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Shocked leads electric set in Portland

By Mike McGrail
City Editor

PORTLAND — Michelle Shocked led an electric hootenanny that had the audience square-dancing in the balconies at Portland's City Hall Auditorium Saturday night.

The emcee of the Arkansas Traveler Review played six songs from her latest album, *Arkansas Traveler*, plus a few tunes from earlier albums *Short, Sharp and Shocked* and *Captain Swing*.

When not singing or accompanying herself on guitar and mandolin, Shocked taught folk-music chair aerobics, played psychedelic ringmaster, and spun a few yarns with political messages lurking in the words.

In between verses of "Graffiti Limbo," she told the story of New York graffiti artist Michael Stewart, who was strangled to death in police custody. No one was charged in his death because a coroner lost the evidence that proved death by strangulation — a piece of Stewart's body.

"And when I tell you it was Michael Stewart's eyeballs the coroner lost, you can believe me when I say justice is blind," Shocked said.

That came from a performer who step-danced to a country fiddle tune just minutes before.

The heavy stuff notwithstanding, Shocked made a sold-out house in the auditorium's cozy confines very, very happy.

She started off with "Don't You Mess with My Little Sister," a staple from *Captain Swing*, before moving into her newer material.

"Over the Waterfall" and "Contest Coming" are adaptations of traditional country tunes, punched up with Shocked's vocals and driving acoustic arrangements of banjo, guitar, fiddle, and accordion.

For "Jump Jim Crow" Shocked



Michelle Shocked, second from left, cranks up the electric folk at Portland City Hall Auditorium Saturday night with some of the Arkansas Traveler Revue players.

(Staff photo by Tracey Rauh)

called guitar picking virtuoso Taj Mahal on stage, for some backup instrumental and low, rumbling backup vocals.

Like most of the songs on *Arkansas Traveler*, "Jump Jim Crow" is Shocked's variation on an old standard, mined with phrases that reflect her views on politics and race. One of its lines asks "Tar baby tar baby tell me true/ who is really the jigaboo/ Is it the white man talking all that jive/ or the black man who's just trying to stay alive..."

Jigaboo was a slur originally directed at Irish musicians who performed minstrel shows in blackface. It became a slur against blacks, but

Shocked turned it back on whites in her trademark, mocking way.

Shocked's voice has a ring at the high end that filled the small auditorium on the fast tunes, and a low, rich range on "Graffiti Limbo" and "Prodigal Daughter," one of her original compositions on *Arkansas Traveler*. Between her voice, ad-libs, and bopping and twisting at the microphone, Shocked had the friendly audience sewn up with her first three songs.

She closed out her set with a an unremarkable rendition of "Anchorage," from *Short, Sharp, Shocked*, then returned with the rest of the Arkansas Traveler Revue cast

for a three-song encore.

The encore revealed the Arkansas Traveler Revue's only significant flaw. It was too much of everyone else, and not enough Shocked.

The revue is made up of Shocked, Taj Mahal, Uncle Tupelo, and The Band. Taj Mahal and Uncle Tupelo did tight 15-to-20-minute sets to open the show.

Shocked only played for about 30 minutes. It was sharp, it was Shocked, but it was too short.

The Arkansas Traveler Revue travels to Boston tomorrow night, Oct. 7, for a 7:30 p.m. show at Silverado, the former Roxy on Tremont Street.