

FUNKY BLUES

Shocked emerges from 4-year exile with maturity and sense of purpose

By Jerry Spangler
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There is a stark sense of purpose about Michelle Shocked these days. A bluesy, introspective sort of purpose.

Not that purpose is something new to Shocked. A gifted singer-songwriter, she has long been an enigma to critics who would pigeonhole her eclectic hybrid of folk, funk, swing, blues, bluegrass and rock. But her new album, "Kind Hearted Woman" (Private Music) takes it all another step.

"What I wanted to do was make an album that grew out of how strong and confident I've become," the media-shy singer wrote in materials provided to the press. It has been a step fours years in the making. Shocked's last album, "Arkansas Traveler," was a brilliant blend of bluegrass, country blues and rock that established her as something of a visionary songwriter with passion for the past and promise for the future.

But "Arkansas Traveler" was also the culmination of a stormy relationship with Mercury Records, and it resulted in a self-imposed recording hiatus. And four years is a long time to ponder life.

"I'm not going to say the obvious things about how a person gets to that place,"

Shocked wrote. "Suffice it so say a little growing up was in order."

The amazing story of Shocked's rise to stardom has been well chronicled over the years. How she ran away from home at age 14, lived the Bohemian life in Amsterdam and San Francisco, wandered the folk music circuit and was eventually "discovered" at the Kerrville Folk Festival. Not performing at the festival, mind you. Simply playing her guitar around the campfires at night.

The unauthorized release of "Texas Campfire Tapes," made with a hand-held recorder at the Kerrville festival, was a stunning testimony to the timeless simplicity of story songs. And Shocked, born Karen Michelle Johnson, was a passionate new voice to give them life.

"Arkansas Traveler" remains one of the finest contemporary folk recordings of the past decade. But it did not result in the commercial success Mercury had envisioned when they signed her.

Then exile. Or as Shocked, now 34, told the Los Angeles Times, "I went on strike."

She continued to play small venues and music festivals like Newport and Telluride. Those who attended the shows found they could purchase "Kind Hearted Woman" at the show. It was an album she recorded herself but had never released to



Michelle Shocked will perform Monday night at the Zephyr club.

record stores or the press. That has now changed with her new record deal with Private Music (it is a nonexclusive agreement that gives her unprecedented opportunity to function as a free agent).

The real winners in this deal are her fans, who have heard rumors and speculation about "Kind Hearted Woman" since an early version began appearing in 1995.

The album is filled with story songs that are intensely personal, often abstract — vignettes that celebrate laughter, tears and all that is life. "Life is good," she says.

● **PERFORMANCE** — Utah fans will get their chance to hear Shocked perform selections from the album Monday, Oct. 28, at the Zephyr Club. Showtime is about 10 p.m.