

Michelle Shocked is full of surprises

By CRYSTAL DEMPSEY
Staff Writer

Singer-songwriter Michelle Shocked's independent streak is as long and wide as the Mississippi.

When her label, Mercury Records, rejected a batch of songs, she put together "Kind Hearted Woman," an album that will be sold only at her shows (for about \$15).

Shocked, who plays Spirit Square on Thursday, is considered a feisty maverick and a risk-taker.

When she went to Mercury wanting to do a funk album, they urged her to do an acoustic, or "unplugged," project. She put her foot down and is heading out with a funk band on the second leg of this tour.

"Funk, soul, gospel and the down-home blues, it's all in my vocabulary. . . . I just want to emphasize it and add it to my palette," Shocked said recently in a phone interview.

Since she hit the scene in the late '80s, folks have been trying to wrestle Shocked down and stick a label on her forehead.

On "Short, Sharp, Shocked" (1988), she's a skateboard punk rocker who wants to be an old woman when she grows up.

"Captain Swing" (1989) shows her romantic, fun side. Her brand of swing, she says, is blues with an up-tempo beat.

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Electric, eclectic

Who: Michelle Shocked.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday.

Where: Spirit Square Center for the Arts, 345 N. College St.

Tickets: \$20. Available at area Ticketmaster locations or at Spirit Square box office: 372-7469 or 1-800-922-6431, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. weekdays, noon-6 p.m. Saturday. To charge tickets by phone: 522-6500, 9 a.m.-9 p.m. weekdays, 10 a.m.-7 p.m. weekend.

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Her last album for her label, "Arkansas Traveler" (1992), paid homage to her musical roots of folk and blues. Shocked played with the likes of Doc Watson, Pops Staples, Taj Mahal and the Red Clay Ramblers.

Part of Shocked's charm is her splendid storytelling. Get a copy of "Short, Sharp and Shocked" and listen to "Anchorage" or "V.F.D."

Her imagery nails an emotion and her guitar-playing is solid. She can make you laugh and cry or — at the very least — smile.

Her melodies recall a past that's slipping away.

"Those first three albums are a trilogy of the music where I come from," Shocked explained. "'Kind Hearted Woman' takes me closer to what I am and where I want to go."

The themes on the new album are pretty heavy stuff. One song is about a midwife delivering a still-born baby. Another is about a friend's mother who was killed by a drunk driver.

Do the songs cut close to her bone? Not anymore.

"A personal connection leads me down a road that I don't want to go down. . . . I let the songs do the work," she said. "I don't have to grind my emotional gears."

Shocked also has the reputation of putting on a heck of a show. She likes to show off her versatility.

"People go away entertained," she said. "They go through the whole scope of emotions."