

THE BEAT

Shocked finds new 'environment' for music

By **JOHN WIRT**
Entertainment writer

Michelle Shocked, singer-songwriter. Greenpeace, an activist environmental group locally famous for stringing a "Cancer Alley" banner across the Mississippi River Bridge.

Shocked and Greenpeace, while not the most likely of partners, have found common ground in Romeville, a poor, mostly black St. James Parish community near the site of Shintech Inc.'s proposed \$700 million polyvinyl chloride plant.

Shocked, a Texas native who's lived in New Orleans for the past few years, will play a Greenpeace benefit Feb. 27 at the Varsity Theatre. The show will feature the

**MICHELLE SHOCKED
AND THE ANOINTED EARLS**
Feb. 27 (10:30 p.m.)
Varsity Theatre

premiere of a music video for "Good News," a song inspired by the Romeville-Shintech controversy, seen as a national test case for the concept of environmental justice.

The singer's also calling her March residency tour a collaboration with Greenpeace. Bringing Louisiana and Greenpeace representatives along, Shocked will perform multi-night engagements in Washington, D.C., New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Baltimore, Md., and Cambridge, Mass.

The Greenpeace-Shocked alliance began with a Shocked concert in Washington, D.C. Some Greenpeacers, hearing the singer discuss her quest to reach a racially diverse audience within the severely formatted music business, saw a chance to land a celebrity spokeswoman.

"I just happened to have some fans who were with Greenpeace," Shocked said from New Orleans. "Because they saw my passion and commitment to the issue on a cultural level, they approached me and said they had an issue developing I might be interested in. They pitched it."

The issue was Shintech's plans to build in



Michelle Shocked

nents Melancon and West, Shocked was struck by what she called Greenpeace's sensitivity to area residents.

"They were very sensitive to what it means to be a community organizer," Shocked said, "that you've got to be empowered, you've got to find out for yourself in a lot of cases why the system doesn't work, rather than (Greenpeace) just going in there, fostering a dependency attitude, 'We're big and let us do it for you,' or even fostering cynicism. 'This is never gonna

working for us. You can pretty much put your finger on it whenever you hear a Texas musician. There is definitely a New Orleans feel that doesn't come to me naturally, but we're kissing cousins."

Following the release of *Kind Hearted Woman*, Shocked's dark, self-released 1994 album (re-released in 1996 by Private Music), her songs have brightened.

"I worked real hard," she said of *Kind Hearted Woman*, "to emphasize, yeah, life throws a lot of stuff your way, but you can

SHOWS TO WATCH:

ROCK



Feb. 27: *Star Drag-The Bayou*; **Michelle Shocked and the Anointed Earls**-Varsity Theatre; **Krush UK**-The Coterie; **Desire-Glen's Bombay Club**; **Blue Max-Nite Moves**; **Hom Gron-Library Joe's**; **Chris LeBlanc Band-Kokomo Lounge** (Prairieville);

Swoon-Thirsty Tiger; **House of Jacob-The Bengal**.

Feb. 28: **Alter Believes**-The Bayou; **Crosstown Traffic**-Daiquiri Cafe (Sherwood Blvd.); **Spank the Monkey**-The Coterie; **Chokin' Spanky**-Nite Moves; **Twobanger-Thirsty Tiger**; **Janus-Library Joe's**; **Leak/Slatline**-The Bengal.

March 1: **Spank the Monkey-Kokomo Lounge** (Prairieville).

March 2: **The Cramps/The Bomboras/The Amazing Royal Crowns**-Varsity Theatre; **Jack Black/Glenmount Popes**-Thirsty Tiger.

March 3: **Sister Hazel/Freddy Jones Band**-Varsity Theatre; **Crosstown Traffic**-The Coterie; **Chris LeBlanc Band**-The Station.

March 4: **Orange Pop Chicken**-The Bayou; **Chris LeBlanc Band**-Stanley's Kitchen and Tap.

March 5: **Gene Loves Jezebel**-The Bayou; **Nosmo King**-Nite Moves; **Chris LeBlanc Band**-The Vineyard; **Mexican Blues Cafe**-M's Fine and Mellow Cafe.

BLUES/RHYTHM AND BLUES

Feb. 27: **Run Jane Run**-Rick's Cafe; **Larry Garner-Phil Brady's**; **Rockin' Tabby Thomas/Special guest**-Tabby's Blues Box (through Feb. 28).

Feb. 28: **Big Luther Kent and the Trick Bag Horn Band**-Rick's Cafe; **Lil Hub and the Wheels**-Phil Brady's.

March 4: **Allison Collins**-Rick's Cafe; **Open mic jam session**-Tabby's Blues Box.

March 5: **Hart and Soul**-Rick's Cafe; **Blues jam**-Phil Brady's; **T.J. "Guitar" Black and the Blues All-Stars/Chris Thomas/The Mighty House Rockers**-Tabby's Blues Box.

VARIETY



Feb. 27: **Danny Maddie**-Country Tavern (8150 Plank Road - through Feb. 28); **Heavy Storm Band**-Apollo Blues Club; **Quantum Leap**-L.B.

Photo by Catherine Ledner

agency tour a collaboration with Greenpeace. Bringing Louisiana and Greenpeace representatives along, Shocked will perform multi-night engagements in Washington, D.C., New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Baltimore, Md., and Cambridge, Mass.

The Greenpeace-Shocked alliance began with a Shocked concert in Washington, D.C. Some Greenpeaceers, hearing the singer discuss her quest to reach a racially diverse audience within the severely formatted music business, saw a chance to land a celebrity spokeswoman.

"I just happened to have some fans who were with Greenpeace," Shocked said from New Orleans. "Because they saw my passion and commitment to the issue on a cultural level, they approached me and said they had an issue developing I might be interested in. They pitched it."

The issue was Shintech's plans to build in Convent, which includes the minority community of Romeville. Though Shocked had been anything but a Greenpeace fan in the past, she found environmental justice, a.k.a. environmental racism, complementary to her musical goals. Coincidentally, Shocked has roots in south Louisiana, her grandmother having lived in the river community of Smoke Bend.

"I just wanna put faces and stories to the issue," Shocked said. "I sat down and spoke with one of the (Convent) organizers, a woman named Pat Melancon (president of St. James Citizens for Jobs and the Environment). It was a delight talking to this woman. She was so efficient, she was so organized. It seemed like she was almost supercharged. I guess my job as an artist is creating archetypes out of reality, and she was quite an archetype."

On a more emotional level, Shocked was impressed with another Shintech opponent, Emelda West. "Good News," the title song to Shocked's new, limited edition album, was mostly inspired by the grass-roots activist.

"She was driving the van and we were going around looking at the site and she says 'Shintech, ye shall not build on this site! I take authority in the name of Jesus!' You just gotta love it. It inspired the direction that the song took for sure."

Besides her admiration for Shintech oppo-

Michelle Shocked

nents Melancon and West, Shocked was struck by what she called Greenpeace's sensitivity to area residents.

"They were very sensitive to what it means to be a community organizer," Shocked said, "that you've got to be empowered, you've got to find out for yourself in a lot of cases why the system doesn't work, rather than (Greenpeace) just going in there, fostering a dependency attitude, 'We're big and let us do it for you,' or even fostering cynicism, 'This is never gonna work, y'all are stupid for trying.'"

From the start, Shocked said, she had a romantic image of Convent, thanks to her roots in another south Louisiana river community.

"The romance that I had always grown up with was that my grandmother was from Smoke Bend, just around the bend from Donaldsonville. So it had that romance when I went to Convent, which is not too far from Donaldsonville. Looking at the town, it just seemed like it was like the wrong side of the tracks, where the black folk live. And because a lot of it was, and some of it still is, sugar cane, you knew that it was very much part of the sugar plantation economy from slavery times. Slavery's gone and, to some degree, the sugar plantations, but it still has the residue of all that history."

Convent and Shintech aside, Shocked's residency tour in March will be a trek into new musical directions. Besides breaking in a new band, the Anointed Earls, she's also looking for a new groove.

"It's real easy when you come from rock 'n' roll to try to get a crowd going with energy and spark. What I wanna learn is that slow build, where you're tapping your toe and swaying your hips before you even know it."

Since she and her husband, a journalist and fiction writer, moved to New Orleans, Shocked added, the city's indigenous music has seeped into her songwriting. Still, she retains her pride in being a native Texas musician.

"We've got a real natural shuffle groove

working for us. You can pretty much put your finger on it whenever you hear a Texas musician. There is definitely a New Orleans feel that doesn't come to me naturally, but we're kissing cousins."

Following the release of *Kind Hearted Woman*, Shocked's dark, self-released 1994 album (re-released in 1996 by Private Music), her songs have brightened.

"I worked real hard," she said of *Kind Hearted Woman*, "to emphasize, yeah, life throws a lot of stuff your way, but you can always transform it into something that encourages growth and change. Out of the 10 songs, seven of them deal with death. The only way I could get through it was to finally acknowledge death as a transformation as well."

Quite the contrary, Shocked's new album, *Good News* — only on sale at her concerts — is more the funky rhythm guitar and soul-singing record she'd intended to make before recording *Kind Hearted Woman*.

"Oh, yeah. I can't wait for sunshine."

The new album's title track, for instance, "is a nice marriage of real old heritage blues and slightly more contemporary groove, soulful, gospely influence. When I do finally settle in a musical direction, I'm hoping that it's gonna be more of a down-home feel. I'm a fuzzy slippers kind of gal. I can't really be too bothered with the latest fashions. I try my best to be in this decade, but when I ultimately think of a good time it's not about trying to impress anyone, it's about expressing my joy."

Down in New Orleans, the singer added, she "keeps a real low profile. I really appreciate New Orleans for all the obvious reasons, but the thing I appreciate the most is that nobody here really knows who the heck I am."

"My husband is a writer, and we were laughing recently because we heard that New Orleans produces more writers and less readers than anywhere else in this country. So, over time, that may have some sway in our decision (to stay in New Orleans), but now we are very happy here."

Photo by Catherine Ledner

BLUES/RHYTHM AND BLUES

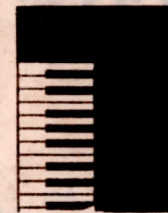
Feb. 27: Run Jane Run-Rick's Cafe; Larry Garner-Phil Brady's; Rockin' Tabby Thomas/Special guest-Tabby's Blues Box (through Feb. 28).

Feb. 28: Big Luther Kent and the Trick Bag Horn Band-Rick's Cafe; Lil Hub and the Wheels-Phil Brady's.

March 4: Allison Collins-Rick's Cafe; Open mic jam session-Tabby's Blues Box.

March 5: Hart and Soul-Rick's Cafe; Blues jam-Phil Brady's; T.J. "Guitar" Black and the Blues All-Stars/Chris Thomas/The Mighty House Rockers-Tabby's Blues Box.

VARIETY



Feb. 27: Danny Maddie-Country Tavern (8150 Plank Road - through Feb. 28); Heavy Storm Band-Apollo Blues Club; Quantum Leap-L.B. Kelly's; Liz Mixon and the Sole Crackers-Argosy Sports Bar (8 p.m.); Open mic with Lynn Anselmo-

Tony's; Van Broussard-Kabara (Gonzales); Susan Owens-LA Daiquiri; Van Broussard-Kabara II (Gonzales); Kid Mixon and the Southern Sons-Annabelle's; Rocky Saxon-Memories.

Feb. 28: Heavy Storm Band-Club Remi; Legacy-Argosy Sports Bar; Stormy-Casino Rouge; Henry Fraizer-Tony's; The Boomers-Satterfield's (New Roads); Kane Glaze and Coozan-Moonlight Inn (French Settlement); Sole Crackers-Kabara II (Gonzales); Dueces Wild-Annabelle's.

March 1: Bob Johnson Combo-Argosy Festival Atrium garden (11 a.m.); Cliff Nickens-Moonlight Inn (French Settlement); Triple Shot-Kabara II (Gonzales); Open mic with Kid Mixon-Annabelle's.

March 2: Rocky Saxon-Ricky's B's.

March 3: Rocky Saxon-Memories.

March 4: Showdown-Ricky B's (5 p.m.); Rocky Saxon-Tony's.

March 5: Danny Maddie-Country Tavern; Snazz-Kabara II (Gonzales); Rocky Saxon-Pedigo's Oyster Bar and Pub.

FOLK/ACOUSTIC

Feb. 27: Barry Lusted-Cortu Restaurant; Kirk Holder-Daiquiri Cafe (Lee Drive); Dexter and Jennifer Braud-Southdowns (7 p.m.); TKO-Outskirts Nightclub (Zachary); Debbie Landry-Chelsea's (Denham Springs).

Feb. 28: Todd Westbrook-Jumelles; Debbie Landry-Daiquiri Cafe (Lee Drive); Mike West and Myshkin-M's Fine and Mellow Cafe.

(Continued on Page 9)