

Michelle Shocked zaps Wiltern in her L.A. debut

A clear message
from socialist
singer Billy Bragg

By Todd Everett
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Billy Bragg headlined Saturday night's Wiltern Theater show, but for many the chief object of interest was second-billed Michelle Shocked.

That's because British folk singer Bragg has played in town reasonably often — this was his second local show this year — and the highly touted Shocked was making her debut.

The booking might have been a bit ambitious at the moment. Bragg's last area performances were at UCLA and Club Lingerie, after all, and there's no particular evidence that a larger audience is eager to see him.

Relatively early in the evening, in fact, it seemed that there were more pamphleteers espousing Central American political issues in the lobby than there'd be fans in the seats.

Both singers gave bang-up shows, with the caveat that neither makes any secret of their leftist politics. No George Bush or Oliver North T-shirts were visible in the audience, and the crowd (which may well have included many card-carrying members of the American Civil Liberties Union) cheered somewhat mechanically each of the several times that Bragg mentioned his "socialist" affiliation.

Following a brief set by the Nicaraguan pop-jazz fusion band Mancotal (who, minus their incapacitated lead singer, sounded like what you'd expect to hear in a Spanish discotheque), Shocked

took the stage.

A sensation in England when Walkman-recorded tapes of an ad-lib campfire performance were released there commercially two years ago, Shocked has just released her first studio-recorded album. She concentrated on songs from "Short, Sharp Shocked," many of them dealing with her growing up in east Texas.

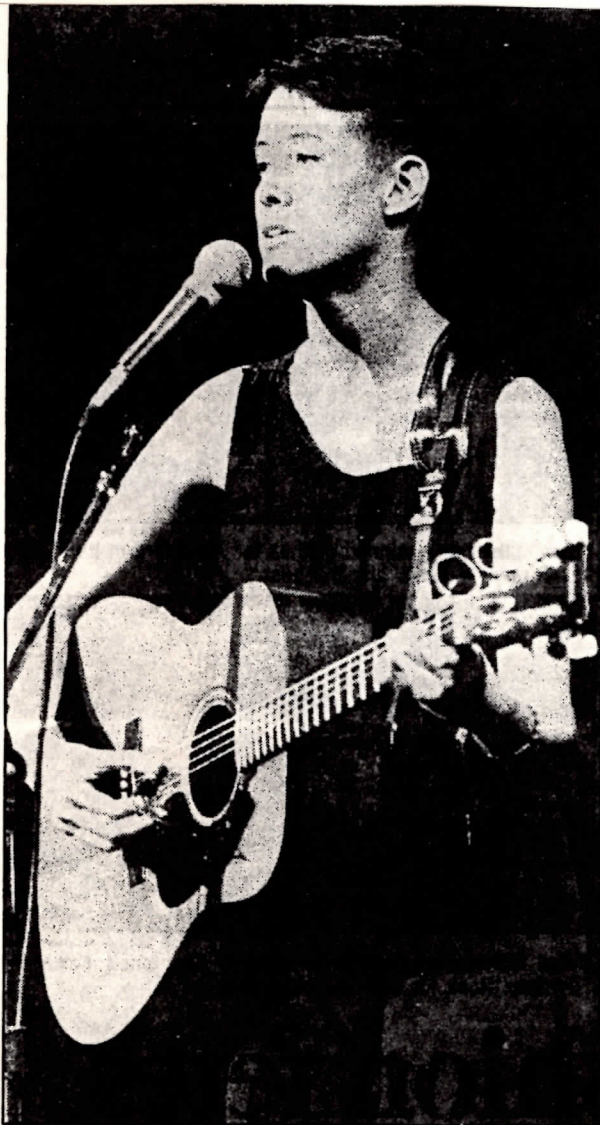
Her short-haired, severe appearance was immediately belied by the singer's confident stage presence, warm voice and more-than-adequate finger-picked acoustic guitar playing.

Material is a bit of a problem at this point. While some of Shocked's songs, like "Anchorage" and "If Love Were a Train," are artfully constructed and convey relatively universal themes, many of the songs she performed seemed too personal and too trivial. Compared with her versions of Steve Goodman's still-chilling "Ballad of Penny Evans" and Jean Ritchie's "The L&N Don't Stop Here Anymore," Shocked's song rhyming "hills" and "daffodils" and the one detailing her days as an incipient arsonist seemed tossed together.

T-shirts played a vital role in Bragg's set, as various audience members tossed them to the singer. Bragg is particularly supportive of organized labor — thus one shirt came from a plumbers' and pipefitters' local, another from the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

Another union, the stagehands', must have been thrilled with Bragg, too, as he enthusiastically carried the show into golden time. He was still on stage at 11:30, well over 1½ hours after he'd begun.

Bragg sang, and spoke, with overall good humor in addition to his obvious commitment. In addition to a lengthy selection of his own love and political songs, he



Steve Grayson/Herald Examiner

It was a bang-up performance by singer Michelle Shocked in her local debut at the Wiltern Theater Saturday night.

sang his adaptation of the traditional "There is Power in a Union" and a well-received version of the Flying Burrito Bros.' L.A. anthem, "Sin City."

His thick cockney accent and

overamplified, trebly electric guitar made total comprehension of his songs sometimes difficult for those who weren't familiar with Bragg's oeuvre. But the message was clear throughout.