

Shocked injects fun into folk fare

**MICHELLE SHOCKED AND
COWBOY JUNKIES**
Commodore Ballroom
March 1

By JOHN MACKIE

THE PROBLEM with a lot of folkies is that they're so *serious*. They treat traditional music forms with undue reverence, draining the life out of great old songs by performing them far too straight. And while I hate the capitalist system as much as the next person, masquerading slogans about the glorious workers and the evil bosses as lyrics is just plain *boring*.

Michelle Shocked is a different kind of folkie. Sure, she wants to smash the state and replace it with a system that values people and the earth over the almighty buck. But she treats this as a given, opting to write songs about real people and real situations rather than spout off about dialectical materialism. When she is overtly political (as on Graffiti Limbo, a song about a black graffiti artist who was killed by the police in New York City), she goes for the heart, appealing to your sense of justice rather than preaching a party line.

She also has a great sense of humor and a comic's sense of timing, traits that help make her concerts very special indeed. Wednesday night, she charmed a full house at the Commodore with a stylish mixture of folk, blues and plain old story-telling.

Walking onstage dressed like a beatnik from the '50s (black sweater, black pants, black Lenin hat), Shocked got right into the bluesy swing of When I Grow Up, her fluid voice floating through the melody like a pebble skipping across a lake.

Then she launched into her hit



PETER BATTISTONI

MICHELLE SHOCKED: a different kind of folkie

single, Anchorage. It's a marvelous song, sentimental without being sappy, with an unforgettable "hey girl" in the chorus and images so vividly painted it's like they are your memories she sings about, not hers.

Just as touching was her *capella* version of Steve Goodman's The Ballad of Penny Evans (a heartbreaking song about the young widow of a Vietnam vet) and her own Fogtown (a tale of down and out life in San Francisco). Always captivating, she struck a fine balance between political banter and humorous storytelling in her between-songs patter, breaking down the barrier between audience and performer to set up a warm, intimate evening.

Toronto's Cowboy Junkies

opened with a good set of melancholy country, folk and blues. Not since British folk singer Nick Drake passed away from an overdose of anti-depressants has anyone created music so spell-bindingly languid.

Singer Margo Timmins is coming into her own as a frontperson — she's riveting to watch onstage, and has developed into quite a torch singer. Her blue voice fits in perfectly on old classics like Patsy Cline's Walking After Midnight, Lou Reed's Sweet Jane and the Rolling Stones' Dead Flowers, and the band debuted a couple of country-tinged weepers (Cause Cheap Is How I Feel, Where Are You Tonight) that measured up to their high standard. Is this what they call immaculate depression?