

A Victory for a Renegade

NEWSDAY (NASSAU EDITION)

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Photo by Catherine Ledner

Michelle Shocked.
Appearing with the Casualties of Wah in support of her new album, "Kind Hearted Woman," Saturday at 8 p.m. at Irving Plaza, 17 Irving Place, Manhattan. Tickets are \$20; call 212-777-1224 or 516-888-9000.
Review of her new album on Page C25. F

BY LETTA TAYLER
STAFF WRITER

ONE DECADE AGO, an English producer visiting a Texas folk festival overheard Michelle Shocked, then an unknown activist-songwriter, playing for friends around a campfire. The producer was so enthralled he recorded Shocked with a Walkman, the only device he had handy, and released her songs as "The Texas Campfire Tapes."

The album shot to No. 1 on the U.K. indie chart, complete with fuzzy sound and chirping crickets, and snagged Shocked a fat record deal with Mercury.

Three critically acclaimed major-label albums and one nasty lawsuit later, Shocked has returned to the renegade spirit of her campfire days with the release of "Kind Hearted Woman" on Private Music. Her first commercial album in four years, "Kind Hearted Woman" symbolizes Shocked's legal victory over Mercury, which had refused to produce the record and tried to block her from releasing it on another label.

The album also represents a musical victory for Shocked, who performs Saturday at Irving Plaza in Manhattan. A collection of stark narratives about loss, frustration and redemption in rural America, it is as wide open and inspiring as the sweeping prairies of East Texas where Shocked was raised.

"Kind Hearted Woman" is primarily electric, which Shock contends is one reason Mercury wouldn't produce it. But only a few tracks contain high-wire riffs; most lope or soar to delicate picking and strumming and nod to influences including what Shocked calls "fonk," a blend of folk and funk.

"A Child Like Grace," about the death of a 5-year-

old girl, is electric gospel. "Cold Comfort," a chilling lament over a father who commits murder, has the langor of the Cowboy Junkies.

Shocked's voice is as remarkable as ever. She ends "Stillborn," an ode to a dead baby, with a wail as forceful as a Greek chorus. In "Eddie," a biting account of a boy who commits arson after his father is killed by lightning, she pitches k.d. lang warbles and roars over a catchy walking bass line. The album turns autobiographical in "The Hard Way," in which Shocked declares: "Never a lesson have I learned without first being burned."

Shocked, a former runaway, hobo and East Village squatter-activist, began sparring with Mercury in 1992 when the label wouldn't let her pose in blackface for the album cover of "Arkansas Traveler" to call attention to minstrels' role in American music.

Mercury rejected Shocked's two subsequent record proposals, including "Kind Hearted Woman," but wouldn't free her from her contract either. Shocked then sued Mercury, charging it with, among other things, violating the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery. Before the suit was settled, she pressed 25,000 copies of the album and sold them at concerts herself.

Mercury says it wishes Shocked well. Under the settlement, the label will in mid-November issue its final Shocked album, a compilation of previous recordings, plus "Stillborn." At Shocked's behest, the compilation is entitled "Mercury Poise: 1988-1995" — short for "Mercury Poisoning." ■



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MICHELLE SHOCKED
'Kind Hearted Woman'
(Private Music)