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Shocked does best with storytelling folk

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If all's well that ends well, then Michelle Shocked's Arkansas Traveler concert Monday night at the Maine Center for the Arts was an outstanding event. The last 30 minutes of Shocked's performance, during which she played acoustic guitar with a three-piece string backup, sparkled with the homegrown excellence of her rich voice, storytelling songs, and hip-thrusting guitar playing.

Joined by the masterful picking of guitarist Alison Brown, Shocked regaled the full-house audience with an expanded version of the girl-friend song "Anchorage" (including a love-song in the middle), "Graffiti Limbo," and "When I Grow Up," all from the well-loved "Short Sharp Shocked" recording. Beginning with "Memories of East Texas," Shocked segued into "Come A Long Way," from her newest release, "Arkansas Traveler." Other cuts from that recording were "Prodigal Daughter (Cotton Eyed Joe)," "Over the Waterfall," and "Come A Long Way."

Not all of Shocked's performance was as sumptuous, however. During the bluegrass tune, "Contest Coming (Cripple Creek)," Shocked broke a guitar string, and decided to use the time to lead the audience in a chair-dancing session. But when the crowd didn't respond to her instructions (in part because they couldn't hear her over the backup music), Shocked tossed the mike and danced an energetic solo jig.

After the song ended and before Shocked got too far into her reprimand of the audience, Taj Mahal appeared on stage and brought the

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focus back to the music with the bluesy "Jump Jim Crow/Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah." Later, Shocked apologized for her tantrum, and gave a "little gift" to the audience by smoothly performing a song-in-progress which was filled with all the bucolic poetry of Shocked's best music.

Opening for Shocked was the young four-piece band from Missouri, Uncle Tupelo, which performed half-a-dozen folk-rock songs, and made stage appearances throughout the evening.

The shining moments of the three-hour concert were played by funky bluesman Taj Mahal and members of the legendary folk-rock group The Band. These old-time rockers brought a polish and showmanship that Shocked has yet to develop on her own, or at least this early in her tour.

It was "blues with a feeling" as Taj Mahal performed "Big Leg Mommas Are Back in Style Again," "Blue Light Boogie," and a gloriously sweet guitar solo "Railroad Bill/Freight Train."

Following Taj Mahal, bassist Rick Danko, organist Garth Hudson, and drummer/mandolinist Levon Helm, all formerly of The Band, rocked with an hourlong set which included the hits "Rag Mamma Rag," "Stage Fright," and "The Weight," (with Shocked and Taj Mahal).

In a grand finale, 10 musicians from the various bands ended the concert in a terrifically textured version of Shocked's "Secret to A Long Life," which Shocked dedicated to Mr. Bush because of the lyrics: "The secret to a long life is knowing when it's time to go."