

Billy Bragg make beautiful music

ROCK MUSIC

By Dave Hoekstra

Hearts don't lie. Singer-songwriters Billy Bragg and Michelle Shocked perform through a pair of the most open hearts you'll hear on the rock music landscape. Each artist scopes out the world from diverse roots—Bragg, from his working-class background in the urban bowels of East London, and Shocked from a rural upbringing on the backroads of east Texas. Despite the divisive miles, they share vulnerable emotion, a confessional and detailed sense of songwriting, and clever political commentary that can reach utopian proportion. Credibility makes the world so small.

For us crustbusters over 30, this can smack of idealism. I guess that's why Bragg and Shocked played to a full house consisting predominately of college-age students Saturday night at the Riviera Theater. In the fall of '88, there's not a whole lot to believe in between the misanthropic rock of Poison and a presidential campaign that recalls Heckle and Jeckle.

Shocked, whose splendid "Short Sharp Shocked" album is closing in on the No. 1 spot on college charts, preceded Bragg with a penetrating, hourlong acoustic set that was well balanced between beautiful ballads and bitter folk-punk. Her set-opener, "When I Grow Up" was doused in deep Texas blues musings and primal screams, yet "Memories of East Texas" was carved out of unadorned tenderness. When Shocked perfectly navigated all the high parts the lyric, "You had to watch out for all the curves down by Kelsey Creek," a smile of satisfaction cruised across her face. It's that kind of sincerity that gives Shocked's songs—and political raps—emotional conviction.

Shocked brought Bragg out for "Waiting for a New Deal," a hillbilly encore that featured the Englishman on high and twangy country vocals and acoustic guitar and the Texas woman on square-dance violin. Written by Bragg and Shocked a few weeks ago in Los Angeles, the song addresses the Bush-Dukakis dilemma in do-se-do rhythms and cunning lyrics such as "If you can't get more satisfaction, better call some Jackson, action."

Bragg's 90-minute set reflected the romantic slant of his new "Workers Playtime" record, and was less political than his previous Chicago appearance this spring. New material such as "Valentine's Day Is Over" mixed with older songs such as "Levi Stubbs' Tears" prove that Bragg's passions transcend politics. Yet, until hearing his new song "Waiting For the Great Leap Forwards," which he



Singer-songwriters Billy Bragg (above) and Michelle Shocked played to a full house Saturday night at the Riviera Theater. Bragg, from urban East London, and Shocked from rural east Texas, meshed their diverse roots in the heart-felt messages of their music.



performed halfway through his Saturday set, Bragg had been unable to shade political material with the poignant melodies of his love songs. He's learning that less can be more.

Of special note was Bragg's reworking of Elvis Costello's "Oliver's Army," in a slant in honor of Lt. Col. Oliver North ("Do yourself a real big favor, ask George Bush about Noriega...").

When this kind of wry humor is mixed with boundless passion, that's the point where Bragg and Shocked are best at getting their many heartfelt messages across.