

- 3 DEC 1992

Date

Music

MICHELLE SHOCKED All At Sea

"I am on the equivalent of a floating Japanese hotel room, and it's great!"

Move over Michael Jackson. With octopi, crabs and electric eels as de facto pets, Michelle Shocked is staking her own claim as America's most eccentric rocker on board a Los Angeles houseboat.

"I moved in in April and I got married in July," she enthuses, surveying a front yard of "wide skies, ocean, gulls and sailboats that rock back and forth with stays clanking against their masts."

"And the beauty of it is my husband lives on a houseboat just across the dock! He's over there busy typing away on his word processor and I'm here doing interviews with people in Australia. His and hers houseboats, ya know?"

It's a long way from her home state of Texas, but Michelle Shocked is kind of used to that. She's toured the world more than once, and next week she visits Perth for the third time in as many albums. This time she's coming to play some of the fiddle toons off *Arkansas Traveler* with a bass, guitar/ banjo and fiddle/ mandolin trio.

"And with a few liberties I'll be presenting material from the first two albums of the trilogy as well," she adds, referring to



the acoustic 'protest' album *Short Sharp Shocked* and its jazz/ blues successor, *Captain Swing*.

Michelle's last Australian tour was in partnership with Paul Kelly's (then) backing band, the Messengers. With Kelly now

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resident in Los Angeles, are there any further collaborations in the wind?

"I'm having dinner with him on Saturday!" she hoots. "He came over last week and we swapped new songs, which I haven't done since the *Texas Campfire Tapes* days.

"That used to be the whole reason for writing songs; you could sit around the campfire swapping 'em with other writers. Paul put me back in that spirit. He just picked up a guitar and started playing and his wife Kaarin was singing harmonies, and their little baby was crawling around the floor," she laughs. "It was very domestic."

And, just maybe, therapeutic as well. Michelle mentioned in an earlier *X-Press* interview that the completion of her trilogy had left her with something akin to writer's block.

"What's happening is I'm writing songs like I used to write, and that really annoys me because I'm sitting here insisting that I've gotta do something new and you can tell I don't really want to leave that music behind yet. It's so familiar and so comfortable, songs that tell stories... but I'm trying to be as demanding of myself as I've been of my audience, challenging myself by saying 'no, you've got to go into unfamiliar territory, girl'."

But why sweat it if your own territory is the kind of territory no one else is covering in the first place?

"Well... since no one else does what I do, if I try to do what other people are doing but no one else can do it the way I do it, it'll still be something no one else can do. Right?"

I guess.

Michelle Shocked docks at the Barrack Street Jetty for one concert next Tuesday, December 8.

— MICHAEL DWYER