

Expect the unexpected at Shocked's stop here

Michelle Shocked, 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Barrymore Theatre, \$17.75 in advance, \$20 on day of show, 241-8633.

Michelle Shocked used to be a folk singer, but she's discovered a new toy.

Now it's hard to know what to expect when the Texas songwriter, once happiest playing solo with an acoustic six-string, comes to town Wednesday.

For one, Shocked has discovered the wah-wah pedal, the device that makes funk music funky. She's got a brand-new electric guitar and has just unleashed her new four-person funk band, the Casualties of Wah.

"It's a very, very exciting time for me right now," Shocked said in a telephone interview. "It just feels fresh. It feels like I have been true to my vision."

Her vision began unexpectedly in 1986. A fan bootlegged her performance at a folk music festival and released it on compact disc without Shocked's permission. "The Texas Campfire Tapes" was an accidental hit.

"It honestly had not been my intention to have a career as a recording artist," she said. But the record companies found her.

In 1988, Shocked struck a deal with Mercury Records and began recording a trilogy of albums intended to stay in touch with her roots.

"I wanted to create a road map home," she said. "I didn't know where this journey was going to take me, but my fear was that if it got too big too fast — even if it took too long, and I started to get discouraged — I would always want some reminder of where I came from."

Shocked admits that her five-year project was not promoted strongly as a trilogy and that her seemingly erratic style changes were confusing.

The first record, "Short Sharp

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MICHELLE SHOCKED has learned that funky music gets funkier if you use a wah-wah pedal.

Shocked," explored Texas storytelling with a simple folk style. When she leaped into swing music a year later with "Captain Swing," not all of her fans were happy.

"There were even charges from the folkies when 'Captain Swing' came out that I had sold out," she laughed. "If you can imagine old swing styles being a sellout."

The trilogy concluded last year with "Arkansas Traveler," a project with a long list of guest musicians and an array of folk styles.

Shocked has a gift for storytelling and, she said, a wealth of life experiences to draw from.

"Not only was I in a mental hospital, I have a college degree."

She still wrestles with resentment toward her mother, who Shocked said had her hospitalized nine years ago at age 22.

"The system wasn't set up to help me," Shocked said. She was

released a month later because her insurance expired. Today she speaks scornfully of her mother's decision.

"If you ask me what her reason was for doing it, I think she felt out of control, and — by putting me in an institution that was designed to control my behavior — it gave her just a little bit more of a sense that things could be controlled ...

"I was going through a very, very typical kind of identity crisis a lot of young women go through when you're strong, you're smart, but you grow up in a society that encourages you to act stupid when you're smart or act vulnerable when you feel strong."

Despite her rocky past, Shocked's lyrics are full of fun and mischief.

"When I grow up, I want to be an old woman," she croons in one song. Another recounts her small-town childhood entertainment — doing risky things with matches in the dry grass. "We was making trouble for the VFD (volunteer fire department)," she sings with a hint of a giggle.

Now Shocked is leaving folk music behind and making a rebellious plunge into funk. Or is she?

"There's no way I'm going to come up with an uncut funk sound," she said. Talking about her forthcoming albums, she added, "I beg and I borrow from whatever style suits my purpose at the time, but I know that in the long run, it's going to be a Michelle Shocked album."

What can Madison expect when she takes the stage Wednesday? Shocked wasn't even sure herself.

"We're doing it all, you know. It's like we're doing them just like they sound on the records. We're doing them so that you can barely recognize them. We're doing them with different feels. We're doing them with different arrangements."

"So far, I haven't been inclined to do much where I would come out at a certain point and play solo like the old days, but by the time I get to Madison, that may be part of my vocabulary."