

Music

Good news at last for Shocked fans

By Angela Neville

Michelle Shocked is a storyteller. Within the lyrics of each song she writes lie sub-texts and layers of deeper, hidden meanings. It is what she does best.

The name of one of her last albums is *Kind Hearted Woman*. Behind this is, of course, a story.

"The inspiration for me came from an oral tradition about hobos who would leave symbols on the sides of houses or barns," Shocked says.

"It would indicate to other hobos what kind of treatment they would receive at that homestead. The symbol of a cat with a smile mean that a kind-hearted woman lived in the house who would give you some food, or a place to sleep or some work."

Shocked strikes you as a kind-hearted kind of woman herself — an ordinary woman who has so far lived an extraordinary life.

Born and raised in Texas, she began writing songs at the age of 16, because "I didn't know how to play other people's."

Her career was kick-started in an unusual way. She says she was informed by letter one day that she had an album on the charts which was doing quite well. It was called *The Texas Campfire Tapes*, a bootleg made by someone who had asked her to sing into a tape recorder while performing at a festival.

When asked quite casually if this made her see red, she says, "I was mad, but in a different sense of the word".

"I had only been released from a mental hospital six months prior to this. I was living homeless in an abandoned building in Lower East Side [New York] in very difficult circumstances. When the recording was made I had just come back from living as a squatter in Amsterdam."

From that bootleg recording came a recording deal with Mercury Records. The "problem" was that she came onto the scene at a time when "alternative" music was still a strange concept. And here was an artist that linked punk with bluegrass, country blues and funk.

It caused trouble for her in 1992, when she decided to stray further from European influences and towards a more "Afró-centric" sound. But Shocked says what the label wanted was a "*Short, Sharp, Shocked II*".

"In '92 I was taken into the business affairs office of Mercury at my label on Polygram and I was told that the label would never promote my record because I had basically negotiated too good a deal for myself," she says.

"When you're told that directly, that your art has little value to a label that is responsible for promoting it, you have two choices. One is to say, 'Oh, please promote me, I'll do whatever you say,' or tilt your chin out a little bit and say 'f*** you'."

Shocked took legal action — and won — eventually but at a cost.

"It's taken me five years to win my freedom from that label understanding that I was never going to have the resources that I needed and so by working underground I continued developing my own artistic vision."

Since 1992 until now, Shocked has been underground, relying on word of mouth and tours to promote her work. With her artistic freedom now assured, she is now doing "what I really wanted to be doing five years ago." Her new album, *Good News*, will be available at all her Australian concerts.



But the flipside to gaining her artistic freedom is losing her resources. Shocked admits she doesn't have what she requires to do what she really wants to do. So where to go from here? To another label, she hopes — one that will be willing to cut her some slack.

"The resources come from cultural institutions that are designed to nurture artistic vision," she says. "That's almost laughable, it's like saying that news media is nurturing the truth. No one really buys that anymore, it's just mass marketing to an audience. The better ones tend to understand the true nature of the medium that they work in, it's a cultural media, record labels are. And I know that they're out there."

"I know that the resources that they have available, which include marketing and promotion, have crass motives but underneath they also understand that you don't just get a song on the radio just to sell lots and lots of records. You get a song on the radio so that people can flip it on on their way to work and hear something that influences their thinking."

So will it ever be any easier to "define" Michelle Shocked? She replies by saying she once saw a bumper sticker that read "God is too big for any one religion". So it is with artists, Shocked believes, that artists with vision are too big for any one genre.

"I've become downright militant about it. I believe American artists have such a wealth of heritage to draw from that when they allow themselves to be put into any one genre, they're selling out their own birthright."

"So I have been at pains to define myself as an American artist because that gives me the freedom to say 'on this album, bluegrass, and on this album, rhythm and blues'. That's my birthright, that's my heritage. I wouldn't let any other country take it away from me and I'm certainly not going to let my own."

Amen to that.

Michelle Shocked and the Anointed Earls perform at the ANU Bar tomorrow night. See back cover for a chance to win tickets.