

BOSTON, MA

# Michelle Shocked and Iris Dement trade tracks

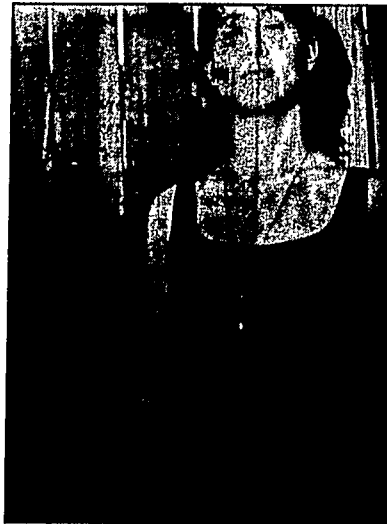
By Ken Capobianco  
CNC Arts Writer

In the early '90s, singer/songwriters Iris Dement and Michelle Shocked were two of acoustic music's most promising acts.

Dement's first two records were critically lauded, impressive efforts mixing traditional folk with country-tinged roots. She carved a niche for herself as a performer and songwriter of honest emotion. Shocked made an impact with her adventurous explorations of folk/country/blues music with heady lyrical content. She mixed potent political sensibilities with a winning unpretentiousness and endeared herself with both critics and fans.

The two artists now appear to be trading trajectories. The Arkansas-born Dement seems to be on the cusp of full-blown commercial success with her new record, "The Way I Should" (Warner Bros.). Shocked, from Texas, though, has struggled in legal limbo for four years before finally releasing "Kind Hearted Woman" (Private), a record her previous record company, Mercury, rejected because it found it not commercial enough nor up to her previous standards. Both artists are performing locally this week.

At heart, the two still have much in common. Both write carefully crafted songs that sound deeply personal. Shocked has always been



At the moment, the careers of Iris Dement and Michelle Shocked seem to have swapped trajectories.

known for her social conscience as well as understanding that the personal is always political. But on her third record, it's Dement who is confronting politics head-on.

"On this record I wanted to be a little more specific with how I felt about the things that are going on in the world," says Dement, who plays the Berklee Performance Center on Friday. "I didn't want to make a 'political' record or anything like that. I write about the matters that are close to my heart and here I felt confident enough to put songs like 'There's a Wall In Washington' and 'Wasteland of the Free.'"

"There's a Wall" is Dement's finely observed look at the impact of the Vietnam Memorial while the high-octane "Wasteland" bemoans politics as usual. Dement sings about "CEOs making 200 times the workers' pay" and hypocritical politicians, Bible beaters and pundits.

"That is one of the earliest songs I wrote but I finally finished it for this record. You see when I write songs, I write for myself as well as writing to help people," Dement says. "With that song I was mad about situations which hurt people in this country. Perhaps I can offer some light on the subject. When

people lose jobs it's not a political issue, it's a human one."

But there are more dimensions to Dement's musical world and on the new record she has some lovely love songs too. She sings with lulling grace on "This Kind Of Happy" and "When My Mornin' Comes Around." As on her previous discs, "Infamous Angel" (1992) and "My Life" (1993) the singer originally front

Arkansas sings about matters of the heart in a most convincing way.

As for Shocked, her new "Kind Hearted Woman" really isn't all that new. She recorded it over four years ago when she was working with Fiachna O'Braonain and Peter O'Toole of Hothouse Flowers. It's an intense and somber affair, raw and unvarnished. The 10 songs are about people with hard lives and small dreams, trying to make a life in an indifferent world. Shocked's previous efforts including "Short Sharp Shocked" (1988) and "Arkansas Traveler" (1991), focused on the inequities in life. Here, the personal is political

in the most extreme way.

"It is a record that means a lot to me. But you have to remember that it was done a long time ago," says Shocked, who will be at the Somerville Theater on Thursday. "When Mercury said that it wasn't releasable or whatever reason they wanted to use, I sold it at shows. I didn't know if it would ever get a commercial release and I'm glad that it finally has. It is not a commercial record. Music doesn't always have to be."

Shocked has moved on, though, and while "Kind Hearted Woman" documents a point in her songwriting life, it's not where she is at now. She's on the road and her shows will be more R&B- and funk-oriented.

"I've got two records that will come out sometime next year. One is steeped in blues and R&B. Since I moved to New Orleans, I've wanted to do something that reflects traditional blues. The other disc will be much more in a contemporary funk vein." She says that she is working with the wonderful Oakland band Tony, Toni, Tone and it will be unpredictable.

What else is new. □

Iris Dement plays the Berklee Performance Center on Nov. 8 at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$22.50. Call (617) 352-7455. Michelle Shocked plays the Somerville Theater on Nov. 7 at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$19.50 and \$24.50. Call (617) 628-3390.