people about the idea of me appearing in blackface on the cover," she said. "And it was during that time that I became convinced not to. Not for the reasons you might think—that people thought it was a racist thing to do—but because I was met by silence."

**"I started seeing rock concerts and rap concerts, and I began to think that the differences between them and the popular culture of 100 years ago were very superficial."  
—Michelle Shocked**

"It was an issue that people were not willing to talk about, that they were afraid of. I found that an issue can overpower a message."

Shocked has a lot to say on the subject of minstrelsy, the musical form that presaged blues and jazz in African-American musical history. People who think minstrelsy begins and ends with Al Jolson warbling "Mammy," she suggests, are missing out on a cultural treasure trove.

"There's a lot of ignorance about blackface minstrelsy," she said. "It's seen as one-dimensional: If a white man was impersonating a black man, he was parodying him."

But such a cultural masquerade could also be a chance for the races to

city: "If you think about just how multicultural L.A. is, it's a miracle that people get along as well as they do," she said.

Since so many of Shocked's songs are essentially road songs, does her newfound happiness and marriage cause her to worry about running out of subject matter?

"I did go through a lot of years of fear that because I had chosen a life (instead of a career, that (material) would go away)," she said.

"But my job description will always include lots and lots and lots of traveling. And my husband travels with me. It all comes down to clichés like, 'Home is where the heart is.'"

A sentiment like that seems odd from an artist whose debut album featured a cover photo of a howling Shocked getting hauled away by a trio of cops.

In lieu of the blackface portrait, the cover of *Arkansas Traveler* shows a very cheerful Shocked against a background that appears to have been lifted from Disney's minstrel-influenced *Song of the South*.

"I actually prefer the cover of *Short Sharp Shocked*," she laughed.

"What I really like about that cover is that it's very misleading as to the material. Because of that photo, I was defined as a punk or a protest singer—but the material on the album was stories, Texas-story telling."

"I like the idea that you can't judge the record by its cover."

It's something to remember when listening to Shocked's music, as well. Her angry songs have become more trenchant, like time bombs.

Earlier songs like *Short Sharp Shocked*'s "Graffiti Limbo" dealt with subjects like the real-life killing of a graffiti artist by the New York police.

"Prodigal Daughter" on *Arkansas Traveler* is every bit as indignant, but couched in a traditional setting that makes the injustice all the more upsetting.

Prodigal sors, the song points out, are welcomed home with open arms from their travels in the big city. But: "When a girl comes home/With the coats he's sown/It's draw your shades and your shutters/She's bringing such shame to the family name/The return of the prodigal daughter."

The minstrel character of "Cotton-Eyed Joe," in Shocked's song, is the doctor who the Prodigal Daughter goes to for a solution to her problem.

Shocked rejects the idea that she's setting her songs in some distant past; "Prodigal Daughter" takes place in an earnest, political present.

"I actually turn that argument around: 'Graffiti Limbo,' in my mind, is a very strong blues—right up the middle of the blues tradition."

"But 'Prodigal Daughter' comes from a story my father told me," she said.

When young Shocked asked her mandolin-playing father what the traditional "Cotton-Eyed Joe" was supposed to mean, he told her: "It's about nothin' at all."

"And later, I began to think that an abortion is one of those issues that's touched just about everybody in the country, but no one was talking about it."

"So I began to think that perhaps my father was right."

"If you were going to talk about abortion, you might have to talk about it as if you were talking about nothin' at all."

walk around in each other's shoes, in a sort of racially inquisitive performance art. That sort of reinvention of one's self, said Shocked, is a thoroughly American pursuit: "It's like an inalienable right."

Whether or not we want to talk about it, blackface performance is alive and well. Contemporary (white) acts like the Black Crowes have sold millions of units doing it. The Rolling Stones have been at it for three decades.

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Following the Los Angeles riots, Shocked and Bull wrote an article for *Billboard* magazine that drew parallels between the politically incorrect "gangsta" rap of L.A. acts such as Ice-T, Ice Cube and N.W.A. and the villainous con men of minstrel tunes.

"The archetype of the gangsta rappers is no different from that of the characters you'd see 100 years ago—in the razor-totin', chicken-stealing Zip Coon, or Staggerlee, or Jim Crow," said Shocked.

This is flammable material, and Shocked knows it. Living in Los Angeles has been something of an education for a girl from the rural Southwest.

"South Central (L.A.) is largely a middle-class neighborhood. But we all think we know what Los Angeles is like, from listening to Ice Cube and Ice-T."

When she first moved to the city, "I said, 'Where's Watts?' 'Well,' he said, 'I'll take you there. Take you there?' I thought, 'But that's not the place you're supposed to go.'"

She's learned to see both side of the