

By James Sullivan  
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

**O**ne of singer Michelle Shocked's many current projects is a homemade album titled "Artists Make Lousy Slaves," recorded in the former servants' quarters of her New Orleans home.

The title and setting couldn't be more appropriate. After a protracted battle with her former label, Mercury Records, Shocked has established an unusual precedent in the pop music industry, effectively declaring herself a free agent in a business where talent is considered a commodity.

A decade after her emergence, Shocked, 34, continues to put her irrepressible convictions where her mouth is, arguing her way out of an acrimonious relationship with Mercury, which had signed her before the popularity of her acclaimed independent debut, "Texas Campfire Tapes," had time to cool.

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## SHOCKED REVELATIONS

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independent charts — one of the only records in history that cost more to buy than to record — and the career of the stubborn young folksinger was off and running.

Though her early participation in punk circles taught Shocked to distrust anything resembling a "system," she still believes the way to change the music industry is from the inside.

"I had enough savvy to realize that you were wrong to work outside the system if you hadn't even tried working within it," she said, distancing herself from maverick businesswomen like Jane Siberry and Ani DiFranco.

One of the reasons Shocked is so driven to institute changes is that, in her experience, Mercury is not alone in mistreating its artists: "I had a bigger screwing with the independent label that put out that bootleg.... They've licensed so many versions of it, so many outtakes with me missing chords and singing like Minnie Mouse because the (record-er's) batteries were weak," she said, still visibly disgusted.

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Growing increasingly frustrated with Shocked's stylistic restlessness by her third album — she had hoped for Nashville folk ("Short Sharp Shocked") to swing ("Captain Swing") to unabashed hillbilly ("Arkansas Traveler") — the label informed her in 1992 that it did not intend to pay for studio time for her next album.

Though record companies typically retain the option to drop acts from their rosters for any number of reasons, in Shocked's case she had already negotiated for complete artistic license with Mercury. To the singer, its stonewalling over her new record was a breach of contract.

"They were working overtime to tell journalists that I was no longer on the label," said the singer, her slipped feet dangling over the side of her chair during a recent interview in a hotel room near the Oakland Airport, where she is staying as she assembles a new touring band.

"Meanwhile, I'd been fighting tooth and nail to try to get off the label."

#### Invoked 13th Amendment

So Shocked filed suit against the company, at one point invoking the 13th Amendment protection against involuntary servitude. "You don't generally think of someone being enslaved in 1996," she acknowledged, yet she felt she was being held against her will by a company that was no longer looking out for

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her best interests.

"They did that big, lumbering dinosaur thing, acting with impunity," she said. "Fortunately, it was over an artistic principle. I don't think I could have sustained the fight if it was just over more money or more contractual rights."

In 1994, Shocked began selling a demo version of "Kind Hearted Woman," the record that would have been her fourth for Mercury, at her shows; proceeds would eventually finance a proper recording session, overseen by veteran producer Bones Howe (Fifth Dimension, Tom Waits). Though the finished product cost Shocked \$150,000, she jokes that the original demo "cost me \$1.50."

Settling out of court with Mercury last March, Shocked managed to retain the rights to her back catalog, which will revert to her in 10 years. Her negotiation of such an arrangement was rare for an artist of such specialized appeal. "It was political instinct and punk-rock attitude. I don't know why they fell for it," Shocked said. "They wanted to be able to go back after the fact and say, 'We want ownership of that cata-

Flowers in supporting roles.

As a member of San Francisco's anarchic squatters community of the early 1980s, Shocked, originally from Dallas, was already much more certain of her beliefs than her performing aspirations. "The career I had envisioned for myself was to be a troublemaker," she said.

"I had this attitude about artists being intellectual elites. I was denying my artistry even as I was practicing it. I was a songwriter, but I considered myself a community organizer."

Arrested during an anti-war demonstration, she gave Michelle Shocked as her name (she was born Karen Michelle Johnston), claiming she was "shell-shocked from the Cold War."

"I had run away from home and I fell in with a group of homeless kids. We all shaved our heads and wore rings in our noses and called it punk. I wasn't that huge a fan of the music, but the scene was everything to me."

Despite living in the underground, her talent was soon uncovered. A cassette recording of a live performance, "The Texas Campfire Tapes," turned up on the British

#### MICHELLE SHOCKED

Michelle Shocked and the Casualties of War play at 8 p.m. tomorrow at the Fillmore, 1805 Geary Blvd., San Francisco. Tickets: \$17.50. Call (510) 762-2277.

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With a New Orleans-flavored work in progress, the author of such notable songs as "Anchorage" and "If Love Was a Train" looks forward to putting her legal problems behind her. For one track on the New Orleans record, she collaborated with legendary Crescent City songwriter Allen Toussaint.

#### Remarkable Performers

Throughout her career, Shocked has enjoyed the company of a remarkable array of performers, from edgy traditionalists like the Mekons and Uncle Tupelo to funk avatars like the Bay Area's Tower of Power. Last year, Shocked was invited to contribute to the star-studded "Dead Man Walking" soundtrack, for which she wrote the stirring "Quality of Mercy."

Her intrepid nature has ensured a core audience of true devotees. "I really separated the wheat from the chaff," she said. She knows she's sent mixed signals throughout her career: "There are the audiences that thought I was a lesbian, or an atheistic anarchist. If the audience is still there, it's because they accept me as someone who grows and changes, and that ends up reflecting on them."

"Success is measured by how you improve the quality of life of yourself and the people around you," she said. "The rest is just gravy." ■