

Shocked takes music community, fans by storm

By Erica Smishek
of The StarPhoenix

Michelle Shocked is full of surprises.

First there's her music, a lush and lively hybrid of folk, country, bluegrass, pop and blues that continues to evolve with each album she releases.

There's her image, a strong-willed, politically charged Texan taking the world, the musical community and everyone in her path by storm.

There's her lifestyle, a never-ending road movie that has taken her from the skateboard-punk-rocking streets of New York to a houseboat in London, England, to marital bliss in Los Angeles with journalist-turned-novelist Bart Bull.

And then there's her voice, a sweet breezy affair full of warmth, grace and the lightness of being.

That voice was on the phone from Guelph, Ont., on Tuesday afternoon speaking volumes about her life, her career and her latest musical project, an intriguing collaboration driven by Shocked's come-what-may approach to existence.

Touring in support of the project, a 14-track musical odyssey called *Arkansas Traveller*, Shocked takes to the Broadway Theatre stage Saturday at 8 p.m.

"This was a chance for me to transform my own past," the singer/songwriter said about *Arkansas Traveller*.

"I have documented it. I have separated it into neat packages. Now I can put it to rest," she said.

A collection of old fiddle tunes that Shocked wrote new lyrics for, *Arkansas Traveller* was recorded in various global locales like Memphis, Dublin and New South Wales, Australia, with some of the music world's most interesting figures. There were bluegrass picker Doc Watson, former Band mates Levon Helm and Garth Hudson, Irish folk-

rockers Hothouse Flowers, gospel great Pop Staples, Was (Not Was)'s Don Was, Taj Mahal and guitarist/fiddler Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, among others.

"It has quite a neat spirit, a sense of adventure and a unique cast of characters," Shocked said.

While some of the songs were recorded in a studio, most were captured on a 48-track digital recording truck that Shocked borrowed from Ziggy Marley and hauled to where each artist lives.

"It was in the spirit of taking the mountain to Mohammad . . . It allowed us to record in all of these weird places — an antique store, a doctor's office, a riverboat, a barn."

Shocked views the project as a way to enhance as well as preserve the historical context of traditional songs for the fiddle.

"In a very subtle way, I wanted to bring these tunes into contemporary culture, to give them a new lease on life."

Some might see *Arkansas Traveller* as a change of pace and a change of musical style for Shocked, who has already given listeners the spontaneous spirit of her Walkman-recorded debut *Texas Campfire Tapes*, the folksy and focused storytelling of *Short Sharp Shocked* and the up-tempo blues of *Captain Swing*.

But she sees the collection as another example of her musical roots, the third plank of a trilogy that began with *Short Sharp Shocked* and continued with *Captain Swing*.

"This is me. This is where I've come from. But I don't know where I'm going," she said. "Any traveller will tell you that."

Though she does not know where the road goes from here, Shocked said she'll undoubtedly be influenced by the music she's listening to now, which includes work by Tone Tone, Al Green and The Time.

"I'm committed to it but I don't know where I'm going with it. I'm very curious about what I'll do next."



Michelle Shocked