

Editor:  
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# Arts & E

## Shocked toughs it out

By JULIE MELROSE

Singer-songwriter Michelle Shocked has always been known as a tough character, but no one knew just how tough until her recent landmark victory in a protracted dispute with Mercury Records.

Mercury executives had punished Shocked for negotiating an unusually favorable contract with them by dismissing her album proposals out of hand — refusing to pay for studio time or promote her career.

Shocked — who performs Wednesday at 8 p.m. in Chapin Hall at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley — fought back by taking Mercury to court, maintained her fan base by touring relentlessly and selling at concerts an album of stark rural songs called "Kind Hearted Woman," and emerged from the battle free of her contract and in control of her past material.

The artist said in a call from Utah last week that the outcome of her struggle is already having an impact on the recording industry. "Any time a David stands up to a Goliath and doesn't get absolutely crushed, it sends a signal. I think there's a paradigm shift happening. If the paradigm shifts sufficiently to say to labels, "You guys need us as much as we need you, and you're not just going to walk all over us," it will make for a healthier relationship between artists and labels."

Shocked now has an unprecedented nonexclusive contract with the California-based boutique label Private Music. "Private was willing to look beyond the bottom line. Instead of having to release all my work on one label and have it judged by them in terms of whether it's stylistically-consistent with my past work, I'm a free agent who can decide whether a label is stylistically consistent with what I want to do next."

In this case, Shocked's plans include an album in the New Orleans style followed by a rhythm-and-blues recording. But because Private has just released a more polished version of "Kind Hearted Woman," the performer's current show combines songs from that album with New Orleans-style funk.



Michelle Shocked will play at Mount Holyoke College on Wednesday.

She will be backed in South Hadley by an Oakland-based band called "Casualties of Wah," comprised of keyboardist Karl Wheeler, drummer Joel Smith, bassist Jamie Brewer, trumpeter Rich Armstrong and trombonist Michael Rinta. "It's wonderful to have the brass behind me," said Shocked.

"It delivers a lot of punch."

Asked if it's difficult for her to promote "Kind Hearted Woman" as a new release, given its history, Shocked said, "I've got to be honest with you. It is. I've got one foot in

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DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE

# Arts & Entertainment

## Shocked it out with label



Shelle Shocked will play at Mount Hope College on Wednesday.

She will be backed in South Hadley by an eight-piece band called "Casualties of War" comprised of keyboardist Karl Wheelwright, drummer Joel Smith, bassist Jamie Miller, trumpeter Rich Armstrong and saxophonist Michael Rinta. "It's wonderful to have the brass behind me," said Shocked. "The band delivers a lot of punch." Shocked asked if it's difficult for her to promote "Kind Hearted Woman" as a new release, given its history, Shocked said, "I've got to be honest with you. It is. I've got one foot in

the past and one in the future, and it's making things very difficult in the present. Having done such a thorough job of presenting those songs to audiences, I'm now ready to move on. And it's quite draining in performances to try to do both the very sober "Kind-Hearted Woman" material and this intoxicating funk, soul, R&B stuff."

Renowned for her powerful roots-based singing style, her generous shows and her uninhibited, charismatic stage presence, Shocked said she is just as at home on stage as she appears.

"I've become quite fearless as a performer — and somewhat disturbingly shameless as well. The thing I fail to do is fully comprehend what's given back to me by the audience. You would think you would be a performer partly so you could feel all the appreciation or adulation, but I haven't quite managed that yet."

Shocked said she was bolstered by her fans' loyalty during the four years her new material wasn't available in stores. "But I think I earned that loyalty by my commitment to staying on the road, and by letting them know I was doing everything I could to help myself, and wasn't waiting for some big daddy out in the sky to come and rescue me. When people bought "Kind Hearted Woman" at shows, they knew they were supporting me real directly."

That's not to say the dispute with Mercury didn't take its toll on Shocked, emotionally as well as financially. But she said she's finally free to look toward more joyful times and projects. "I've done a pretty good job of taking in the fact that I've weathered the storm and there are clear skies ahead. I'm really appreciating my relationship with Private. I understand now that just because things were dysfunctional in my relationship with Mercury Records didn't mean I was a dysfunctional person."

Advanced general admission tickets for the Wednesday 8 p.m. Shocked show at Chapin Hall are \$18.50 at the Northampton Box Office (586-8686). The PonyStars will open the show.