

Michelle Shocked proves talent by performing without backup

by Daniel Owen

Michelle Shocked delighted and entertained her audience Oct. 14 at the George Mason University Center for the Arts. The politically correct term for her performance is probably "instrumentally challenged" because she was forced to play without her band, whose absence went unexplained. Nevertheless, it was a challenge that she rose to with her enormous talent and unstoppable humor. "I want y'all to imagine a real poignant mandolin solo just here," she requested in the middle of one number. "I really should start to learn some lead guitar," she later joked.

But this was not a show that was going to be spoiled by the absence of a band. An appreciative crowd was treated to some of Shocked's classics performed solo, and no one complained.

At times, Shocked was able to stand on the stage and have people yell requests at her from all directions. She played most of their requests, rousing a roaring cheer that drowned out the first few lines of the song. Others she wasn't even able to play. "Someone else normally plays the guitar for that song now and I don't think I can remember what the chords are," she explained with a broad grin.

When she wasn't singing and strumming, Shocked was talking. And she had an awful lot to say — from how she learnt to drive, to why her brother has red hair, to how she felt being married, to how Jimmy Carter was a centrist. At times the audience would interrupt with



calls of "sing a song," but then others would call out "tell us a story," just to be difficult. "I'm so confused," Shocked protested.

She treated the audience to a mixture of Shocked greats, mixed with tracks from her latest album, *Arkansas Traveler* (Mercury). *Traveler* is intended to be the final link in a trilogy that started with her first album, *Short, Sharp, Shocked*. It provides a wonderful, eclectic mix of styles and paces including R&B, folk, bluegrass and country. Even an Irish flute can be heard on the album. The overall effect is bright and lively and it's as much fun to listen to as it obviously was to put together.

Arkansas Traveler is a musical road movie.

Her album, like her concert, is a personal performance. The musical influences are from Shocked's childhood. In the list of performers on the album insert, she is identified only as "Arkansas Traveler" — except once, where she is "Prodigal Daughter."

Whatever role she wants to play — and there is a fair degree of uncertainty on her part about this — and whatever music she wants to play, Shocked is an outstanding musician, leaving her audience — whether on tape or onstage — hoping she'll give them just one more song.