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Shocked takes the show(s) on the road, and there's more where that came from

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Ignored by all radio formats (and MTV to boot), Michelle Shocked's "Arkansas Traveler" album was a desire to reproduce the fiddle music she recalled from her childhood.

Rock review
To do so, she traveled the country to record with a number of notable artists, not only bluegrass, but also in other fields. Her "Arkansas Traveler Revue," playing one of its smallest venues at Toad's Place in New Haven Sunday, is just as challenging a project and just as delightful.

It was also one of the biggest-ticket items in Toad's history (\$24 at the door). But that didn't deter a large crowd from appreciating the value of hearing four worthy headliners: not only Shocked but the Band, Taj Mahal and Uncle Tupelo.

Tupelo's latest direction is also toward the traditional. The country-rock band's latest album, on the Rockville label, mines an all-acoustic sound that, with the kick of Mike Heidorn's drums and the harmonica of Jay Farrar, sounds like old Neil Young.

Shocked joined them on a song on mandolin, on which she has become quite adept, then filled in space until

the next set with a monologue about the political season in which she was uncharacteristically nervous. (Message: She's 30 now, no longer an anarchist, and more of a centrist; therefore, she's voting for Clinton.)

Taj Mahal coasted through his tiny portion with a couple of blues numbers on electric piano, followed by sprightly guitar-picking and a good jazzy number with the sidemen of the Band, which is so decimated, it might no longer qualify for the capital B in its name.

Fully half of the once-classic American rock band are replacements. Chief songwriter Robbie Robertson never rejoined the group after the celebrated "Last Waltz" on Thanksgiving Day 1976. Richard Manuel committed suicide 10 years later.

It's still great to hear Rick Danko and Levon Helm singing again on such Robertson tunes as the transcendent "It Makes No Difference" and "Rag Mama Rag."

But Hudson's trills on "Stage Fright" and "The Shape I'm In" were barely audible, either by his own omission or through soundboard mistakes. The replacement pianist, guitarist and additional drummer were merely workmanlike. (The extra drummer allowed Helm to pick up the mandolin a couple of times, but on the other songs the additional

drummer continued, shadowing Helm's work).

Playing the recently unearthed "Blind Willie McTell" from their longtime mentor Bob Dylan was a natural, but it was wacky to follow with a version of Bruce Springsteen's "Atlantic City." What was next? A Michael Penn song?

The Band was the longest and best-received of the support acts, and it was joined for a rousing version of "The Weight" that included verses by Shocked and Taj Mahal.

It was tough to follow, but Shocked, with an amazingly efficient backing band that included Alison Brown on guitar and banjo, tore it up with rocking versions of "When I Grow Up" and "Don't Mess With My Little Sister" before settling into the vernacular of her current project.

She threw in some clogging and return appearances by Taj Mahal and Uncle Tupelo, individually and together in the closing "Secret to a Long Life" — minus the Band, who joined her on the recording.

What's great about the "Arkansas Traveler Revue" is that Shocked could have a sequel with those from the record left off the current tour: Jimmy Driftwood, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, Norman Blake, Pops Staples, Doc Watson and Alison Krauss, Hothouse Flowers, and the Red Clay Ramblers.