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BURRELLE'S

Michelle Shocked keeps her balance

By Tim Carman

OF THE HOUSTON POST STAFF

STANDING ALONE on stage — vulnerable but defiant, naive but worldly, physically slight but musically bold — Michelle Shocked juggles her contradictions in warm human terms, lending her live performance an unaffected air that's often absent in her recorded work.

Witness her sold-out late show Friday night at Rockefeller's. Sure, Shocked was preaching to the converted from on high, but this spokeswoman for the unheard — and unwashed — masses often looked and acted like the disaffected she sings about: frail, coy, cynical, sturdy and sensitive.

"Music is a lot like politics because it's too damn important to be left with professionals," the blue jean and T-shirt clad Shocked said, only half-jokingly, late in her 19-song showcase.

Now, that was a funny line (especially if you subscribe to her political point of view), but it's

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not true in her case. Despite her recent — if reluctant — integration into the music biz machinery, Shocked is a consummate professional, expertly balancing her 80-minute performance with anecdotes and music, and expertly pacing it with a wide range of musical styles that prevented it from lapsing into a folksy homogeneity.

Throw in the fact that Shocked was in excellent voice and that her guitar skills were sharply defined, and you have anything but another musical amateur with a lot to say (à la Bob Dylan).

MICHELLE SHOCKED

The singer and songwriter performed Friday night at Rockefeller's. Personnel: Michelle Shocked (vocals, acoustic guitar, mandolin), "Dollar Bill" Shocked (mandolin, vocals) and Tommy Willis (slide guitar). Presented by Rockefeller's.

understatedly angry and full of agony that you could forgive the sound-and-fury rhetoric that led into the song.

Like all expert folk storytellers, Shocked is not about to let facts get in the way of a good tale. Her political preaching about governmental underlings (her example: Oliver North) creating foreign policy was not grounded in fact. (During North's current trial, evidence has been submitted that indicates Iron Man Ollie was just following presidential orders.)

Yes, Shocked was sometimes naive, but that naivete worked to her advantage in a live setting. She seemed more real, more human and considerably less pretentious than her studio efforts. She sometimes stammered and fumbled for her words; other times there was no hesitation in her voice, especially when the former Dallas resident said she continues to live in England despite the politics of Margaret Thatcher, whom Shocked called a name not suited for a family paper.

But Shocked's best material continues to be her non-political songs, which actually comprise most of her oeuvre. Her stirring folk lyricism in "Memories of East Texas," her adult recollections of childhood misdeeds in "V.F.D." and her rave-up tale of un-Mormon-like conduct in "Making the Run to Gladewater" re-

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Aside from her ability to humanely iron out her contradictory wrinkles, Shocked also knows how to explore and enhance a song's structure without additional instrumentation — a fact that, by itself, justifies a solo performance. (Of course, budgetary restraints are probably the chief reason for such a tour.)

Shocked mined each song for its full potential in concert. Her bluesy take of "Graffiti Limbo" (about a New York City graffiti artist allegedly choked to death by local police) was brought to a fevered vocal pitch. Similarly, Shocked gave "5 a.m. in Amsterdam" an emotionally real guitar treatment, replete with a bass-string gimmick that sounded like a clock striking.

Perhaps her most moving number, however, came when Shocked abandoned her guitar. Her a cappella reading of "The Battle of Penny Evans," was so

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Her mandolin work-out with father "Dollar Bill" Shocked, who joined her for two songs, also rang with Lone Star spirit and unassuming warmth, even if the elder Shocked's vocals were a bit strained on their version of Leadbelly's "Titanic."

Following her "train trilogy" first encore, Shocked finished the show, appropriately enough, with "The Secret to a Long Life (Is Knowing When It's Time to Go)," after which she quietly walked off stage for the night.

But for Michelle Shocked — a self-proclaimed feminist, anarchist, mental patient, expatriate, Mormon fundamentalist, populist and college graduate — the secret to a long (and successful) life is knowing how to balance her contradictory images and stances.