



Michelle Shocked's exuberance rubbed off on the Warfield audience.

As her band fiddles 'round Shocked delights wild fans

By Larry Kelp
Tribune music critic

How fitting that Michelle Shocked's Arkansas Traveler Revue pulled into town just days after the election.

"I had the privilege of flying down to Little Rock a couple of nights ago," she informed the crowd Friday at San Francisco's Warfield Theater, and the audience went wild with cheering.

Shocked broke into the old fiddle tune "Arkansas Traveler," accompanied by her band, with some vaudeville jokes tossed in along the way, read by several people pulled from the crowd.

The concert reveled in populist and Southern sensibility, simple musical pleasures and many political hot potatoes nestled in Shocked's entertaining songs.

Shocked's one problem is that she can do anything she wants, from playing rural folk tunes to belting out rock on a par with Grace Slick or Janis Joplin. She refuses to focus on one easily marketable style. And in the process, continues to deliver unexpectedly excellent local shows, from Great American Music Hall benefits with Billy Bragg (and Grace Slick and Paul Kantner), to a showcase for women singers at the Freight and Salvage, to performing for Bread and Roses' Festival.

Friday's nearly four-hour show included Texas blues-jazz-Cajun guitarist-fiddler Clarence "Gatemouth Brown," roots revivalist Taj Mahal, and Shocked with a no-drums acoustic band playing songs from all of her albums and some new ones.

In a short haircut, black tank top and tights, Shocked was full of such effervescent energy that her spirit quickly rubbed off on the crowd.

She explained that the bit about, "Life is what happens to you while you're planning things," applied to this tour. "I couldn't have been on a more satisfying musical bill if I'd planned it that way. I didn't. It just sort of happened."

Originally it had been announced with members of the Band and Uncle Tupelo (like the others, they're all on her recent "Arkansas Traveler" album), but those were changed to the current lineup.

The album's concept is Shocked taking the traditional fiddle tunes her dad played on mandolin when she was growing up, and writing new lyrics to them. It's a device (using old music for new words) used by Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger and many other great artists of vernacular music.

There were other surprises along the way, as in her hit, "Anchorage," where she updated the song to explain that she had gotten married a few months ago, and the song's protagonist, Kelly,

and her husband had attended.

By the end, "The Secret of a Long Life (Is Knowing When It's Time to Go)" (dedicated to George Bush), Shocked was surrounded by all the evening's musicians.

While Brown and Mahal are frequent visitors to the Bay Area, they have their own audiences.

On Friday, the crowd (the 2,200 seat theater was not quite filled) talked through the opening songs by Brown, with his unimpressive Gate's Express band, cranking out the latest in trendy blues riffs from his most recent album, then switched to the same music he's played most of his life, Cajun fiddle tunes (he now lives in Louisiana) and big band swing tunes played with lightning speed on electric guitar, including the Duke Ellington-associated "C Jam Blues" and Count Basie's "One O'Clock Jump." Brown was the epitome of musical eclecticism years before Shocked was born.

Even Taj Mahal commented that, "I was 17 years old when a vegetarian friend asked if I'd ever heard of Gatemouth, and then invited me over to listen to his records."

Mahal, the former Bay Area who has played everywhere from Berkeley's Freight and Salvage folk club to gigs with the Oakland Symphony, did the soundtrack music for the new film "Zebrhead."

Shocked said of Mahal, "He's the man who taught me a lot about the real meaning of music, because the word doesn't exist once you get to the place where it's what goes on between the performer and the audience."

Her drummerless backing trio included bassist Gary West, fiddler Paul Elliot (picked up on their Seattle stop), and banjo and guitar player Alison Brown, a long time feature of the local bluegrass scene who was a member of Alison Krauss' band before heading out on her own.

Like Bill Clinton, Shocked is far from perfect. But she continues to write some of the most entertaining songs that tackle real issues. And she continues to take chances with her career. So far her following has supported her every move.

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