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Lifestyle D7

Shocked concert restores faith in power of song

**By Erica Smisbek
of The StarPhoenix**

Thanks for the memories. That's undoubtedly what people were humming as they left the Broadway Theatre Saturday night after witnessing one of the finest concerts in Saskatoon in this or any other year.

Michelle Shocked and her three partners in musical crime put on an inimitable display that delighted the full house and probably restored many people's faith in the power of song.

Review

For almost 100 minutes, the talented foursome — Shocked on guitar and mandolin, Alison Brown on banjo, guitar and mandolin, Ray Legere on fiddle and mandolin and Gary West on bass — dazzled with their technical prowess, artistic integrity and charming personalities. Moving easily from folk to pop, blues to bluegrass, ballad to toe-tapping bravado, the unit crossed borders and generations to give the audience a unique taste of musical history, always mindful to keep an eye on the contemporary context.

As important as the music itself

was the players' respect for it, for each other and for the crowd. Axl Rose and more than a few others in the music business could afford to take some lessons from this gracious band of merry women and men.

Shocked guided her mates and the evening with a subtle yet effective hand, careful to get the most out of the music and all the musicians, herself included.

Her back-to-the-roots material is definitely accessible but certainly not easy. Shocked knows it and responded accordingly, using her wit, easy-going manner and knock-'em-dead smile to draw the

audience into her magical web.

The singer/songwriter drew heavily on songs from her latest album, *Arkansas Traveler*, a collection of old fiddle tunes she has adapted with new lyrics. Cotton Eyed Joe became Prodigal Daughter, a sweet, melodic tune about a doctor who performs illegal abortions. Soldiers' Joy became Shaking Hands, a moody, evocative piece about morphine addiction during the Civil War. Frankie and Johnny became Hold Me Back, a bold tale about a woman who kills her cheating lover.

Not exactly light subjects. But set against a sound that was never predictable, always interesting and usually spirited, the words took on a strange new life, sometimes floating in the air, sometimes falling at our feet, always demanding our attention.

Earlier songs from Short Sharp Shocked and Captain Swing carried just as much resonance. Memories of East Texas was a gentle, seamless work linking one woman's hard-won wisdom to her past. Anchorage was a gorgeous tribute to friendship. Graffiti Limbo was an angry, loud bit of blues.

Connecting it all were Shocked's smooth, lush warble, a variety of stringed instruments, each with its own special voice, texture and significance, and three exceptional band members who fanned the flames of Shocked's fire.

Hans Olsen opened the show with a strong 40-minute solo set featuring guitar, harmonica and a voice so deep it seemed to come from his boots. While his simple approach warmed the crowd, it was the hot showcase that followed that will stick in the minds of all who attended.