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Bio Terrorism

Michelle Shocked's eccentric life

by Dave Wielenga

It takes six pages of small print for Michelle Shocked's publicist to summarize her life, which began as the accidental daughter of an unmarried Mormon and a Texas carpenter named "Dollar" Bill and is scheduled to arrive—40 years, three months and 20 days later—at the Coach House on June 13. I'm still apologizing for tying up the office fax machine so long.

Shocked sounds a little apologetic, too.

"I am an eccentric person," she allows, in a what-can-you-do tone that implies it's not her fault her life has a story line as jagged as an electrocardiogram.

But the woman born Karen Michelle Johnston can hear the comic understatement in such a brief explanation for a biography that includes a military-brat childhood, a runaway adolescence, dropping out of high school, a homeless young adulthood, graduation from college, commitment to a mental institution (complete with electric-shock therapy—hence the last name), being raped in Italy, a musical apprenticeship as a punky troubadour, arrests for political activism, overnight cult stardom in Great Britain, a hit record in America, a career-paralyzing standoff with the record industry, and the formation of her own label. Oh, and did we mention that she got married 10 years ago?

Knowing you got all that information by fax, it isn't long before Shocked's straight face is ruptured by a giggle.

"I don't really think I'm eccentric," she confesses, still chuckling, "but my husband assures me every day that it's true."

So are Shocked's eccentricities the consequences of her circumstances, or has she generated lots of the drama and chaos that have followed her around because of her overreaction to those circumstances?

"Hmmm, that's a *good* question," Shocked says. "Maybe I would have been eccentric anyway. But maybe I was given this eccentricity for a purpose—to set my life toward a direction where these



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situations wouldn't be able to ruin me."

And then, after careful consideration, Shocked doesn't choose either answer. Bottom line, it doesn't matter anymore—and that's the truest sign that Shocked's long journey of passionate, intractable opinion may have reached a destination of serene, tolerant acceptance.

An attitude of gratitude permeates her new album, *Deep Natural*, a double disc of electrically swirled roots music laden with lyrics of big-picture faith and joy delivered with gospel-style fervor in Shocked's mighty and malleable voice. In fact, Shocked's membership in a mostly black New Orleans church is the inspiration for songs like "Good News," "That's So Amazing," "Psalm" and "Go in Peace." And her shows—featuring not only the members of her band but some of their children as well—take on some of the feeling of a traveling salvation show.

"I've stopped short of preaching," Shocked says, laughing, "but the show does come to a point where I'm ministering in the Al Green kind of mold."

Consider the lyrics to "Can't Take My Joy," which open the album: "Jealousy and anger/Greed and hypocrisy/The seasons of human nature/Cannot take my joy from me/Joy, joy, joy, halleluja."

But don't come to the conclusion that this is Christian music, or some of the old Shocked will come out.

"I hate Christian music! Hate it!" she rails. "I'd love to call it gospel because I love, love, love gospel, but I'm not black, so I'm not ever going to be gospel. I guess calling it 'spiritual' would be the more common coin of this realm."

That's where Shocked comes from in "Forgive to Forget": "Full with fear/Possessed by pain/Bitter tears/I'm crying again/I don't know when/I lost the will to live/And I found the will to forgive/But the more I forgive/The more I forget/Holding on to the past/Is my only regret/Let it go, let it go, let it go."

"I realize I'm not qualified or educated enough in gospel to be an effective preacher," Shocked says, "but just because I don't know what I'm talking about doesn't mean I'm gonna shut up. If I have to sit back and wait till I know everything before I speak—well, I'll be too old by then. So I just try to talk truth."

There's a similar approach to the ethereal soundscapes underneath Shocked's lyrics, which merge the reggae of Bob Marley into the R&B of Curtis Mayfield, adorn them with haunting horns and wistful pedal-steel guitar, and process this marriage through echoing electronica. The music is so good that it can stand alone—and it does on *Deep Natural*'s second disc, called *Dub Natural*.

"I owe this sound to the great glory of my producers—my husband [veteran music journalist Bart Bull] and [Hothouse Flowers guitarist] Fiachna O'Braonain—and the fact that I finally had the wisdom to follow their direction," Shocked gushes. "Up until now, I always had to control everything because I didn't trust anybody else's direction for me."


Of course, up until now, that was the difference between Shocked making her own music and making the music dictated by record conglomerates. The release of *Deep Natural* marked the debut of Shocked's own record label, Mighty Sound, and it's hard to imagine this album being produced any other way.

"That does get to the point of my career," says Shocked. "Lots of artists have experienced what I've experienced in the industry—they've been the debutante, the ingénue, the overnight sensation and had the hit single. But not so many have what I have now—freedom from all of that. I don't have to depend on the overnight sensation or the hit single anymore. The fact that I own my own masters means that 15 years into my career, I'm in control of my destiny."

As much as any of us have control, that is. Shocked laughs when you say that.

"You're right. The ability to live with contradiction and uncertainty is a sign of maturity," she says. "All I've really discovered is where my voice is right now—and what's nice is that's what I'm most intrigued with, today only, one day at a time. It's as good a reason as any to go into battle."

Michelle Shocked performs at the Coach House, 33157 Camino Capistrano, San Juan Capistrano, (949) 496-8930; www.thecoachhouse.com. Thurs., June 13, 7 p.m. \$25. All ages.

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