

Where was The Band?

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Taj Mahal and Michelle Shocked
John M. Greene Hall, Smith College
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When Michelle Shocked listed some of her "all time heroes and contemporaries" in a recent press release, four of the most prominent names were Taj Mahal, Uncle Tupelo, Levon Helm and Garth Hudson.

As witnessed by a crowd of 1,200 at John M. Greene Hall last Saturday night, Shocked's list may have been altered in the past week but her musical talent is unquestionably intact.

When Uncle Tupelo and The Band (Helm, Hudson and Rick Danko) have formed a semi-reunion tour backed out of what was promoted as "The Arkansas Traveler Review," the show was transformed into "The Michelle Shocked/Taj Mahal Series of Uplifting Moments." The tour had been going on for about a week, but "personality conflicts" resulted in the change.

Regardless of the "sudden" cancellation (a spokesman for Great Northeast Productions, who organized the show, admitted Saturday night The Band had pulled out as early as last Wednesday) Mahal played an inspired first set that flowed smoothly into Shocked's hour and a half show.

Shocked's combination of knee-slappin', foot-stompin' down south music coupled with a Joni Mitchell/Carole King voice created some memorable moments. With a three piece band behind her that included some high-flying fiddle licks, a mesmerizing mandolin and the banjo's sweet twang, Shocked showed why she is one of the premier female acts in the country.

Offering tunes from each of her three albums, Shocked tried to show "y'all where our musical influences come from." The upbeat "St. Anne's Reel" with

the catchy "Bait your hook/Throw your line/Clean your catch" got things in a groove and led nicely to "Cripple Creek". (NOT the Band's "Up on Cripple Creek").

Shocked then led the seated version of a square dance with what she termed "The Chair Dance," complete with a down home Yee Haw.

The mellow, soothing "Silver Spoon," a song Shocked wrote for banjo/guitar player Alison Brown was an especially bright moment enhanced by Brown's accompaniment on vocals.

Mahal and Shocked combined for a rousing "That's the Way the Story Goes" after which Shocked poured it on in the homestretch introducing the brand new "Custom Cutter," about the hardships of winter wheat farming.

Add to that song list the thoughtful "Graffiti Limbo," a heartwarming "Anchorage" and the Civil War tribute "Shaking Hands/Soldier's Joy" and the result was a terrifically focused and powerful set by Shocked. The only lowpoint came when Shocked stepped up on her soapbox prior to the encore and preached her political view. (She's voting for Bill Clinton; if you cared.)

Mahal's fans were prominent in the crowd and they were certainly not disappointed with the blues master's soulful set. It included a deeply moving "Corrina," as well as the good-time "Fishin' Blues."

While the personal conflicts that caused The Band and Uncle Tupelo to leave the tour were not clear, Lou Salamone of Great Northeast Productions said Mahal was the peacemaker in the situation.

"Just give Taj his carrot juice and direct him to the stage," Salamone said.

The carrot juice certainly worked as Mahal proceeded to boogie through his set.

Full refunds were offered at the box office prior to the show but less than 50 were issued, according to Greene officials.