

'Pretentiously Unpretentious?'

Michelle Shocked Swings Through 'Burgh

By Lynne Margolis

Until reading her bio, I had always wondered whether Michelle Shocked's name was made up. It's so alliterative — *shell-shocked* — it just kind of rolls of the tongue like all good stage names are supposed to do.

When I read her hand-printed history, however, I became convinced she was so down-to-earth, she'd never do something like use an assumed name.

I was wrong. Shocked *did* make it up, but not for the stage. It was the moniker she gave an arresting officer after being picked up during a demonstration of some sort. The image was reinforced on the cover of her first Polygram album, *Short Sharp Shocked*, which shows a picture of her apparently being arrested.

Her second Polygram LP, *Captain Swing*, contains a much different image, both on its cover and in its content. "Swing" is the perfect word to describe the blend of blues, jazz, old soul and other distinctly American influences Shocked drew upon for her latest effort. It also is a departure from her folkier style, first displayed to the world via a recording made on a Sony Walkman (*The Texas Campfire Tapes*).

Part of the reason she took a different path, she revealed during a recent Chicago-to-Pittsburgh telephone conversation, is because it gave her a chance to take her music beyond one specific style. "There was a real danger before — I felt I was being pretentiously unpretentious," she explains. Of *Swing*, her Hoagy Carmichael homage, she says, "It's cleverness for the sake of being clever."

In music, Shocked adds, it's not the style that's really important. "What is important is the feeling that it evokes in you."

A woman who loves to travel and spend time on the water, Shocked uses a sailing metaphor to describe her switch to swing. When the wind changes, she explains, you take a different tack. By tacking back and forth, you eventually arrive at your destination. One song on the album, "It Must Be Luff," continues the nautical metaphor. (Luffing is a term used to describe a shaking sail). "And when you talk that soft romantic stuff," she sings, "you take the wind out of my sails / It must be luff, it must be luff."

The "Captain" reference in the album title; the jaunty skipper's cap; the anchor tattoo on her arm in the promo photo. Eventually it all starts to add up. "It's so clever that it's almost too clever," admits Shocked, who once fantasized about taking a trip up the Intercoastal Waterway and viewing Pittsburgh from the Ohio River. Although that fantasy description conjures up some serious folkie images, Shocked says another reason she chose mostly humor-tinged, toe-tapping tunes is because the concept of being a folk singer who makes records is one with which she is not very comfortable.

"I'm working toward a place where I can resolve this basic sort of conflict I feel in terms of being a professional folk singer," she explains. Part of the problem is that folk singing, by definition, is something that should not be packaged and sold. She believes it should spring spontaneously, regardless of one's "talent." Shocked intends to spread a message — using the concert stage only because it gives her a forum to do so — to say anyone who wants to can be a musician. She says talent really is unimportant — feeling is. Her father, for example, "can't carry a tune in a bucket," but instilled his musical values in her, and next year, she hopes to perform with him on tour.

Of her current tour, which will bring her to Graffiti May 9 with Poi Dog Pondering and John Wesley Harding, Shocked says, "I'm having a jolly time. I'm really pleased. It's my first time touring with a band."

She notes, however, that a small part of being a musician actually involves performing. "That's all that matters, really, the one-and-a-half hours you're on stage," but that's not all it's about, she explains. The rest is travel, politics, talking to media people and handling the business of touring.

Fortunately for Shocked, her father also instilled in her a love of travel. As this was being written, she was planning to perform a night in Chicago, fly to Washington D.C. for an Earth Day concert, fly back to Chicago for another show or two, then head for Detroit for another show.

But it's all worth it, she says, because it gives her a chance to carry her anti-establishment politics and musical messages to the public, "to make people think."



**"Swing is
A FEELING.
EVERYTHING
ELSE IS JUST
STYLE."**

CAPTAIN SWING