

Nelson no-show leaves audience Michelle Shocked

Little Village
biggest draw
expected tonight

By Don McLeese
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The annual roller coaster that is South by Southwest hit its first peak Wednesday night with the 10th annual Austin Music Awards show, and then plummeted downward Thursday morning with the event's official opening ceremonies. Instead of the traditional keynote speech, SXSW had scheduled opening remarks by Michelle Shocked followed by welcoming comments from Willie Nelson (who didn't want his name associated with anything as formal as a keynote speech).

Shocked's well-meaning but muddled analysis of racism in America met with a tepidly polite response from the audience, which was anticipating Nelson. It was then announced by SXSW managing director Roland Swenson that Nelson was a no-show, delayed on the road again in Laredo, though Nelson promised that he would arrive in time to play during Poi Dog Pondering's free show at Auditorium Shores Thursday evening.

"The speech part of it was something that he wasn't too anxious to do," admitted Swenson, who had invited Nelson to speak at most of the previous conferences and had annually been turned down. This year, however, Nelson had been expected to use the platform to promote Farm Aid V, scheduled Saturday in Irving.

Shouldering alone the agenda-setting responsibility, Shocked offered an anecdotal analysis of current racial relations as an outgrowth of blackface minstrelsy. It was a provocative topic, particularly pertinent at a conference offering music heavily steeped in black influence, but which remains overwhelmingly white in both the registrants it attracts and the artists it presents.

The singer-songwriter's central example of a Fishbone concert — a black band that draws a predominantly white audience — as modern minstrelsy made no distinction between reinforcing ra-



Michelle Shocked's speech Thursday at the official opening ceremony of SXSW offered an analysis of current racial relations as an outgrowth of blackface minstrelsy.

cial stereotypes and subverting them (which that band in particular consciously attempts). Her tentative stab at dealing with rap seemed confused, as even she acknowledged that she wasn't quite making her points for her audience. She repeatedly advised the crowd to purchase a pamphlet, written by her fiancé and journalist Bart Bull, who had inspired her interest in the topic.

Ultimately, Shocked's contention that truth can get crushed within "the weight of history, and the way that history gets told and who that history gets told by" is an important issue, one that is central to the American character. As a speechmaker, however, she communicates more lucidly with her mandolin.

In a four-hour extravaganza that brought together old and new, country and blues, and Roky Erickson and Gibby Haynes (as co-presenters of the metal award), the 10th annual Austin Music Awards concert emphasized the willful diversity that is musical Austin. Befitting the occasion, Wednesday's celebration



Pianist Ernie Bowser, left, and guitarist T.D. Bell exchange addresses with 'Harmonica Bob' Minor of El Paso between sets at the Austin Music Awards ceremony, a four-hour extravaganza Wednesday.

offered a retrospective of tradition and testimonials, while previewing breakthroughs to come. It also showed that ripples from Nashville's country boom have made their way South by Southwest, with a new generation of winners and performers emerging from Austin's country-rock hotbed. In a changing of the guard,

Chaparral was named the city's best country band. The word backstage was that the band, which has a 1 a.m. headlining spot on tonight's showcase at Hondo's, has all but signed with SBR's Nashville division, reflecting the sort of label interest that wouldn't have been likely a couple of years ago.

Providing some of the evening's early highlights, Kelly Willis — honored as Austin's best female vocalist — and former Wagoner Monte Warden teamed for a hard-twanging dust of Jackson, and both offered strong performances of their own. In Austin, Willis and Warden have attained the status of familiar veterans, but to the outside world they remain fresh talents in their early 20s, just coming into their own with a star quality that will not be denied.



Backstage, young country got its comeuppance when a starstruck fan approached emerging artist Kevin Welch — one of the conference's visitors from Nashville, who will play Butch Hancock's Lubbock or Leave It on Saturday — and asked whether he was Guy Clark. Welch took the comparison with someone a couple of decades older than he in good grace. At this stage of the game, it's nice to be recognized, even when you're recognized as someone else.

Other highlights: Both Joe Ely and Lucinda Williams treated the audience to material that they have recorded but not yet released, while the Bad Livers showed they have taken that next step toward original material that is as inspired as their choices in bluegrass/throw covers have been.

The concept of a series of "house bands" didn't really translate from theory to practice — with most performers opting to play solo or with their usual accompanists — but the Antones backed the gamut of blues offerings, and showed that a band that Austin takes for granted is one of the world's best. Throughout, guitarist Derek O'Brien displayed the artistry that makes him one of the city's musical linchpins.

By the time Eric Johnson, honored as musician of the year, brought the festivities to a close, a month's worth of clubhopping and a decade of Austin musical tradition had somehow been compressed into a single evening.

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Tonight's picks: Little Village (9 p.m., Terrace) will only accom-

modate 2,000, out of the 20,000 or so who have shown interest in seeing the show. About half the hall will be reserved for conference registrants with badges; another few hundred tickets will be sold to wristband wearers beginning at 6 p.m. Anyone else is out of luck.

Fortunately, tonight's showcases offer plenty of appealing alternatives, particularly for those with a taste for discovery. You could easily spend the whole evening at Antone's, where opening act Toni Price (8 p.m.) is the latest discovery of the club's label (and one of the finest singers in town), and where Robert Ward (1 a.m.) will demonstrate all those licks he taught Lonnie Mack (who then taught them to Stevie Ray Vaughan).

Or, you could spend the evening at the Hole in the Wall, where Kris McKay and Michael Hall (11 p.m.), followed by Randy Franklin (midnight), practically amount to a Wild Seeds reunion, and where young Beaver Nelson (1 a.m.) will demonstrate the sort of promise that recently got him signed to a developmental deal with Columbia.

Other favorites include Michelle Solberg (10 p.m., Cactus Cafe), whose vocal range and purity transcend the inevitable Kate Bush/Joni Mitchell comparisons, and Lucinda Williams (11 p.m., Rita), playing plenty of new material with a full band. Ian Moore (1 a.m.) should attract more attention since joining Joe Ely's band as lead guitarist, while Shoulders (1 a.m., Main Event) created the biggest stir at last year's SXSW with its circus/cabaret romanticism.

A little earlier at Steamboat, the Arc Angels (11 p.m.), whom Wednesday's awards named Austin's best band, represent the city's brightest hope for this year's popular breakthrough. A great accordion pairing finds 19-year-old zydeco whiz Little Brian Terry (11:30 p.m., La Zona Rosa) preceding Texas treasure Ponty Bone (1 a.m.) just a couple blocks from Liberty Lunch, where the Skeletons (11 p.m.) and Dave Alvin (midnight) will be tearing it up. And as for tearing it up, few roots-rocking bands are capable of causing more trouble than Two Hoots & a Holler (1 a.m., Continental Club), powered by the unpredictable Ricky Broussard.