

MONDAY
OCT 12 1992180
...ed. **BURRELLE'S** PQ

Shocked delivers upbeat show despite backstage bickering

By JOHN STIFLER
Special to the Gazette

Music Review

NORTHAMPTON — Before Michelle Shocked's concert Saturday night at John M. Greene Hall, WRSI disc jockey Jim Olsen went onstage to explain that there was good news and bad news. The bad news was that The Band and Uncle Tupelo, both scheduled to accompany Shocked on a 28-city tour (of which Northampton was the sixth stop), would not appear. The good news, said Olsen, was that both Shocked and Taj Mahal, the other big name still on the tour, had promised to play a long, fine show.

As it turned out, if the show had been billed only as Michelle Shocked and Taj Mahal in the first place, no one would have noticed anything missing. And if old veterans of the folk-rock era or new Midwestern punksters didn't like the terms under which they were supposed to play second guitar to a 30-year-old woman who has done as much for both genres as anyone in the past five years, that was their problem.

The captivating concert began with assorted chunks of Mahal's huge personal catalog of music. He was relaxed, funny, sliding around the keyboard and guitar while singing "Fishin'," "I Don't Care Where You Get Your Appetite (so long as you eat your dinner at home)," "Big-legged Women Are Back In Style," and half a dozen other wonderful tunes.

Then Shocked appeared, upbeat and in fine voice, and zigzagged through a colorful repertoire from her three albums plus a couple of new songs.

Michelle Shocked has the formula for conspicuous originality. First of all, she's got the licks down. If she weren't so interesting verbally, her mandolin playing alone would earn her a spot in a fine band.

More to the point, despite her rebellious image — running away from home, getting discovered by playing more or less on the street — she has assimilated and built upon the traditions in which she was raised, including Texas songwriters like Guy Clark, swing artists like Louis Jordan, and

the traditional fiddle tunes she learned from her father.

Another piece of the formula is that she knows the value of specific imagery. She sang "Silver Spoon," a sweet, simple song about friendship that was inspired by a spoon-pin worn by her banjo player, Alison Brown. In a sharper tone she sang "Custom Cutter," a song of impatience and frustration, as embodied by watching winter wheat grow and waiting for someone to come and harvest it, and the chilling "Grafitti Limbo," a tune from her first album about a graffiti artist allegedly strangled during his arrest.

A propos of this song — as well as "Shaking Hands/Soldier's Joy," about morphine addiction in Civil War soldiers, or "Prodigal Daughter," an extraordinary reworking of the old folk song "Cotton-Eyed Joe" into a contemporary piece about abortion and gender bias — there's no question that Shocked has lots of socio-political items on her agenda. But one beauty of her art is that she avoids being polemical, and she is altogether difficult to categorize. She's hardly a new-traditionalist, not an updated Pete Seeger, not a Bruce Cockburn or Billy Bragg, not a hard-edged version of Holly Near.

She dresses in punk black tights and thin-strapped top, but when she sings her own version of "Cripple Creek" she could just as well be on the Grand Old Opry stage.

Before her encores she offered an explicit political message. "The last time I voted was in 1980. This year I'm voting for Bill Clinton." While making such a speech in Northampton was probably too easy, one theme was appropriate, namely that what defines political centrists is an attempt to avoid excluding one side or another.

Saturday night in Northampton, Michelle Shocked came across as centrist in her music, embracing many generations and combining pointed lessons with an ability to laugh at herself.