

Michelle Shocked, a throwback to Woody Guthrie days

By Patrick Kampert
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Not so long ago, Michelle Shocked was a penniless musician squatting in Amsterdam and roaming Europe. Now, she's got a record contract with PolyGram, and a write-up in Rolling Stone. But to hear Shocked tell it, she's more than willing at some point to give up her newfound success and go back to being homeless.

"I was working outside the system before," she says, "and now I'm working inside the system. But who's to say I can't go back outside again?"

The role of the outsider suits Shocked well — it's been hers to live for much of her 25 years. Her parents' marriage broke up when she was young. Her mother remarried to a military man, and then converted to Mormonism, which Shocked rebelled against for a long time before taking to the streets as a teenager. She wandered to Texas and fell in with her hippie father. From there it was nomadic. Austin. Europe. San Francisco. Today, ever the outsider, she lives on a houseboat in London.

"You just build your own sense of home," she shrugs. "My only real security is within myself. It's not in a family or a country protected by missiles. It's quite ironic that my home is on the water. If I can quote a Leadbelly song, 'I don't like no land at all.'"

The reference to folk legend



Michelle Shocked

Leadbelly is quite telling. For, while Shocked has drawn comparisons to other women who have recently made their mark in music, like Suzanne Vega and Tracy Chapman, Shocked is more of a throwback to the days of Woody Guthrie and

Leadbelly, the two songwriters honored on the recent Folkways compilation.

Shocked's rough-edged, country-tinged music belies her punky image, and her fierce dedication to political and philosophical ideals is more attuned to the populist Guthrie than to Top 40 sensibilities: witness the cover of her current album, "Short Sharp Shocked," which shows a screaming Shocked in the headlock of a San Francisco police officer at a demonstration during the 1984 Democratic convention.

"We were surrounded by police, at which point we were charged with conspiring to block the sidewalk," Shocked says. "I was the third one arrested individually, and it was my first arrest. I couldn't understand the idea of passive resistance, so I struggled a bit. At which point they pulled my hair, twisted my arm and elbowed me in the sides. Then I realized that they couldn't stop me from screaming my head off. One of the cops put his hand around my throat and they were about to put me in the police van when the photographer caught it. It was published in newspapers the next day."

How ironic that four years later, Shocked was performing the first date of her U.S. tour in San Francisco.

"Yeah, I feel like a debutante," says Shocked happily. But this wasn't just any tour kickoff. Shocked, with tour partner and kindred spirit Billy Bragg, was playing a benefit for the Central American

Michelle Shocked performs at 8 p.m. Thursday in Seattle's Moore Theatre in a show to be opened by Canada's Cowboy Junkies. Reserved seating is \$14 at Ticketmaster outlets.

Mission Partners, a concert that also featured Jefferson Airplane/Starship alumni Paul Kantner and Grace Slick, and Bay Area band the Beatniks, among others.

It's precisely that kind of humanitarian/political bent that Shocked relishes and revels in. But it's also one that worries her. Just like the comparisons to early Dylan, who also shied away from the role of prophet-leader.

"I'm really seeking to establish my roots," she says carefully, "but at some point, in the near future, I'm going to have to take a philosophical leap of faith. The leap of faith that I'm envisioning is that I'm going to have to tell people I can't be a spokesman anymore. They've got to start speaking for themselves."

Shocked's role as a spokesman in the first place would have seemed rather unlikely two years ago. Her rise to the fringes of fame already is etched in pop music folklore. While she was appearing at the Kerrville (Texas) Folk Festival, an Englishman named Pete Lawrence asked her to record some of her songs into his Sony Walkman. They walked to the edge of the festival grounds and there, aided by crickets and abetted

by 18-wheelers, her mark was made.

Shocked didn't think much about it, and ended up back in New York. Meanwhile, in Britain, Lawrence, the head of Cooking Vinyl Records, played the album for his friends, who were suitably impressed. He wrote to Shocked and asked her if he could release the tape as an album.

Shocked wrote back and said "Sure. Good luck." With that casual agreement, as casual as the album itself, the resulting record landed at the top of the British-independent charts.

That record, "The Texas Campfire Tapes," showcased Shocked's raw talent, and the unique aura of the tape was refreshingly jarring compared with many of the over-dub-happy synth bands she shared the charts with.

Now, with her music denting American charts, she's wary. She turned down an advance from her record company, PolyGram, to keep control of her music. She rejected her first video. From the company's point of view, they have to deal with an uncompromising artist, one who has talked openly in interviews about drug experiences, mental hospitals, rape and the lack of integrity in other musicians.

"I've always felt I had all the cards," assesses Shocked. "I was never trying to make a living by playing music. I don't need them, and that feeling of control is probably the best gift you could give an artist. I'll play this music whether I have a contract or not."