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Tribune photo by John Kringas
Michelle Shocked performs
Thursday in the first of two
shows at the Park West.

Shocked gives a scholarly performance

By Dan Kening 7880

As delightful as Michelle Shocked's recent "Arkansas Traveler" album is, her appearance Thursday in the first of a two-night stint at the Park West decidedly lacked that record's charm.

True, she performed many of the updated fiddle tunes that figure so prominently on an album that features a plethora of guest stars. But despite some musical assistance from bluesmen Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown and Taj Mahal, Shocked's show suffered from a serious case of self-indulgence.

Following full sets by Brown and Mahal, Shocked hit the stage nearly 2½ hours after the concert began. And when she finally did, the flat spots

Folk

outnumbered the highlights.

At one point, she and five members of the audience polka-danced around the stage while Brown sawed away at "Beer Barrel Polka" on his fiddle. During the next song, "Arkansas Traveler," Shocked recruited more members of the audience to trot onstage to feed her cornball lines from index cards. "Excuse me, does this road go to Little Rock?" read one. "No, it don't. It stays right here," Shocked replied.

And you thought "Amateur Hour" died with Ted Mack!

Possessed with a clarionlike voice and an outspokenness that makes for good copy,

Shocked has been a critical favorite since coming virtually out of nowhere with 1986's "The Texas Campfire Tapes." And while her musicologist approach to her art is commendable, onstage it bordered on the pedantic.

"Arkansas Traveler" completes a trilogy of work I started five years ago with 'Short Sharp Shocked' and 'Captain Swing,' she solemnly informed the audience.

Truth be told, the sold-out crowd seemed completely under her spell. She even got audience members to do some group square-dance moves during "Old Joe Clark." Then again after the long wait, perhaps they were just hoping to get their money's worth.

Dan Kening is a free-lance writer on music and radio.