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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 1992

‘Arkansas Traveler’ Michelle Shocked keeps spirits high

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REVIEW

On her way to Santa Rosa, Michelle Shocked stopped off Tuesday night in Little Rock to celebrate with another Arkansas Traveler.

Thursday's crowd at Burbank Center for the Arts was smaller than that party down south — the hall was about half full — but the spirits were nearly as high.

The audience certainly roared approval when the singer-songwriter mentioned our future president. They lent equal support to Shocked and her rollicking Arkansas Travelers Revue, which included blues legend Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown and Taj Mahal.

Except for a minor MTV hit back in the late 1980s — a wispy folk recollection called "Anchorage" — Shocked has survived on a small but passionate following. "Short Sharp Shocked," which spawned "Anchorage," was one of the best albums of the decade, filled with passionate folk blues fueled by Shocked's knowing lyrics and sinuous voice.

Live, Shocked is every bit as charming, revealing her East Texas upbringing with an easy twang, an "oh gosh" modesty and a handy "y'all."

Her two-hour set Thursday was devoted largely to music from her latest album "Arkansas Traveler," which was inspired by the old-time fiddle tunes she learned from her father. Shocked recorded the album in locations all over the world, with folks like Mahal, Brown and The Band sitting in.

(The Band, in fact, was supposed to play Thursday but canceled at

the last minute.)

Shocked opened with the familiar "When I Grow Up," shimmying to the perky beat as she flicked the strings on her electric guitar. She wore black and her black mop haircut bounced fancifully.

Shocked's winning personality quickly energized the hall, with lengthy chats between each song laced with wry humor.

"If it's all right wit'chew, I'd like to introduce the band. Gary, this is Allison. Paul, I'm Michelle," Shocked said, as band members turned to each other and shook hands.

Shocked's set offered too many highlights to mention here.

Rewriting the traditional fiddle tune "Cotton Eyed Joe" as a song she called "Prodigal Daughter," Shocked devised a haunting poem on abortion. Prodigal sons are welcomed backed, she sang, but prodigal daughters are treated with shame.

"Graffiti Limbo," a nasty piece of blues about a black New York graffiti artist who died — quote, unquote — mysteriously after being arrested.

"I wrote this a long time before what happened to Rodney King," Shocked said, instilling the song with even more anger than she did on "Short Sharp Shocked."

"Anchorage" offered the evening's most poignant moment. As she sang about a letter from a long-lost friend, her eyes puffed wet and red. An emotional connection to her first big song? Maybe. But her face



Michelle Shocked performed Thursday at Burbank Center for the Arts

suggested something deeper, a new chapter to the story, some tragedy perhaps.

Shocked stopped the song to explain, telling the audience of her recent marriage, lamenting that she had lost track with her friends Kelly and Leroy again and feared they would miss the wedding.

"So I called my friends over at MTV and they put out an APB and a few days before the wedding I got this call — 'Chelle? Kell.'" Shocked recalled. "They'd just moved down

the block. The next day we flew 'em down."

At the encore, Mahal and Brown joined Shocked and company on stage, after playing separate sets earlier in the concert.

Brown's set was particularly sharp, as the aging master — decked in black and glittering silver — guided his feathery fingers across the guitar and fiddle.

Mahal was more gently soulful on the piano and acoustic guitar during a chatty and animated set of blues.