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Date

B Travelling light with a persuasive performer

FOLK

BRUCE ELDER

MICHELLE SHOCKED

State Theatre, December 10

THERE was a point near the end of this remarkable concert when, with artless simplicity, Michelle Shocked revealed just why she is such an emotionally persuasive performer. She had launched into *Anchorage*, her charming tale about the way childhood friends drift apart. She paused midway through the song to talk about her recent marriage to long-time boyfriend, Bart Bull. At the time she had decided that her friends, Kelly and Leroy (the subjects of her song *Anchorage*) should come to her wedding. She explained the problems of

trying to find friends in Alaska, then, quite suddenly, she said that at her wedding a friend had sung the same song that she had sung at Kelly and Leroy's wedding. A moment later she was singing the most hauntingly beautiful version of *Carrickfergus*.

Michelle Shocked is one of those performers who, because they reveal themselves on stage with unpretentious honesty, is capable of touching an audience in a deep and enduring way. The effect of *Carrickfergus* was extraordinary. It was as though every member of the audience was sitting next to Kelly and Leroy at the wedding of Michelle and Bart.

In fact the whole evening was a bit like that. There was a time when nearly everyone held hands and performed a kind of sit-down square dance that Shocked called "The Chair Dance". At

another point five members of the audience, decked out in red bandanas and with the worst American accents imaginable, delivered the hayseed jokes featured on *Arkansas Traveler*.

This was an evening when Shocked took her audience for a journey through her folk/country routes. Backed only by Alison Brown (banjo/guitar), Garry West (electric bass) and Ray Legere (fiddle) she played most of the material from her recent CD *Arkansas Traveler*, nodded at *Captain Swing* and delivered exceptional live versions of *VFD*, *When I Grow Up*, *Anchorage* and *Memories of East Texas* from *Short Sharp Shocked*. It was a subtle intermingling of Bob Wills-style Texas swing, bluegrass, hoedown and country folk. It was a glorious exposition of the musical culture of

Texas and the deep south. To isolate highlights in such an exceptional performance seems unfair. However *Blackbury Blossom* was delivered with touching poignancy, *Contest Coming (Cripple Creep)* was performed at a blistering pace and *Weaving Way* (which she recorded with Paul Kelly's Messengers) was given a distinctive, deep south twist.

Over the past five years, on three albums and a crudely recorded cassette, Shocked has explored her musical routes. In the process she has exposed her fans to some marvellous country/folk music forms.

The question now is: where does she go from here? The two rather ordinary samples of her new material *Midwife* and *Eddy Bonebreak* did not seem to indicate that she has a rich new seam of material waiting to be explored.