

Poet of the people

By HELEN A.S. POPKIN
Times Staff Writer

Michelle Shocked thinks of her first tour of Florida as a "special introductory offer."

When the 30-year-old Texas singer/songwriter takes the stage Saturday night at Jannus Landing, she will be alone: Her first solo tour in four years. Shocked will perform songs from her first three albums, each encompassing a different musical style of American songwriting heritage. To keep the audience open to her range of styles, Shocked will appear without an opening act.

"Since I'm touring for the first time since the trilogy is complete, Florida audiences will get the whole picture," Shocked said in a recent interview from California where she lives on a houseboat with her husband, *Spin* magazine writer Bart Bull.

Shocked began the trilogy in 1988 with *Short, Sharp, Shocked*, a tribute to the storytelling style of songwriters such as Guy Clark. With the hit *Anchorage*, Shocked was immediately pegged as a "fe-

male folk singer" and lumped together with Tracy Chapman, Susan Vega, the Indigo Girls and any other women with acoustic guitars.

Her second release blew that image out of the water. *Captain Swing* (1990) illustrated her blues influences — swing style — focusing on the big band styles of Dixieland, Memphis and Chicago.

In 1992, Shocked completed the trilogy with *Arkansas Traveler*, which encompassed fiddle tunes and the black-face minstrel tradition. Recording in a riverboat, an antique store and even a barn, Shocked enlisted the help of her "all-time heroes and respected contemporaries," including Doc Watson, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, Taj Mahal, Uncle Tupelo and Hothouse Flowers.

Still, each release bears a common thread — Shocked's commitment to remain true to her political agenda by telling the story of people's lives, her own or others,



MICHELLE SHOCKED

and letting listeners draw their own conclusions. Her songs reflect her strong feminist and anti-racist beliefs, as well as her political activism, ranging back to her homeless days in New York City.

Beyond those delicate themes, "those albums function as a road mark or a source book for what my musical influences are,"

Shocked says.

Though the trilogy was in Shocked's mind from its inception, "I got a lot of advice early on not to tell people," she says. "I guess they thought it was going to be a surprise," she says of her business advisers. "I didn't agree but I followed their advice. It came off like I changed styles for whimsy, like Neil Young."

Shocked is well aware that the music business is, after all, a business, and not in existence to indulge her muse. From the beginning of her own bizarre success story, Shocked has learned the hard way about the business.

MUSIC PREVIEW

Michelle Shocked, 9 p.m. Saturday at Jannus Landing, St. Petersburg. Tickets \$15. Shocked will also appear the day of the show at 4:30 p.m. at Music Revolution, 4055 S Dale Mabry, Tampa.

As the legend goes, in 1986 Shocked was simply a vagabond with a guitar hanging out at a folk festival in Texas. Her campside croonings drew the attention of visiting Brit Pete Lawrence, who captured Shocked's songs on his Sony Walkman. The primitive recordings were released in England as *The Texas Campfire Tapes*, going to the top of the alternative charts and capturing major label attention.

Seven years later, Shocked was sued for \$200,000 by the organization that released the *Texas Campfire Tapes*. "I have run into some very complicated business dealings, but I'm trying to be a hard-nosed realist," she says. "I have to fight the same battles that anyone would, whether they're in canned goods or in shoes. The School of Hard Knocks has a few openings for Michelle Shocked."