

Michelle Shocked shows genius for being herself

MARY LAMEY
THE GAZETTE

The voice at the other end of the line was foggy with sleep but still thoughtful. It was morning, early by rock 'n' roll standards, but Michelle Shocked was in full interview mode.

"I don't know if I'm the best person to appreciate how good things are going right now," the Texas-born singer drawled. "Sometimes it feels like I don't know how to enjoy what I've got because my mind is off on tomorrow, or something, y'know?"

All this in answer to the standard opening gambit: "How's it going, Michelle?"

You can't expect rote answers from Shocked, the anarcho-folkie who brings her Arkansas Traveller road show into the Spectrum tonight.

'Selling snake oil'

In a business stuck on image and packaging, Shocked has shown a special genius for being herself, speaking her mind and following her instincts.

"Authenticity is a real big deal in the music industry. I've been packaged in a certain way and while people might not know exactly what I am, they know I'm a darn authentic version of it."

"Selling a lot of snake oil," she calls it.

Her recent publicity photos take a swipe at the star-maker machinery. She tossed off her usual T-shirt,

jeans and high-top sneakers to pose in broad-brimmed straw hat and a flowery frock.

"They wanted a country girl, I showed 'em what a real country girl looks like," she said, her voice sly. "Minnie Pearl, now that's authentic country."

Legend has it that Pearl, comedy queen of the Grand Ole Opry, once advised K.D. Lang to "Stick with me, honey, and you'll be farting through silk."

The story makes Shocked laugh.

"That's authentic, all right! That's Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend done on the country music scale."

Feminist and anti-racist

Arkansas Traveller is also done on the country music scale, built on a foundation of traditional fiddle tunes, reworked and with lyrics written by Shocked.

Feminist and anti-racist views lurk beneath the surface, notably on Prodigal Daughter, a reworking of Gotton Eyed Joe.

While a prodigal son is welcomed home with open arms, Shocked notes that "When a girl goes home with the oats he's sown, it's draw you shades and your shutters. She's bringing such shame to the family name, the return of the prodigal daughter."

She travelled across North America, to Ireland and Australia to record Arkansas Traveller with



Michelle Shocked "They wanted a country girl"

some of her favorite musicians, including Taj Mahal, Doc Watson, ex-Band mates Levon Helm and Garth Hudson, fiddle whiz Alison Krauss and Hothouse Flowers.

The end result brings Shocked full circle on a musical journey she started five years ago with the release of Short Sharp Shocked. She set out to explore her musical roots, using each recording to spotlight an aspect of the music-making pro-

cess.

On Short Sharp Shocked, which yielded the hit single Anchorage, she focused on lyrics, paying homage to story-telling songwriters like Guy Clark and Jean Ritchie.

With 1989's Captain Swing she dipped into the big-band styles of jump-band king Louis Jordan and country-swing master Bob Wills.

Arkansas Traveller, on which her father Dollar Bill plays, captures the "home-made jam" she grew up on back in Gilmer, Tex.

A private gag

"I don't know why it was so important for me to work through my past in such a definite way, but it feels darn good to have done it."

My goal all along has been to defeat the industry's record-oriented way of doing things that says you can only be one kind of musician.

It's a private gag, but she likes knowing Captain Swing is filed under R & B, while Short Sharp Shocked is in the folk bin and Arkansas Traveller is found under the country heading.

"Maybe I'm the only one who gets the joke."

Michelle Shocked, with opening act Bob Wiseman, tonight 8:30 p.m. at the Spectrum. Tickets cost \$20, plus tax and are available at the Spectrum and through Admission (790-1245).