

Michelle Shocked has found new life and new fans with a new music label.



Private Music

Shocked's voice melds tenderness and torment

By Elizabeth Elders
STAFF WRITER

Michelle Shocked is a survivor.

Just listen to her recently re-released album "Kind Hearted Woman" (Private Music). It has all the trappings of a survivor's tale: from lost crops to lost loves to lost causes filled with stark gray portraits of Middle America, and the singer-songwriter at her most primitive and unproduced.

Her voice is a contradiction, both tormented and subtle. Songs like "Cold Comfort" and "Stillborn" set the tone: a ravaged and desolate landscape of loss, fear and redemption — a soundtrack of sorts for the downtrodden.

"There is lots of tenderness and vulnerability that has come out of me in this process," Shocked says. "I didn't know I was strong enough. But now I realize I have the strength and I don't have to send such a strong image to prove that. I can be loving and giving, too."

Surprising words from a woman who's made it through her share of hardship. As a teenager, she says, she ran away from home, spent time in an institution and lived in the beer-vat squats of San Francisco. A recording of Shocked, performing at a campfire in Kerrville, Texas, in 1986, filled with the sounds of crickets and passing trucks, went to No. 1 on the United Kingdom indie charts and led to a contract with Mercury Records. Her life went from bad to good almost overnight.

Five years and three albums later, things were not so good again: Shocked wanted out of her Mercury contract, she says. It

PREVIEW

Michelle Shocked

Opening act is Pony Stars. With the Casualties of Wah. 8:30 p.m. Sunday, \$15. Variety Playhouse, 1099 Euclid Ave. N.E. 404-249-6400.

was a tough time for her — fighting with her record company while trying to continue writing. But after it was all over, she had not only gotten out of her contract, she had something to show for the chaos, "Kind Hearted Woman."

Private Music, a smaller label, offered her more artistic control. Producer Bones Howe (Tom Waits) is the wizard behind Shocked's kinder and gentler sound.

"Bones is concerned with the dynamics of the album," Shocked says. "He wanted to capture what he calls 'the arc of the story' — a story that begins somber and ends with joy and resolution."

■ To hear Michelle Shocked, call 511, enter 8600, then access code 423.

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