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MUSIC

Three chords and something to say

1054A

By JERRY DeMARCO
Staff Writer

"Don't tell David Letterman that you smoked pot with your father," Michelle Shocked's grandmother told her. But she did.

"I guess I'm shameless," Shocked said. "Being a teenage runaway, I never had the sense that my actions would affect the esteem people would hold for me or my family."

It's that feisty insistence on going her own way — no matter the fallout — that made the 34-year-old singer-songwriter no pushover for the corporate suits at her former label, Mercury Records.

After releasing her first three albums, Mercury refused to allow Shocked to record what it deemed "stylistically inconsistent" successors. Nearly four years of unanswered phone calls later, she filed suit against the record company under anti-slavery laws.

The out-of-court settlement that resulted earlier this year allows Shocked unprecedented ownership of her catalog. It also calls for an upcoming compilation she coyly titled "Mercury Poise," a pun on Graham Parker's late-Seventies attack on the label, "Mercury Poisoning."

Unlike Parker, who's still spitting bile, Shocked drove straight past bitterness during her long-running legal battles. She cut her own album, the magnificent "Kind Hearted Woman," and sold it at her gigs. Freed from Mercury, she signed with Private Music, which released the CD last month.

"I'm feeling very creative and liberated," said Shocked, who plays Irving Plaza in Manhattan on Saturday night with her band, The Casualties of Wah. "I used to think I was doing this to

MUSIC PREVIEW

MICHELLE SHOCKED AND THE CASUALTIES OF WAH:

8 p.m. Saturday. Irving Plaza, 17 Irving Place, Manhattan.
\$20. (212) 777-6800. Box office, TicketMaster outlets, and TicketMaster Charge, 507-8900 or (212) 307-7171.

please someone else. Only when I came up against these troubles did I realize I was doing it to please myself."

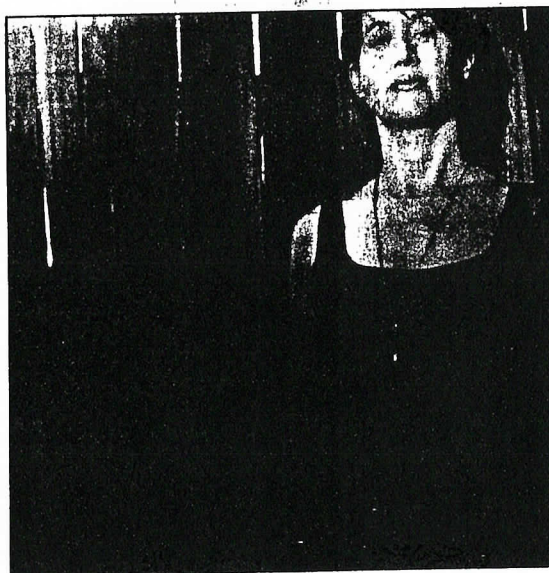
The adversity affected not only her professional dealings but her personal life as well: Shocked put off having children and even considered bagging her career.

"I kept waiting to have my life back," she said over the phone last week. "Now my husband and I are finally planning a family, starting next year. It really cemented our relationship. ... We middle-fingered the system."

"Kind Hearted Woman" also became a power source of sorts for Shocked, a self-proclaimed "funky white girl" from Texas. Twin sister to Springsteen's "The Ghost of Tom Joad," the neofolkish album is more than a batch of songs. Set in wintry-white rural America, it divides neatly into three sets, with a 10th tune pulling the masterpiece together.

Shocked wrote the first three vignettes for choreographer Mark Morris' dance piece, "Home." Each is a bleak, first-person allegory about human frailty and powerlessness against nature.

The next three are true stories, though not her own: "Cold Comfort" consoles a man whose mother is killed by a drunken driver; "Friends can



Michelle Shocked: "Don't fence me in."

only watch and wait while the seasons slowly change/Winter will soon be here/And except for the holidays, it's a fine time of year."

"Eddie" is about a 12-year-old arsonist who began torching fields after seeing his father struck dead by lightning. At first, his pyromania puzzled her. Then Shocked recognized it as a type of blasphemy, "sending clouds of black smoke up to the heavens, praying God will choke."

Although not autobiographical, the aching early stories on "Kind Hearted Woman" may as well be Shocked's. Her parents divorced when she was 3, and she ping-ponged between them. When

sense of it all," Shocked says of these songs of redemption.

A half-dozen tunes from "Kind Hearted Woman" make up the solo portion of Shocked's live show, an eclectic retrospective that clocks in at a Springsteen-like three hours. Shocked also is airing material from a couple of works-in-progress: One is a collection of rhythm-and-blues influenced by her new home, New Orleans. The other is "more of a West Coast contemporary gospel sound," cut with funk and soul, she said.

"It's evolving onstage," she said. "We're playing music that hasn't been recorded yet and creating it for ourselves. It gets refined each night."

Though few can capture such complex emotions with such peaceful maturity, Shocked insisted there's no magic to it. "All you need is three chords and something to say," she said. To make her point, she used to bring an audience member onstage, hand the stunned novice a mandolin, and teach a few chords. "If you want the best jam, you've got to make your own," Shocked would say.

Backed by a band that is better versed than she in gospel, R&B, and jazz, Shocked admits feeling intimidated herself at times. "I've done a great job the past few years of stabilizing my self-esteem," she said, "but I'm still having to deal with some insecurities. The great thing about a tour is you get up and do it every night. You're pushing up against your own limits."

"It's been a bit of a pressure cooker the past four years, a lot of despair and frustration. I stood up to a major label and said, 'Don't fence me in.' I stood on the artistic principle that artists need the freedom to grow and change. ... Now I've gotta get out there and do it."

Shocked was a teenager, her mother had her committed to a psychiatric hospital. She ran away at 16 and didn't see her mother again for 15 years.

That moment is captured, albeit obliquely, by "Fever Breaks," the album's most personal track. As Shocked sat at her dying grandmother's bedside in 1994 — in the same hospital where she had been institutionalized — her mother suddenly walked in. "There was a flood of emotions there, of all kinds," she said. "It was almost surreal."

"Deceptively breezy, 'Fever' introduces the album's final three cuts, all personal expressions of hope. 'That's me speaking, trying to make some