

Mercury poisoning

an interview with Michelle Shocked

By Joel Dyer

ID cath, frustration, frustration, death, death, death and death" is fortunately only the first part of Michelle Shocked's description of the struggles on her new and long-awaited CD *Kind Hearted Woman*. The unclassifiable singer-songwriter goes on to explain how the pain-injected lyrics ultimately "lead to grace, redemption, acceptance and, God willing, peace." A look back at Shocked's often rugged road to the present and those schizophrenic notions actually make sense.

Shocked ran away from home when she was 15 and wound up in the dangerous and insecure world of the homeless. Her escapade journey included being raped, a stint in a psychiatric ward and living in the infamous beer-var squats of San Francisco. "I fell into that cycle which low self-esteem often leads you to; that is, you live with relatives and they kick you out; you live with friends and they kick you out; and then you live with so-called boyfriends and they kick you out. Ultimately you find yourself at the end of a long chain of rejection. It really starts with the idea that you don't deserve the basic shelter and security that people find necessary for survival. So you allow yourself to spin into this vortex of just subsisting somehow day to day."

Eventually Shocked managed to put herself through college in Austin, but she still carried the baggage of her earlier, run-away trials. After graduation she wound up in San Francisco playing music on the street and doing drugs. The cops didn't appreciate her lifestyle so they tossed her in a psych ward in Santa Cruz. And that was just the beginning of the tribulations that today breathe sincerity and, more importantly, empathy into Shocked's music.

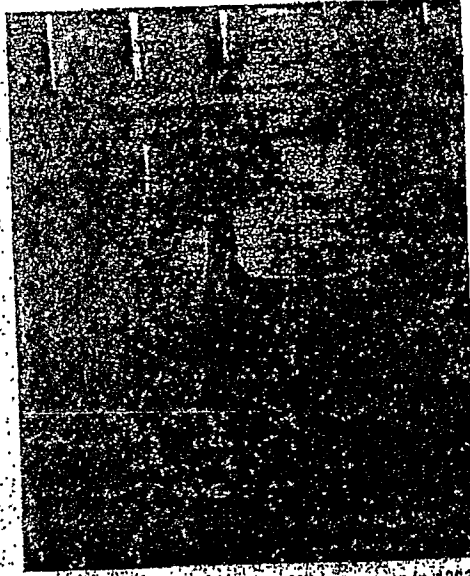
"I was really caught up in the romance and mythology of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Being a feminist, it was enough of a romance to realize there was still pioneering work to be done for women living this kind of vagabond lifestyle. I was really just trying to be a poet."

Fortunately for Shocked, her salvation from the low self-esteem trap was at hand — literally. According to Shocked, her transformation from insecure street urchin to self-described "groovy rhythm electric guitar player and sassy soul singer" was no less than a miracle of grace. "I'm sorry to be so blunt about it," she says, "but it was God's will alone. There are so many people caught in that vicious spiral and I was no different. The talents that I enjoyed, the intelligence that I enjoyed, none of that was enough to overcome the trap that my mind had put me in. For some reason, amazing grace I'll say, God saw willing to put love in my life. The love transformed my life and really helped bring me out of it."

"All I can say in my defense is when the opportunities for love and self-respect came, I had the courage to take them. A lot of people have been so defeated by the syndrome and are living in such fear that any change, even if it's a change for the better, is seen as something negative."

Shocked is a Christian, having had a conversion experience in a South-Central Los Angeles church. But she prefers a more personally defined description of her beliefs. She describes herself as "no longer in denial of my spiritual nature. By nature I am a spiritual person. I had been raised by some pretty heavy-handed Muslims. Instinctively I knew that the ideology I was presented with was racist. But see, I blamed God for that. I thought God was a racist. Over time I've come to understand that he has to view on the limitations of human beings to pass his message along."

"My conscience tells me that acceptance, that patience, that tolerance, that forgiveness, that turning the other cheek, that accepting a higher wisdom than my own is the right way to live. The soul knows no color. The soul knows no ideologies."



When Mercury records tried to kill her career in 1992, Michelle Shocked fought back.

The soul knows truth. I wouldn't define myself as the Christian Left; I don't think we need to politically orient ourselves in opposition to the Christian Right that has been so willing to define itself with the values of hatred.

"Just as it takes all kinds of people to make the world, it takes all kinds of people to make a church. And this time I'm not going to allow the bigots to drive me away. I'm going to stand my ground and say there is a place for Michelle Shocked in this faith."

Part of standing her ground is Shocked's role as an outspoken and unapologetic feminist. She is quick to point out that her main political emphasis is still the plight of her "sisters." Shocked doesn't understand how we can put a man on the moon yet still can't figure out how to produce and provide women with a safe, legal contraceptive. She also finds the hesitation, or just plain opposition, on the part of the government and corporations to providing child care for working mothers more than a little hard to swallow. Shocked's sincerity for women's issues rings clear in her voice as she describes the hardships of various friends and acquaintances: single mothers struggling to raise families in today's hostile political and economic environment.

All this crusading has naturally led the Texas-born singer/songwriter — whose songs are ripe with the trials of common folks in rural settings — to be compared to legendary folk singer Woody Guthrie. The comparison seems logical to almost everyone — except Shocked.

"That Woody Guthrie mythology is a real mixed bag and a lot of it is based on a eugenics agenda; eugenics being a particularly romantic type of nationalism that looks for the voice of the white soul. I don't feel a kinship with Woody Guthrie in the way that most people assume I do. Woody Guthrie was willing to sing about punting his rear end on the line. Whether he actually had the calluses on his rear end to prove it, I couldn't really say. I somehow suspect not. I think he did a real good job of promoting himself."

If Guthrie was a good self-promoter then there's yet another reason why the comparison to Shocked is undervalued; she

almost promoted herself into oblivion. It's not that she didn't know how to negotiate a good record deal, just the opposite. She cut too good a deal.

After Mercury records, Shocked's former label, released her last album in 1992 (*Arkansas Traveler*), the artist found that all of her new project proposals were being rejected by Mercury because they were considered "stylistically inconsistent." Never mind that this excuse was offered even before the record company had heard the songs.

Shocked wasn't sure what was going on until she was hauled into a meeting in Mercury's business department. "The accusal really didn't come clear to me until I was taken to a private meeting in business affairs and I was told, point blank, that this label was never going to promote me because I cut too good a deal for myself. I guess I beat them at their own game and they just didn't like it one little bit."

What had been a career on the rise ground to a halt. At one point Shocked even considered giving up music. But Mercury picked on the wrong woman.

The legal battle that ensued — which Shocked won — may well turn out to be the recording artist shot heard 'round the world. In winning her freedom from Mercury, she set a precedent that may well affect the entire industry. Not only did she get the right to her master tapes; she became a musical free-agent.

Her new release, *Kind Hearted Woman*, is on the Private Music label. Shocked can now choose the label she thinks is best for each of her future projects without being bound to long-term contracts. She's no longer tied to the whims of the record companies and can get on with her career and her life.

During the Mercury havoc she had to put her plans to have children on hold. Shocked, who's now in her mid-30s, says, "My biological clock is ticking, but my husband's is winding down. He's seven years older than me." The pair hope to have kids within a couple of years despite the state of the world. Shocked says, "This is the biggest example of me acting on my faith. I can't sit here and tell you that this is the kind of world I want to bring children into, but as a part of my faith, I have a responsibility to act on the positives. Children bring love and innocence and hope into the world and testify are the best motivation for us to change things for the better."

Change for the better, regardless of circumstances, seems to be the theme of Shocked's life these days. And it's the theme of *Kind Hearted Woman* if you listen closely enough. While tragedy is present in large quantity on the album, it's tragedy leading to redemption. Many of the emotions and frustration Shocked has experienced are present on the CD including those derived from the death of her grandmother during its creation. "When my grandmother died of cancer, the album dropped out of me like a dead baby. I know that sounds gross, but I don't have time to mince words anymore. I'm now the age my mom was when I ran away from home, and I like the view from here. I find my sins pretty damned forgivable. So here's your redemption; crucify yourself until you can't carry your joy; then have the courage to live with the consequences."

In Michelle Shocked's world, parallel lines intersect. It's a place where tragedy transforms itself into redemption and songs laced with pain can bring out a smile. Call it a state of grace. **73**

Michelle Shocked will perform at the Boulder Theater, 3517 Colorado Ave., Denver, on Tuesday, Oct. 22, 9:00 p.m. Tickets are \$10.00. Call 333-3333 for more information.

Boulder Weekly October 24, 1996 11

AFTN: Shelley & Erik
Boulder Weekly
— Herb