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Shocked therapy: Poignant CD & legally set free

By ROBERTA PENN
SPECIAL TO THE P-I

Singer/songwriter Michelle Shocked has been in a prison without walls for more than three years, trapped in a recording contract with a company that wouldn't let her record.

"I had a contract to do seven records with Mercury and I did three," Shocked explained in a phone interview. "I wanted to make another record, but for nearly four years they didn't return my phone calls.

"I filed a lawsuit in August of '95 that challenged Mercury under the California labor laws enacted to prevent indentured servitude. It opened a can of worms and then they returned phone calls and negotiated a settlement."

The settlement included one more release for Mercury, a compilation, that will come out later this year, and it gave Shocked complete artistic control of the project. Her title for the set, "Mercury Poise," is a message to the label.

"It's a reference to a Graham Parker song, 'Mercury Poisoning,'" Shocked explained. "The subtitle is 'Never P— Off a Songwriter.'"

While she was fighting with the label, the high-spirited Shocked was also working. She put a CD out on her own, "Kind Hearted Woman," and sold copies at her gigs. When Mercury released Shocked, she took "Kind Hearted Woman" to the Private Music label. The CD was released this week and Shocked is touring behind it. She and her band perform at 8 p.m. Wednesday at the Showbox.

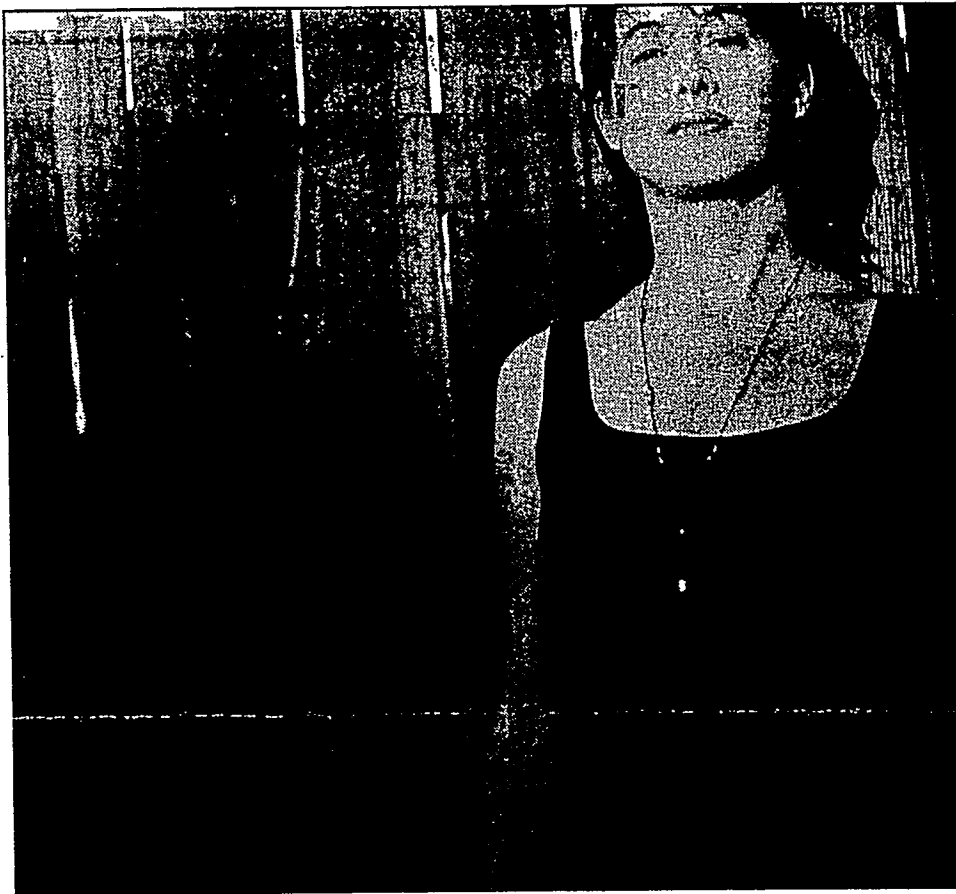
The all-original set begins with three songs Shocked wrote for choreographer Mark Morris' dance piece, "Home." The lyrics tell heart-breaking stories of alienation, loss and the power nature has over humans. The songwriter's plain-spoken way with words lets her take on painful and personal subjects without falling into excessive drama.

"Stillborn," the first cut on the CD, is so straightforward and intimate it seems to come from Shocked's own experience. But no, she has not lost a baby.

"It was a metaphor I landed on while trying to write a story for the dance," Shocked said. "Though I haven't lost a child, I know women who have and the metaphor has poignancy and resonance for a lot of women. It's very true to my feminist spirit."

And true to her spirit of survival, for Shocked has bounced back from great loss in her own life. Raised on Army bases and in the small Texas town of Gilmer, Shocked moved between the lives of her divorced parents, an open-minded dad who took her to music festivals and a strict, Mormon mother.

She was a teen-age runaway and part of the



CATHERINE LEDNER

Michelle Shocked is touring behind her latest release, "Kind Hearted Woman."

COMING UP

■ **Michelle Shocked.** Singer/songwriter and Casualties of Wah perform at 8 p.m. Wednesday at the Showbox. Tickets: \$18; 628-0888.

San Francisco squatters and punk music scene after being raped, only to be violated again. An English record label owner taped Shocked playing around a campfire at a Texas folk festival in 1986 and, without her permission, released "The Texas Campfire Tapes," which was a hit with the alternative music crowd.

In 1984, she moved to Europe but returned after being raped, only to be violated again. An English record label owner taped Shocked playing around a campfire at a Texas folk festival in 1986 and, without her permission, released "The Texas Campfire Tapes," which was a hit with the alternative music crowd.

In ensuing releases, Shocked moved from wry and spunky folk-rock songs like "Anchorage" to twisted R&B originals like "God is a Real Estate Developer." For her third album, "Arkansas Traveler," she recorded with some of her mentors. Among the cast of American roots artists were Doc Watson, Taj Mahal, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown,

Norman Blake and Levon Helm.

Shocked's tour will feature songs from all her releases but the interpretations will be fresh because her band is new. Musical director for the Casualties of Wah is organ and keyboard player Carl Wheeler, a church choir director who has worked with Tony! Toni! Tone!. Shocked and her band will also preview upcoming material.

"We'll be doing tons of new material and presenting a spectrum of the four albums," Shocked said. "The new material is work in process, what we'll do in the studio next year. I like to perform the songs before I record them."

Though Shocked has moved past her bad experiences with Mercury and sounds effusive about the future, she is not bitter about the past. For there was a lesson to be learned, one much more important than how to deal with today's corporate culture.

"During that time, there were far greater challenges. Like dealing with the fact that I was making records and having a career to please someone else," she said. "When I realized I was going to have to fight for my creative survival I had to admit that all along I had been doing it to please myself. It's the same damn thing as growing up: the more we take on the freer we become."