

Playfully Spontaneous MICHELLE

THERE'S something that's been taxing the mind of Michelle Shocked well outside the boundaries of this curiously circumscribed world of music-making. It has to do with the suppressed gospel according to St James, the brother of Jesus, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the fact that Michelle was raised in a heavily Fundamentalist Christian tradition.

MICHELLE SHOCKED STORY BY MICHAEL SMITH

IT'S creating quite a crisis within this softly-spoken young Texan singer songwriter, as her intellect battles the tenets upon which her entire life, moral and ethical code and initial world view are based, but you won't find it spilling into the music Michelle will be presenting during her fifth tour of Australia. And it won't be the by her own admission dark and heavy side of herself that was on display with her last album, *Kind-Hearted Woman*, either.

"THE last album, *Kind-Hearted Woman*, was ten songs, seven of them about death! It was going to be heavy, no matter how you present it. But you know, I really didn't want to make that album. It was just the circumstances that I found myself in at the time. I couldn't do this light material, even though I had written some of it already, and the material I'm doing now is what I wanted to be doing then, how could I honestly be up there presenting that side of myself when the realities I was dealing with were much harsher, much darker than that. So I finally bowed to the pressure of the realities - I wish this wasn't the story I had to tell but this is what's going on. I'm just glad it's over."

TO that end, Michelle has made some pretty major changes in her life that have helped her overcome the problems.

"WE live now in New Orleans. The way that the band and I have been living in Los Angeles and New York as kind of

media centres and industry centres, so there's an element, living in New Orleans, where I'm kind of out on the fringes. And that's really been fine. You know, I've been fighting a lot of legal warfare actions for the past four years and there wasn't much point to sitting in those heavy media centres when all I could do was wait while the lawyers did their job. So I finally got free of Mercury in '96, and by then I'd been almost two years in New Orleans, and making forays out on tours. But last year finally, I came to the end of that road and I just took a year off, really devoted it to a true sabbatical, trying to go deep and really examine my motivations, what my focus is. So by the end of last year, I'd pretty much garnered a larger and lighter perspective of what it is I think I'm doing.

"WITH that in mind, come January I called up the band, brought them into New Orleans and spent about a week rehearsing and a week in the studio doing this very, very limited, very finite effort, kind of a sketch really. I'm not calling this a proper album. This to me is a sketch, and as a result, some of the songs that I very much wanted on the album didn't make it. The production just didn't get across. But the basic intention is just to give people an idea of what direction I'm heading in."

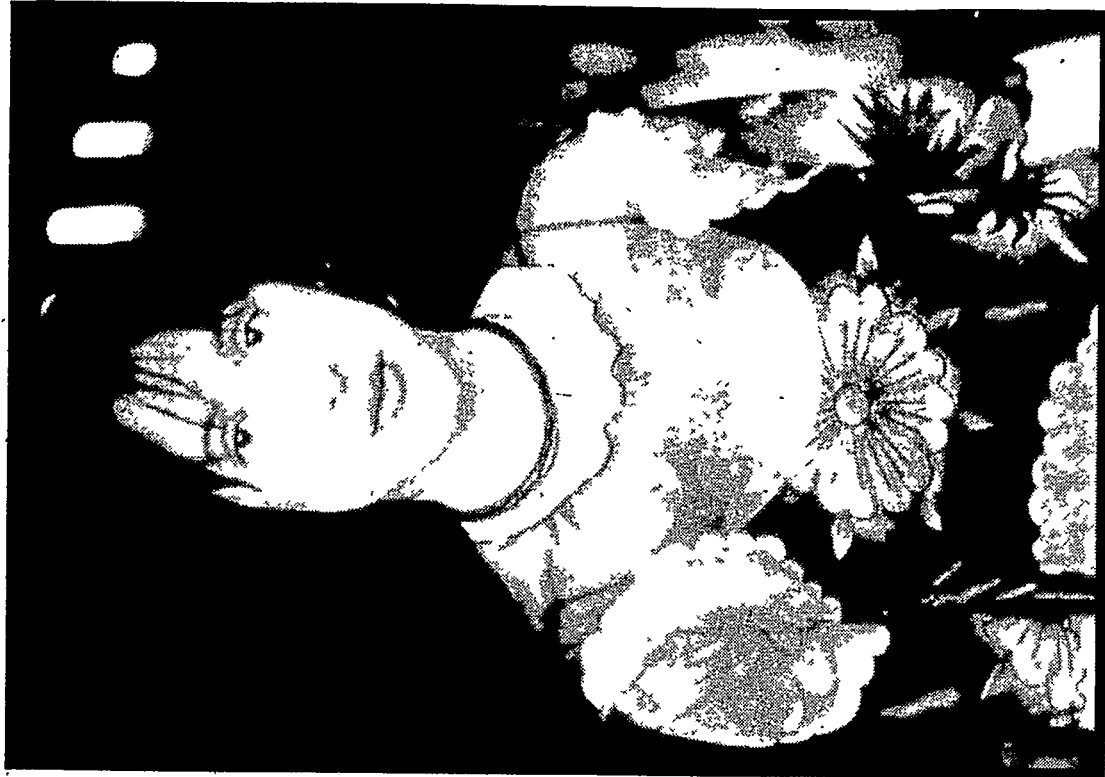
ON previous visits, Michelle has either performed solo with just her guitar, or Kelly's old band, The Messengers, but

this time around, she's bringing out her own band, The Anointed Earls.

"THE band are from California. They've decided they're going to say they're from Spontaneity, California. It's very much a playful, spontaneous show that we do, but they mostly have a background in R&B. The drummer, Cedric, has been working with Tony Rich and the likes of that. The guitar player, played with Tony Janti Tone. They've each had very successful careers in the new R&B scene, but they desperately wanted to get out of the current R&B business because it's all business and no music. Not that they don't love the R&B tradition, but the business has so effectively leached all of the juice out of the music. Basically I found them but I think they really have a future together on their own as well. It's really come together as a band, not as a backing band."

ALL the legal battles and accompanying traumas have basically been about Michelle's uncompromising position when it comes to the integrity and authenticity of her musical message. By refusing to play the industry game and "manufacture" the requisite batch of "hits", she found herself battling the system head-on, and for a change, beat it. So where is she, musically, this time around?

"IT'S definitely blues, which is why the music has always had that swing, and always been at pains to show the tradi-



tional roots to the music that I do, even if what I'm playing on the surface is pop. I'd like to do a trilogy of albums that are emphasising this Afro-centric side of my influences - the R&B, the blues, the gospel, the jazz, the funk - to dig and kind of work that vein. And to do that I'm not willing to start my own label. I'm not willing to spend all effort getting up the resources independent of the majors. But, because this frees myself giving that up just for the oppor-

tunity to make records for somebody, I still want to keep my focus on songwriting, and since my first love is songwriting, my second love is performing, to get involved in any kind of label relations - I don't want to get into the bureaucracy too much."

Michelle Shocked & The Anointed Earls play four nights at the Metro, Monday 27 and Tuesday 28 for a seated audience, Wednesday 29, and