

Singer Michelle Shocked offers anarchy and a smile

By Larry Kelp
The Tribune

THE PAIRING OF two fast-rising pop talents, political folkie Michelle Shocked and Canada's country-folk Cowboy Junkies, made them the hottest ticket of the year.

They performed in two shows Saturday at San Francisco's Great American Music Hall. The 450-seat club set a new record, selling out both shows in an hour.

Fans rubbed elbows with celebrities from local rock stars to Sean Penn. It was a triumphant moment for individuality and bucking the conglomerate marketing system, for each musician makes music that doesn't fit into today's pop styles.

The Cowboy Junkies really do play everything *that slowly*, and Shocked really is far better than her uncomfortable television appearances.

Her big-selling album "Short Sharp Shocked" boasts a cover photo of Michelle Shocked being choked by a riot cop at the 1984 Democratic Convention in San Francisco.

When Shocked appeared Satur-

day, "The policeman who arrested me came down and shook my hand," she told the late-show audience. "He wasn't too impressed by me, but when he found out that Jay Leno flashed the album cover with his picture on the 'Carson Show,' he was impressed."

Turning political issues into big-time entertainment is something Shocked has become a master of during the past six months. She's second only to Tracy Chapman in the category — both honed their skills on the feminist circuit before going mainstream — plus, she knows how to tell jokes.

Shocked has been on prime-time television and in full-page features in magazines from Newsweek to People to Rolling Stone. Her second album was nominated for a Grammy Award in the folk category, but she should have been up for several other awards.

She travels light, with just her acoustic guitar. But she's put together a band for bigger concerts, and

CONCERT REVIEW



By Matthew J. Lee/The Tribune

Michelle Shocked plays friendly, crowd-pleasing political tunes.

this may have been the last time to see her at her best, by herself in an intimate setting.

She has become an '80s Woody Guthrie, a lovable populist with a winning smile and some of the catchi-

est songs around.

In the '30s Guthrie rode the rails, bound for glory with his guitar as his constant companion. In the '80s

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Shocked has taken up Guthrie's ways, living with the homeless and alienated youth of America and Europe, getting involved with and writing songs about all kinds of political causes.

She's young, and presents her causes with the enthusiasm of someone who thinks she's doing something new — perhaps unaware that she's just the latest member in a social music lineage that has been active, although not always on a mass level, throughout American history and hundreds of years farther back in Europe.

At the late show Shocked, in black turtle-neck pullover and cap, jeans and boots, tossed away her two best-known songs at the start — "Anchorage" and "When I Grow Up (I Want to Be an Old Woman)," then got down to picking out melodic guitar riffs to accompany a wide variety of material, sometimes drifting into Guthrie's talking blues style as in "The Campus Crusade," about college-circuit evangelists.

She brought club owner Jeanne Bradshaw onstage to model the T-shirt Shocked designed to sell in the lobby. The shirts, which bear the slogan

"When it's radical to be liberal, flags will burn," are designed to help raise awareness of a friend's trial for flag-burning.

"If this job's only good for fame and money and girls, I don't need it," she said to cheering supporters. "But I've got the microphone, so I'll use it."

Her between-songs musings touched on English Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's attempts at gay bashing, the Christic Institute's case against the Iran-Contra leaders, and members of Seeds for Peace who have organized a demonstration at a Nevada nuclear test site April 7-16.

Shocked is a vibrant talent who knows how to entertain while driving home her points.

For her 1:30 a.m. final encore, she sang "The Secret of a Long Life (Is Knowing When It's Time to Go)" accompanied by two members (and a toddler son) of local hardcore band MDC (as in Millions of Dead Cops).

The Cowboy Junkies were far less clear, playing the most minimal of rock as if from behind a gauze curtain. They never threw anything out to bring themselves more into focus.

Toronto singer Margo Timmons, her brothers and friends have expanded the Junkies from

a quartet into a seven-piece band. Their use of such non-rock instruments as accordion, mandolin and pedal steel guitar provided sounds reminiscent of The Band's music slowed to a crawl. Their claim to fame is Lou Reed's quote on their "The Trinity Session" album jacket that their remake of his "Sweet Jane" is "The best and most authentic version . . ."

Theirs is an even more anti-star (some would say anti-musical) stance than Shocked's. The band played in near-darkness, with only a couple of dozen votive candles for illumination. Perhaps it was an attempt to

recreate the mood of the Toronto chapel where they recorded their album in one day for a cost of \$250.

The Junkies aren't so much offering a new style as atmosphere.

Their shows didn't push the new album, either, offering only a few songs from it. Where the early concert had featured Bruce Springsteen's "My Father's House," at the late show they did Neil Young's "Powderfinger" and Elmore James' blues "Dust My Broom" alongside their own "Misguided Angel" and "To Love Is to Bury."