

Restaurants and Entertainment

MUSIC

Joyously Shocked

Last Thursday, October 1, at Ulster Performing Arts Center in Kingston, we were all treated to a joyous evening of down-home jamming music and down-home political good sense offered to us by Michelle Shocked and her Arkansas Traveler Revue.

Shocked, born and raised a "conservative fundamentalist, Mormon army brat," has turned those origins on end. In six short years, her grit-filled honest life of musicianship and songwriting has enabled her not only to follow her dream, but materialize it and share this joy with us. Her Arkansas Traveler Revue was made up of herself and her band, plus Uncle Tupelo's Band, Taj Mahal and The Band of Woodstock fame. But from the get-go this concert was different, *good* different, as a sparkling, elf-like woman came out to introduce the evening and the first band. I didn't know who she was, but as the evening progressed I got this funny feeling it had to be Michelle Shocked.

According to Shocked, this concert was the culmination of a trilogy of albums, beginning in 1988 with *Short Sharp Shocked*, continuing with *Captain Swing* in 1989 and progressing into *Arkansas Traveler* in 1992. The concert itself was so unpretentious that each group simply flowed into the next. Uncle Tupelo, a Missouri-based working man's band with religious roots in their music, opened with lead singer Jay Farrar doing impassioned vocals to concise, no-nonsense country music. Next came good ol' Taj, with his bad-assed self taking the piano apart on "Celebration Blues." Taj followed with some of his soulful guitar work, which always reminds me of Thelonius Monk, who had the same genius for making so much sound out of the silences and spaces between the notes, where so much feeling and meaning lives. Later, Taj jammed with Shocked on her composition "Jump Jim Crow."

Following Taj, The Band did a jubilant set of music that had the entire house on its feet. Rick Danko and Levon Helm sounded as if no time had passed since their Dylan days. Shocked joined in with them to jam and everyone could feel how natural the whole thing was.

At one point, Shocked, who emceed the concert, read from a statement that focused on her growing process as a politically aware person, which culminated with her support for Bill Clinton and her urging everyone to register to vote. WDST radio of Woodstock, co-presenter of the concert, registered 58 people to vote in



MAX SCHWARTZ

Michelle Shocked.

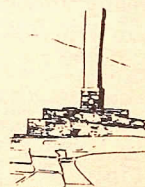
the lobby that evening.

Finally it was time for Michelle Shocked and her band, and our emcee came out in a new outfit befitting the occasion and began to smoke. There's a joy in her performance that is infectious; she simply does what she not only does supremely well, but what she has always loved to do since the days she listened to her father, "Dollar Bill" Johnston, "who, by teaching himself to play the mandolin at age 35 from books, provided the inspiration for me and my brother to learn and enjoy the beauty and pleasure of homemade jam," as she states in her CD notes to *Arkansas Traveler*. The duets with her excellent guitar and banjo player, Allison Brown, as well as the duets with her Nova Scotian fiddle player, were dynamic and had the entire house enthralled.

The concert peaked with an all-out nearly half-hour jam with Michelle, Taj, Uncle Tupelo and The Band, as Rick and Levon led the way on those immortal Band songs, and Taj sang some riffs as if they were *his* songs, that's how good it was! I came out of there feeling we can win, we *can* make a difference politically, and we can do it with joy and music and sharing the feeling. ++

Max Schwartz

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