

MAY 2 1990
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IN CONCERT TOMORROW

Short, sharp, a little less shocking

7885BA new concert

By ANDY SMITH
Journal-Bulletin Pop Music Writer

Michelle Shocked figures that if you can't get in the front door, try the back — or the window.

An outspoken political radical, Shocked presented a bold face to the world on the cover of her last album, *Short Sharp Shocked*, which featured a United Press International photo of herself locked in the stranglehold of a San Francisco police officer at a demonstration. Lately though, Shocked has metamorphosed into Captain Swing, the title of her new album, with a cover showing a smiling cartoon of Shocked.

"I looked back over the past two or three years and realized maybe I had taken things to the point of caricature. So I'm trying a shift of emphasis, both in the music and in the way I project myself," Shocked said in a recent phone interview. "Last year I thought that being on David Letterman and playing music would also mean that I could get my licks in about the way politics is played in this country. Well, that's turned out to be a little naive, and I've learned my lesson."

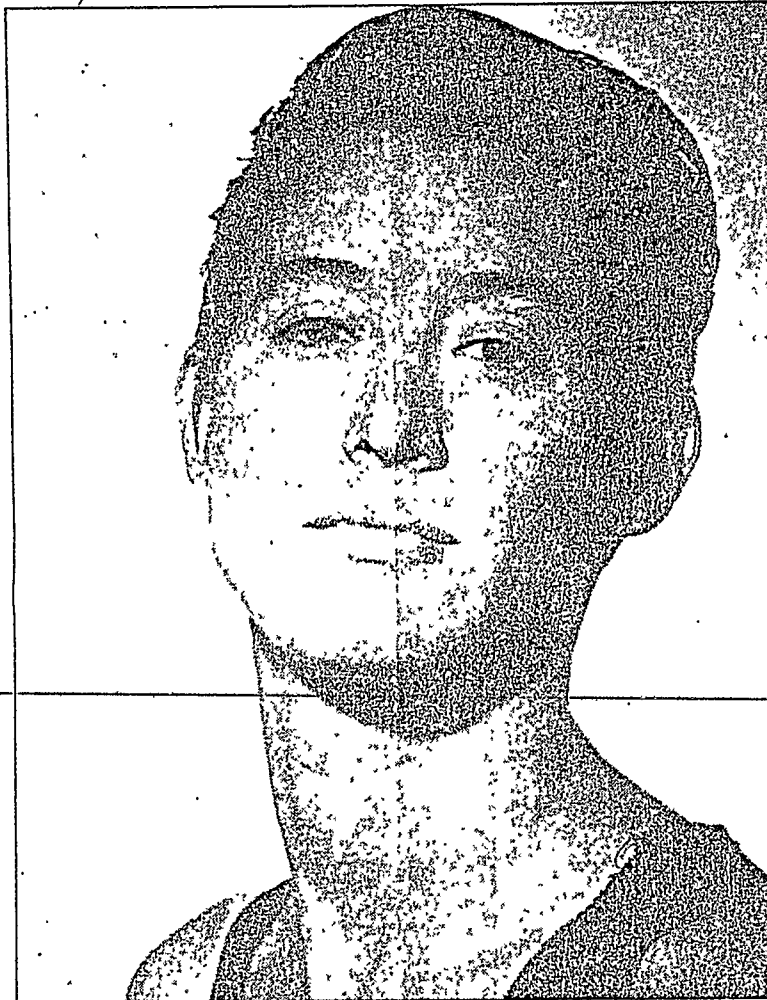
When Shocked tried to talk about politics with Letterman, the talk show host offered her popcorn.

"I'm learning slowly that you don't go spouting off all your hare-brained political philosophies," Shocked said. "Because I know from my side when people do it, and I think it's racist or reactionary, and it really gets to me. So that helps me understand why we temper what we say in public and not keep the pot constantly stirred. And I've done my share of stirring that pot."

But Shocked isn't changing her politics; she is changing her tactics.

"The trick is to make the image less political, but still sing the songs I want to," she said.

Here she said she was inspired



— PolyGram Records Photo

MICHELLE SHOCKED: "I'm trying a shift in the way I project myself."

by what she calls the "subversive nature" of the blues and swing that provided the musical inspiration for *Captain Swing* (Mercury), an album that ranges from horn-heavy blues arrangements to country swing to spare rural blues to jazz. Shocked said she had been listening to people like jump blues pioneer Louis Jordan, enormously popular in the '40s, whose *Nobody Here But Us Chickens* was a veiled comment on racism.

Maybe that's why Shocked is delivering a big wink on the cover of *Captain Swing*.

On the new album's *Looks Like Mona Lisa (Smells Like Tuna Fish)*, Shocked has the subject of the world's most famous painting hankering to "rob the Louvre blind." And a jazzy, sardonic *Streetcorner Ambassador* deals explicitly with the homeless.

But Shocked doesn't write protest songs in the tradition of Woody Guthrie or the young Bob Dylan. "I try not to be didactic, and you might not call a lot of my stuff protest songs," she said. "But the music is all inspired by politics."

So, says Shocked, her rocking *(Don't You Mess Around With) My Little Sister* is also about American intervention in Third World countries even though there's nothing in the lyrics that says so. And *Anchorage*, from *Short Sharp Shocked*, had a feminist subtext.

"I remember this quote from Abbie Hoffman, that he preferred Marshall McLuhan to Karl Marx," Shocked said. "Media, technology, communication are the forums that society is being built around. So I'm trying a little 'medium is the message' guerrilla tactic. I'd be the first to say no, you can't change the system by working from the inside. But the way circumstances fell into place for me, there would be as much hypocrisy walking away from this opportu-

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Michelle Shocked changes her tunes

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nity, especially after all the belly-aching I had done that no one was listening to me."

Shocked, 27, was born in Texas, picking up her first interest in music from her father's record collection. Leaving Texas in 1983, she lived "close to the edges of homelessness" in San Francisco, New York and Amsterdam, and became involved in "squatters' rights" movements.

Her big musical break is one of those storied show business accidents. In 1986 she was a volunteer at the Kerrville Folk Festival in Texas when an Englishman named Pete Lawrence recorded a few of her tunes on a Sony Walkman.

A surprise success

Lawrence released an album called *The Texas Campfire Tapes*, complete with chirping crickets and the occasional passing truck in the background, and the record became a success in England. That led to Shocked's wary involvement with Polygram and the corporate music world.

"In this urge to market me there was a tendency to lump me together with this image of a woman playing an acoustic guitar, and I got put into a category with Tracy Chapman and Suzanne Vega," Shocked said. "With all that, one of the things that got sacrificed was the true musical roots I carry with me from Texas, from deep in the middle of the muddy Mississippi. I think the radio and the record companies are confused. They weren't sure what to do with me. Maybe we can have a

growing category of people they don't know what to do with, like k.d. lang and Lyle Lovett."

Michelle Shocked performs tomorrow night at the Living Room, 273 Promenade St., Providence, with opening acts John Wesley Harding and Poi Dog Pondering. Admission is \$15. Call 521-2520.

She also appears Saturday at the Opera House in Boston. Tickets are \$16.50 and \$18.50; call 1-800-382-8080.