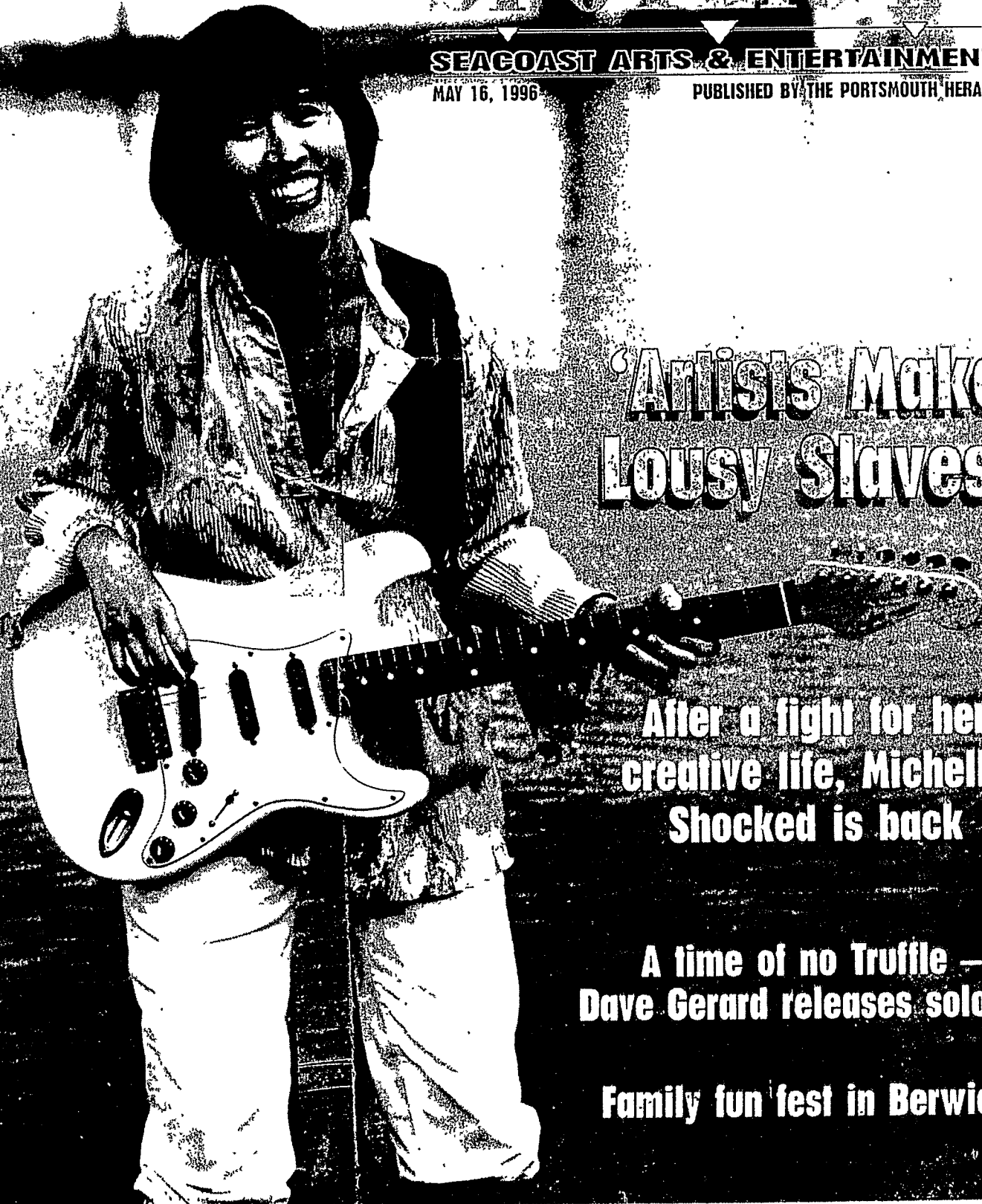


SPOTLIGHT

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'Artists Make Lousy Slaves'

After a fight for her creative life, Michelle Shocked is back

A time of no Truffle — Dave Gerard releases solo CD

Family fun fest in Berwick

Michelle Shocked is free at last

Singer celebrates release from corporate musical slavery

By Tom Colletta
Spotlight Correspondent

In the 10 years since Michelle Shocked first came to national prominence with *The Texas Campfire Tapes* she has explored many different areas of America's varied musical heritage.

From the Walkman-recorded primitive folk of *Campfire* to the storysongs and punkier stylings on *Short Sharp Shocked*, from the jazzy big-band arrangements on *Captain Swing* to *Arkansas Traveler's* homage to the minstrel tradition, Shocked is a comfortable and confident chameleon no matter what musical skin she's in. The one thread that runs through the body of Shocked's work is her righteousness, firing broadsides against the powers-that-be on levels personal, political and social.

So don't expect any complacency when Shocked plays The Music Hall in Portsmouth on Sunday, May 26, as part of her "1st Annual Underground Testing Tour," which carries the strident tag line "Artists Make Lousy Slaves."



Michelle Shocked's newest album, "Artists Make Lousy Slaves," is a celebration of her freedom from corporate slavery in the music business. The recording is only available through her concerts, such as the one on Sunday, May 26, at The Music Hall in Portsmouth.

(Courtesy photo)

As well as any number of current social woes to rail against, Shocked has literally been in a battle for her creative life in the past two years with her record company, the gigantic multinational Mercury/Polygram.

"The trouble began back in 1992 when I was working on a collection of songs entitled *Prayers*,"

Shocked said. "They approved a budget for the sessions but then they wouldn't pay for the studio time."

Thinking creative problems may have been the basis of the label's unwillingness to ante up, Shocked offered *Kind Hearted Woman* as a sort of compromise. That album, subsequently self-released by Shocked and only available at her concerts, was a stark por-

trait of rural America, complete with stillborn children and crop failure. (The genesis of *Woman* was the song "Home," penned as part of a collaboration with noted American choreographer Mark Morris.)

Still no response. "It was really frustrating," Shocked said. "I mean the label wouldn't even return my phone calls." It wasn't until Shocked initiated litigation against Mercury/Polygram last fall that any kind of communication occurred.

"They basically told me, 'We'll never do anything for you because you negotiated too good a deal for yourself in the first place,'" Shocked said. She theorized that because she had kept the rights to her songs, the label would never really maximize their profits, no matter how many records she sold.

"I think when they first started working with me, they were rolling the dice to see if I could have a megahit, a la Tracy Chapman," the soft-spoken singer continued. Whether consciously or not, Shocked stresses that the "hit" record has never been foremost in her artistic process. "My catalog, my body of work, are my natural resources. They are more important than any hit single."

The good news for Shocked is that her "natural resources" will remain hers as Mercury/Polygram have agreed to let her walk from her contract and, most importantly, let her retain the rights to the albums they have released.

"In a year and a half, the rights to my back catalog will be mine. I can release them myself, or bring them with me to a new label," she said. "It's kind of like the Pharaoh setting Moses free."

Not that all this legal wrangling has put a stop to Shocked's musical productivity. Shocked said the "Underground Test Site Tour" was going well so far.

"I'm following through on my theory that every spring I want to play smaller venues in smaller cities that are usually passed up in favor of larger population centers," she explained. Touring with minimal overhead and only one other musician, Fiachna O'Braonain of the Irish group the Hothouse Flowers, enables her to play more intimate settings like The Music Hall, she said.

"It's a little bit daunting to go out there on stage with just two guitar players, but between us I think we have enough charisma for four people," she chuckled. As well as playing guitars, the

duo works about six or seven other instruments into the live presentation including slide guitar, mandolin and tin whistle.

Shocked's musical relationship with O'Braonain, whose first name means "Raven" in Irish, dates back to *Arkansas Traveler* when the Hothouse Flowers backed her on the cut "Over the Waterfall."

"We played together on a three-week tour of the U.K. and Ireland a couple of years ago and it went well so we kept in



With a career ranging from blitzspeed-punk to '40s swing, Michelle Shocked is a postmodern feminist folksinger with the confidence to be a musical chameleon.

(Courtesy photo)

"I'm trying that New Orleans-style funk-swing that makes your butt sweat and makes you smell."

- Michelle Shocked

ity of Mercy," her contribution to *Dead Man Walking*, music from, and inspired by, the critically-acclaimed motion picture.

Shocked related that the invitation to participate came from out of the blue and was, in her words, "a gift from God."

"Apparently David Robbins (brother of film producer Tim) caught some of my performance at the New Orleans Jazz Fest last year and I instinctively hit on themes, death and redemption, that the film and album address," she said.

"I was given absolute freedom, carte blanche, to do whatever I wanted," Shocked said. "I ended up writing the kind of song I wanted to include on *Prayers*. It was a wonderful show of faith on the producer's part to ask me," she added, particularly considering that other contributors to the project were such luminaries as Bruce Springsteen, Johnny Cash and Patti Smith.

The song is also indicative of the musical direction Shocked is going in as the century winds to a close. "I guess you could say I'm going in a spiritual direction," Shocked said. And although that may sound serious, "Quality of Mercy" musically is almost straight up gospel-funk, no doubt an influence Shocked absorbed from her current hometown, New Orleans.

She said, laughing, "I'm trying that New Orleans-style funk-swing that makes your butt sweat and makes you smell." While not admitting to 100 percent success in that department, she sees her newest compositions as being "classic funk, soul and R&B with a bitter lemon twist of lyric."

After the "Underground" tour is completed, Shocked plans on reassembling her interchangeable cast of musicians dubbed "The Casualties of Wah," for some full band recordings, and finding a new label who believes in what she's doing. After all she's been through, it wouldn't seem wise to bet against her.

"I'm still pinching myself after all the haggling with Mercury," she said. "Now everything's in place."

Michelle Shocked will play at 7:30 p.m. on Sunday, May 26, at The Music Hall, 28 Chestnut St., Portsmouth. Tickets \$18 and \$20, on sale at the box office, 436-2400, or by calling Ticketmaster, 626-5000.

touch," she says.

In the independent spirit of *Kind Hearted Woman*, O'Braonain and Shocked recorded 10 songs in three days to create the album *Artists Make Lousy Slaves*, an album only available at their performances. Despite the somewhat ominous title, Shocked described this newest collection as "jaunty," a celebration of her freedom from corporate musical slavery.

Another exciting addition to the Shocked song book is "Qual-