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PERFORMANCE

JOHN WESLEY HARDING & MICHELLE SHOCKED
at the Wilton Theater - 7880 BA

Remember the "New Dylan" scare of 1972? We had John Prine, Elliot Murphy, Loudon Wainwright III and some guy from New Jersey who mumbled a lot vying for the crown. Dylan still casts a mighty shadow, even if he isn't standing so tall himself these days. June 2 at the Wilton, Michelle Shocked and John Wesley Harding played out the final night of a two-month tour, and both made it clear they are in the running for the coveted "Even Newer Dylan" title. Saturday's performance also showed one performer in search of a voice he can call his own, and another who only has to figure out what to say.

Besides the name, John Wesley Harding has

adopted the Dylan attitude, the crazy-quilt lyrical patter, the staccato guitar style. He would also be better electric. Sticking pretty much to songs from his debut album (*John Wesley Harding*), Harding delivered a confident set, surprisingly well received by the close-to-sellout crowd. I tried, believe me, I tried, but it is impossible not to notice the similarity to Elvis Costello in Harding's vocal phrasing. I suppose that he can't help it if his voice sounds like that, but he's got to try a little harder. Between songs, we were treated to bitterly amusing diatribes against corporate sponsorship and the unusual nature of Phil Collins' body hair. In one new song, Harding went off on the hypocrisy of the performers at a recent Live Aid Benefit. This, and a nice self-mocking version of Ricky Nelson's "Teenage Idol," shows that Harding has given a lot of thought to the responsibilities of stardom. If he gets the music together a little more, he may have a shot at it. Right now, though, Harding is more like the New Steve Forbert.

Last year, Michelle Shocked played a solo show at the Palace. That performance showcased a winning personality, a nice picking style, and, unfortunately, political sloganeering as subtle as a Van de Kamp election spot. This time, we were treated to another side of Michelle Shocked, and she made it real clear that, at least in her "Captain Swing" persona, the music comes first. And what music: fronting a six-piece band, Shocked tore through the bulk of her latest album. Like a Maria Muldaur with a high IQ, Shocked rode her bucking accompaniment, and she wisely allowed her crack musicians to step out in solo style. Country guru Pete Anderson was not on stage (except when he came out and played harmonica on "Grafitti Limbo"), but his arrangement expertise was evident. Unlike Harding, Shocked defines the term unprepossessing, which is surprising considering her political commitment and the obvious care and feeding she gives to her music. She also dances real cool.

Letting the band take a breather about 45 minutes in (they deserved it), Shocked played a brief acoustic set. She opened with an exquisite rendition of "Memories of East Texas," and went on to do an even better "5 A.M. in Amsterdam." Bringing out her father and brother for a Norman and Nancy Blake flatpicking tune, Shocked allowed her roots to show, and demonstrated that she plays a not-half-bad mandolin. The house was in a dream state, and then Shocked lurched back into swingtime, the only jarring moment of the set. It would have been nice to see her do a few more cover tunes, as the material on the new record is a tad weak, but this is a minor carp. Michelle Shocked is a new L.A. resident, so maybe it won't be another year before we see her again. (Eric Nelson)

John Wesley Harding plays at McCabe's Thurs., June 7.



Just what L.A. needs — another folk singer