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Boston Globe

A joyful Shocked finds essence of music

By Joan Anderman
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Music Review

MICHELLE SHOCKED
At: *House of Blues, Sunday night (through Wednesday)*

At a time when so-called alternative music has faded into an achingly familiar refrain of scrappy guitar changes and plaintive singing, Michelle Shocked is still happily crisscrossing the American music landscape like nobody's business, and nobody's idea of a career trajectory. This is, after all, the woman who several years ago sued her record label, Mercury, citing the 13th Amendment – that's the one abolishing slavery. Creative control, if not corporate dollars, in hand, Shocked is rebuilding her career with a series of multinight residencies in small clubs and what she accurately describes as "an eccentric little archival recording" of new material that's being sold at the shows.

Shocked has explored the blues and R&B in the past, in and among honky-tonk, hymns, fiddle tunes, rock, and swing. Now she's diving headlong into the tradition – and if the idea of a tall, skinny white girl wailing with a four-piece, all-black band called the Anointed Earls sounds unlikely, you have two nights left to bear witness to the depth and breadth of Shocked's talent. The group is still finding its footing, and the first few songs sounded like a rehearsal: searching for tempos, fumbling into harmony vocals, misjudging dynamics, conferring and adjusting midsong. Once the proverbial pocket was found, however, the walls came down.

Like her band, Shocked was unsure and ebullient. She continues to be a radiant, unpretentious performer who distills the essence of whatever style, or styles, she's investigating. At Sunday's sold-out show, she sang dirty soul riffs with the openheartedness of a folk singer and played fuzzed-out blues guitar like a Delta punk. "Good News," a roiling R&B groove that belies its theme of environmental disaster, was commissioned by Greenpeace, with whom Shocked is collaborating to draw attention to the health dangers posed by PVC plants near the town of Convent, La. The tune accompanied the 14-minute film "Communities in Crisis," which was shown on TV monitors at the start of the show, and Shocked grouped the evening's politically oriented songs around it: the mournful "Stillborn" from 1994's "Kind Hearted Woman" and the new song "What Can I Say," a sly, jazzy bit of funk about the demise of natural habitats.

Shocked pulled out favorites – among them the raucous old-time rocker "Little Sister," buoyant, bittersweet "Anchorage," "VFD" (which segued into a head-spinning cover of the '70s funk treatise "Fire"), and the lifting, country-folk "Prodigal Daughter." But the rest of the set was devoted to her new material. "Little Billie" was a barnburner, sung straight up with a chaser of grit. The band gathered center stage for "Can't Take My Joy," a luminous a capella gospel song, and explored the vibrant space between notes on the soul ballad "Forgive to Forget." A perpetually grinning Shocked preached the healing benefits of swinging your hips, and orchestrated a full-house square dance, matching all that musical mastery with – of all things in this day and age – irrepressible joy.

Paula Cole tops Earth Fest bill

Paula Cole, who recently won a Grammy Award for best new artist, will headline the WBOS Earth Festival at the Hatch Shell April 25.

The fifth annual Earth Festival, which is free, also will have performances by Cheetah Revivals, Dan's course, about Cole, the Rockport native turned national star. "She played the second Earth Fest and essentially stole the show," says Klein.

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