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Michelle's long, lasting kiss

By LISA WALLER

FANS ARE fickle creatures. Their relationship with a performer is a one-way intimacy; often sustained for years through a collection of albums and the odd one-night stand in a pub or a concert hall.

Such love affairs give rise to all sorts of expectations. Some fans dump old musical loves who dare to step out and change styles. The jilted fan becomes the harshest critic.

Michelle Shocked doesn't want to break any hearts but she is considering loving and leaving her most faithful followers — The ones who fell for a fresh-faced girl with a Texan twang, a 12-string guitar and her own brand of homespun melodies. She says her latest album, *Arkansas Traveller* is a "long and lasting kiss from a female troubadour" for those who cannot accept the new musical directions she might pursue.

The 30-year-old troubadour has reached a set of crossroads and she's not sure which direction to take — to continue down the path she's on or take the road less travelled. For the time being, she seems content

to rest under the signposts. And why not? She has achieved what she set out to do — a trilogy of albums exploring her musical roots and influences.

It began in 1988 with *Short Sharp Shocked*, which showed her lyrical influences in songs including *Anchorage* and *If Love Was A Train*; then in 1990 it was *Captain Swing*, which demonstrated her musical influences with the swinging big-band sound of songs like *On The Greener Side*.

Most recently, *Arkansas Traveller* explores Shocked's passion for black-face minstrelsy, fiddle tunes and strawberry jam (the idea being "if you want the best jam you've got to make your own") coupled with the rock ballad *Come A Long Way* and the theme to the Al Pacino-Michelle Pfeiffer movie *Frankie and Johnny*.

Shocked has completed three albums of the music closest to her heart and soul. Now she wants to challenge audiences to grow with her.

She promises to challenge the record companies too.

"I want to get into that phase which record companies always find very annoying: experi-



Michelle Shocked

menting. I want to explore styles which are not familiar and about which I am not comfortable," she says.

Shocked exudes a quiet but unshakable confidence in her own talent. She believes in her ability to write great music, tell a poignant story and keep an audience entertained.

She says she thinks she has what it takes to become a "rock-folk legend" like Springsteen, and despairs that instead she is being cast as a Joni Mitchell or a Joan Baez. And that's not how she wants to be seen — or heard.

She has her own style and her

own vision which includes black-face minstrelsy as it relates to culture. She also sees some rhythm and blues.

"If you listen to rhythm and blues you can see it is radical and new and has a large continuation. It's not superficial because people take the style and add to it. I am very aware of all the traditions which are growing from it.

"I am thinking of blues in terms of Louis Jordan and jump swing. I suspect that's where it will come from."

Shocked knows too much about black-face minstrelsy to copy it with a conscience.

"It would be like performing with a black face without putting on the black face," she says. "I want to draw on my information and make it different."

With *Arkansas Traveller*, Shocked looked for musicians who represented a tradition, but one that had been bastardised.

Her heroes and respected contemporaries such as Jimmy Driftwood, Garth Hudson, Taj Mahal, the Messengers and Hothouse Flowers all helped bring the dream to life.

Dublin's Hothouse Flowers

were chosen over a traditional Irish band because they have soul and a love for it. The Messengers were reminiscent of Bob Dylan, who took styles and made them his own, while Shocked chose Taj Mahal because of his understanding of black tradition which had been interpreted through white audiences.

For her next album, no matter what style or form it may take, Shocked will write all her own material.

"I am very hesitant to let go of the past. It is very disturbing because I am writing some of my strongest acoustic stuff now. I think it is a very natural reaction when you are going into the unknown to give it a very long, lasting kiss.

"I hope next year will be an opportunity to realise my potential. I have done a good job of laying down the foundations, but I have to set up the rest for the house I want to build."

Michelle Shocked performs at the Canberra Labor Club on December 15. Bookings 251 5522.