

MUSIC

Places

Shock tactics

JIM DRIVER MEETS
MICHELLE SHOCKED

Let's start with some background. Michelle Shocked is a 32-year-old singer/songwriter from Texas. An Englishman called Pete Lawrence heard her playing at the Kerrville Folk Festival in 1986, recorded her on a small cassette player and released the resulting 'Texas Campfire Tapes' on his own Cooking Vinyl label. Since then she's moved to mega-big London Records and her third album for them is released this week.

We met at Putney's Half Moon pub the night after her showcase at the Borderline. Shocked was in town with a small acoustic band (including brother Tom) and her fiancé, Bart Bull. She had volunteered to play unannounced at a cancer charity concert with local favourites the Boogie Brothers, but due to sound and logistical problems, the gig was less than a roaring success. The 'Blues Brothers' clones didn't want to hear a trio of acoustic guitar and banjo-led songs, and those who did, couldn't. It didn't seem to put her off: 'You sort of expect problems at a short-notice gig like this, and we didn't help any by turning up late.'

Michelle Shocked has genuine charisma. On the 'Texas Campfire Video' (Jettisoundz) there's an interview sequence from New York cable TV conducted by a gushing presenter who, at every opportunity, insists on saying what a brilliant performer she thinks Shocked is. The singer's embarrassment oozes from the screen like radiation. With anyone else it would appear girlish, but with her it just comes across as natural. Talking to Michelle Shocked is like interviewing a dozen people: one minute she's giggling like a 16-year-old, the next she's imparting wisdom like an old squaw.

'Arkansas Traveller' is certainly her most mature album to date. Although it's impossible to make comparisons with the no-budget 'Texas Campfire Tapes', it's certainly her best since. It is a journey through musical roots (both hers and those of America at large), inspired by a trip down the Mississippi with her dad. It includes performances from the likes of Clarence 'Gatemouth' Brown, Doc Watson, The Red Clay Ramblers, Pop Staples and the Hothouse Flowers (acknowledging the important Irish influence on all aspects of American 'folk' music).

The inclusion of the track 'Jump Jim Crow', featuring black roots-singer Taj Mahal, is Shocked's attempt to highlight the issue of America's black-

face minstrels. Originally the plan was for her to appear blackface on the cover of the album, but the idea was quietly dropped. 'Gatemouth' Brown advised against it: 'the world wouldn't understand. All it would do is make her seem racist.'

Even so, she refuses to drop the subject. 'Of all the issues this album brings up, the most important is the minstrels thing,' she told me over a glass of bitter. 'I knew it would generate controversy, but that was not my intention. Immigrant musicians, especially the Irish, often couldn't find paying work until they put on blackface and told the audience they were playing "Ethiopian" or "plantation" songs. Originally it wasn't meant to be a parody of black culture, it was an attempt to embrace it. It gave white musicians an expression of soulfulness.'

We'd met before, six years ago when I was running gigs at the Cricketers pub at Kennington Oval and gave her her second-ever paying gig. Her first had been at the Royal Festival Hall. I asked whether I could detect a mellowing of views since then? She smiled: 'Possibly. I now realise that I don't know enough, haven't read enough to go round spouting opinions as if I'd invented them. A lot of what I believe isn't what you'd call "politically correct", either — like the minstrels thing. People would like to pretend it never happened, but it obviously did. Another thing is abortion. Abortion has always been a part of women's lives, it's always gone on, but it's not been talked about or written about until now.'

'Ideals are not something I can control. It's not logic that convinces me of something, it's what my heart says. My heart has a way of involving me in things, which can only be good for the music.'

'Arkansas Traveller' is released by London Records on March 30. Michelle Shocked appears at the Town & Country on May 4.



Time Out
25 Mar 1992

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