

**MICHELLE SHOCKED
by JUDY EASTMAN**

Three Melbourne shows and a national tour that has taken in the East Coast Blues and Roots Festival at Byron Bay and every capital except Darwin are an indication of Michelle Shocked's popularity in Australia. She spoke to Beat on the eve of her fifth Australian tour about record label freedom, political correctness and being an east Texas gal.

It seems remarkable that this is your fifth visit to Australia. We don't get too many performers who come back as regularly as you. What do you like about Australia so much?

"Well I really do like the audiences and I think there's a lot of sympathy for the musical styles that I'm interested in but um probably the thing most responsible is that the promoter who's brought me over has been willing to do it pretty much on my terms—sometimes solo, one time with a band, one time with Paul Kelly's band. I've done a lot of live concert work in the past 10 years and it's really meant a lot to be able to keep Australia on my itinerary because usually you'd make it back once or twice, not five times, and it's a great way to keep in touch with people."

Who are you bringing over with you?

"I've got my band, the Anointed Earls. We have a variegated history. The drummer [Cedric Anderson] goes back to the early days of my last project, *Kind Hearted Woman*. The bass player [Jamie Brewer] goes back to a band I had in '96 called the Casualties of Wah—an r'n'b band—and the guitar player [Dubla Smith] was in a band that I wanted to do a collaboration with on my former label [Mercury], Tony Toni Tone, and the label said absolutely not and put it's foot down. So here it is five years later and he's playing guitar for me."

You mentioned your former label. How did winning your freedom from it affect your direction?

"It's been that sort of heady sense of freedom that sort of reminds me of—I put myself through university and when I graduated, suddenly the days loomed large in front of me and it was "Ah, I can do whatever I want!" and "Oh shit! I can do WHATEVER I want!" Suddenly the bottom dropped out. There were no structures...It's a lot of power being able to pick and choose what projects you want to do and what label. But it also took me a bit of time to gather up my courage...I had to find a lot of confidence early on but now I think what's helping the most is that I've put together the dream team of a band, who are really going to be the people I can hold hands with as I go on this journey."

How did the label dispute affect your songwriting?

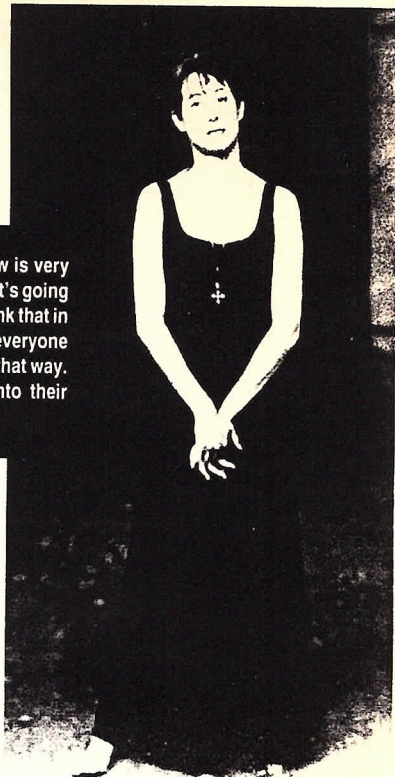
You talk about your first post-Mercury project Kind Hearted Woman as being 'the songs you need to sing, the stories you needed to tell' and many of the songs come from a difficult or painful position—was that a reflection of the stresses you'd gone through?

"The songs definitely characterised the frustration that I was experiencing...It's the direction I wanted to go all along. I just didn't have the support. Some of the songs I'm currently doing are five years old and I'd wanted to develop them back then but didn't have the support and out of that frustration a lot of the songs on *Kind Hearted Woman* came forth. A lot of the songs I'm singing now are fairly blithe, relaxed, warm and how can you sing those songs when it seems your very creative life is being threatened?"

In the United States the culture there now is very very separate but equal, very segregated. It's going backwards I'm afraid to say. You would think that in the heyday of rap and hip hop it looked like everyone was crossing over. It really didn't happen that way. If anything it scared everyone further into their suburbs and their white-flight enclaves.

Tell me a bit about the direction you want to take and your new cd Good News.

"Well album is a bit of an exaggeration. It's a very limited edition and not a very good realisation of what it is I want to do. Kind of a necessary first step...it needs a lot more work...[but] at least it'll show how I got to where it is I'm heading...Let's say the emphasis is on, um. Here's my understanding of American musical tradition. It's got influences from both European and African sources and that as an American, you're entitled to choose—what



do I want to show? Which influences do I want to emphasise?... At the moment I'm choosing to emphasise much more of the blues aspects, the afro centric aspects, which include things like funk and jazz and r'n'b and swing."

The liner notes to Arkansas Traveler talk about you wanting to 'black up' for the cover but that the label was against this. Has political correctness showed any signs of slowing down in the United States? If not, how is it affecting performers' freedom of expression?

"No, matter of fact it's gotten more correct and very very apartheid. In the United States the culture there now is very very separate but equal, very segregated. It's going backwards I'm afraid to say. You would think that in the heyday of rap and hip hop it looked like everyone was crossing over. It really didn't happen that way. If anything it scared everyone further into their suburbs and their white-flight enclaves. You're not allowed to speak about certain things and most importantly there's not a lot of dialogue...You know there's been that big success with Lillith Fair, and what that means is white women speaking to white women. Did we need that? I mean we already know what we think!"

So what are the good things about living over there?

"Well we live in New Orleans, which is a very culturally rich city. You know, I've lived at different times in my life in Europe and I've tried to check out and wash my hands of the whole affair but living in the States I really do feel like I can do some good. I'm able to score the occasional point or two by something I say or write or sing, you know—make someone think—and that's a good feeling, to have some kind of influence or effect on the direction of things."

You've talked about the influence of the so-called 'Texas outlaw' songwriters and artists from the 1960s and 70s. What characterised that group?

"There were a lot of very regional songwriters who influenced us that the world at large had never heard of and it makes you very proud to have had such high quality regional influences and it really taught you early on how to have a distinctive voice of your own...There's more about cowboy mythology, which I think—I'm sorry if this sounds very American naïve—but that's why I like Australia. It's more like Texas! There was country and there was rock but it was really called honky tonk...there were no highbrow middle class artsy fartsy Texans going around. It wasn't art, people needed music to dance to."

Your connection with roots music is clear, but you've torched the idea that you're a wide-eyed country girl with songs like 'Come A Long Way', where your observations of L.A. are razor-sharp.

"Yeah, well I'd run away when I was 16 and I went to San Francisco, then New York, then Amsterdam. I lived in London. I've been around. [But] you know I think I'm still wide eyed. It's like I try to keep that part of me that grew up in East Texas available, see things through those eyes but not live like a false ideal of that either. I've been around and I've seen things. I write about cities. I've heard it said, the way that Joni Mitchell writes about lovers LA obviously and Anchorage, Fogtown, 'New York City, imagine that', 5 a.m. in Amsterdam. I write about cities that's my thing."

Michelle Shocked plays the Prince of Wales with support from Karma County on Wednesday 22nd, Thursday 23rd and Friday 24th of April.

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