

Michelle Shocked finally breaks free of Mercury's orbit

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'Kind Hearted Woman' ends
5-year exile from record stores

By Salvatore Caputo
Staff writer

Michelle Shocked comes out of record-company limbo today ready for a baptism of fire.

"An artist ultimately must be in control of their direction and vision, or the job should go to the vice president of business affairs," she says from a rehearsal in Oakland. "Let him make the album."

Kind Hearted Woman, to be released today on the Private Music label, marks her first new work to hit record-store shelves in five years. No, she wasn't suffering from writer's block, she was feuding with her old label, Mercury.

"They claimed that I was taking my music in a stylistically inconsistent direction," says Shocked, who plays Scottsdale's Rockin' Horse on Thursday.

The bone of contention was *Casualties of Wah*, a band she put together about a year after the release of her previous album, *Arkansas Traveler*. That album was full of American roots music. *Casualties of Wah*

took a funkier direction.

The split is reminiscent of Neil Young being sued for delivering "uncommercial" records to his label.

"I think they (record-company executives) learned their lesson: Don't sue the artist! Just

don't return their phone calls for four years," she says. The label wouldn't drop her but also wouldn't release her work.

This wasn't her first contretemps with a record company: Back in 1986, a British label "recorded a bootleg at a festival with me sitting around a campfire singing songs into a Sony Walkman with weak batteries." Although the unauthorized release led to a tussle, it became an independent hit and led to her being signed by Mercury in 1988.

Mercury re-released the bootleg as *The Texas Campfire Tapes*, but her big splash came with *Short Sharp Shocked* (1988), an album that combined punk attitude with that campfire feeling.

She then made an about-face with the big-band sounds of *Captain Swing* (1989) before re-



Dave Hansen/Newport Daily News

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To hear selections from Michelle Shocked's *Kind Hearted Woman*, call PressLine at 271-5656 and press 2249.

turning to the more familiar territory of *Arkansas Traveler*.

Shocked, born in Texas, spent most of her growing up as an "Army brat," moving around often. That seems to have kindled both artistic and real wanderlust.

"I wanted to be a traveler long before I ever had any career direction or ambition." Af-

ter reading Jack Kerouac in high school, "it was all over," she says. "So I started traveling on the premise that I could be poor anywhere, and that's when the music caught up with me. I wasn't chasing the music."

Armed with that fierce independence, Shocked wasn't about to be cowed when she and her label fell out. She finally fought to be released from her Mercury contract and won. Not only that, but the ownership of all her Mercury work eventually will revert to her.

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Michelle Shocked unleashes *Casualties of Wah*

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In a parting shot, she gave a retrospective album that's due to be released Nov. 5 the title *Mercury Poise*, a reference to *Mercury Poisoning*, Graham Parker's bitter song-lashing of the same label.

"I couldn't pass that up," she says, "especially when they were insisting that the title was 'Anthology,' as if I was dead."

But *Kind Hearted Woman* finds Shocked very much alive. She portrays people living on the edge with such empathy that she seems to have put on their skin.

Stillborn tells of a midwife trying to cope after a stillbirth. "Still the mother asked to hold the child that never cried/rocked it gently, softly keening a plaintive lullaby." Shocked's voice sounds like sobs, barely contained, echoing in the midwife's suddenly hollow heart.

The album makes a long climb from that emotional desolation to

the hopeful resignation of the closing tune, *No Sign of Rain*. In that song, the protagonist knows she can leave the hard times behind if she'll only hit the highway, but decides the time is not yet right.

"All of us — the producer, the musicians, myself — were very aware that what we were trying to capture was an 'arc,' (which) is what (producer) Bones Howe kept describing it as," she says. "There's an arc of a story."

"I don't want to get literary pretentious on you, but that is definitely the approach that a novelist would have to take. By the end of your story, it has to have gone somewhere. And so it starts with despair and it ends with redemption."

Shocked gathered the songs for *Kind Hearted Woman* in 1994, after the death of her grandmother.

"The song *Fever Breaks* is whatever that creative thing that songwriters do to deal with experiences

like the only member of their family that they really had that deep bonding with passing away. ... I try to avoid having the material on *Kind Hearted Woman* being seen solely as autobiographical, but that song would certainly be more a candidate than most."

Despite the album's continuity, she didn't write the songs all at once.

"The first three came from a collaboration with modern dance choreographer Mark Morris. Some of the songs were very old and some of them were very recent."

The project came together in record-label limbo.

"I've been on tour somewhat relentlessly since all of this (the Mercury trouble) came up, but what I also did, against all wisdom and advice of my counselors, was to press up a limited edition of the same material that's on *Kind Hearted Woman* and sell it at the shows."

That album — featuring Shocked doing the same songs in the same sequence accompanied just by her Fender Stratocaster — helped sustain her financially during the dispute.

The new version features Fiachna O'Braonain and Peter O'Toole of Hothouse Flowers, with whom she toured during the Mercury dispute. Now she's touring with a new version of the *Casualties of Wah*, headed by keyboardist Carl Wheeler, who played with Tony! Toni! Tone!

Will her Scottsdale show feature a broad retrospective, or will it focus on *Kind Hearted Woman*?

"Well, a broad retrospective and a broad preview as well," she says. "I mean, imagine, if they've kept me in limbo for four years, I have a lot of things to say, and it's real exciting. That there is not one, but two albums to be released."

"It seems like it brings an audience that thinks of me not as (being) in the past, but in the present and hopefully in the future."