

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON, DC

DC-30

D. 791,290

OCT 26 1992

BURRELLE'S

Michelle Shocked 7890

Michelle Shocked seemed a bit shell-shocked when she performed at George Mason University Wednesday night. A tour built around the singer's latest album, "Arkansas Traveler," featuring the Band, Uncle Tupelo, Taj Mahal and her own group, had just "unraveled," she told the crowd, so that only Taj Mahal remained on the bill with her. She didn't offer much of an explanation, apart from alluding to a lot of "backstage drama," though her management later said the decision to pare down the lineup was hers.

Whatever the reason, Shocked seemed emotionally distraught at times, verging on tears not only when she discussed the tour but when she spoke of her obviously painful relationship with her mother. Throughout her two-hour set she punctuated her songs with rambling anecdotes—some of them touching, some amusing, several others hopelessly convoluted.

But the songs—and especially the applause they generated—often lifted her spirits as she plucked out simple melodies on a electric guitar and occasionally sang with an old-timey purity and power. The best tunes, drawn from her first and third albums, included a poignant "East Texas Memories," an expanded version of "Anchorage," a wonderfully animated duet with Taj Mahal on "Jump Jim Crow" and a bittersweet "Prodigal Daughter." Still, the blues artist's opening set of finger-style guitar tributes to Etta Baker, Elizabeth Cotten, Mississippi John Hurt and Robert Johnson, barrelhouse piano blues and robust sing-alongs was far more consistent and enjoyable, if by no means as odd. —Mike Joyce