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Success has not come easily for the resilient Michelle Shocked. MICHAEL DWYER speaks to the singer-songwriter.

MICHELLE SHOCKED can't remember if it's four or five times that she's visited Australia in the past 10 years. But she sure remembers the last time. "When you talk about things like death, you'd better be sure to throw a laugh or two in there," says the soft-spoken Arkansas singer.

"It was a necessity to do that show. Once you see this show it'll make more sense. It's like I've left all my cares and worries behind. But at least we know what they are," she says with a suitably carefree laugh.

Shocked's powerful shows at the Fly By Night Club in March 1995 painted a portrait of an artist of inspiring determination. The death of her grandmother, rejection by her record company and her subsequent refuge in Christianity informed a show which was low on knee-slapping, but loaded with the magic of a great storyteller and the strength of a woman in control of her destiny.

Her fifth album, *Kind Hearted Woman*, was on sale in the foyer after her record company, Mercury Records, refused to release it. The stalemate resulted in a hostile split which led the singer to all but abandon her old material for the 1995 tour.

"I've never started my own record label, I've never inked a distribution deal," Shocked says. "I've basically just sold my CDs at my concerts as a way of taking it directly to the people who have supported me all along."

"When I stood up to Mercury I really felt as if they thought their power was denying me access to my audience. By continuing to play live and sell my CDs at shows I pretty much flaunted that in their faces."

"They really do think the power comes from them when it really comes from the people who take your music into their hearts. They didn't know where the power lies, that's for sure."

Nevertheless, the row with Mercury took years out of an extraordinary artistic trajectory. Michelle Shocked's first four albums covered a range of traditional American forms, from southern folk to punk-blues to swinging jazz. Although her insistence on following her musical heart left her record company scratching their heads, it won her a rock solid cult following in Australia and elsewhere.

A greatest hits album, *Mercury Poise* (as close as they'd permit to *Poisoning*), set her free from her contract in 1996. You can bet that the album on sale in the foyer of the Fly By Night this weekend will reveal more confident artistic progress.

"We're calling what we do now an intimate dance party," Shocked says. "It's very groovy, very funky, very bluesy. It's a lot of fun but it's still got a lot of depth."

"The challenge now is that I've gone to all this effort, struggled to win the right to go in this musical direction so it can be disconcerting in the middle of a very groovy time to have someone holler out for an old campfire favourite."

"Now I'm starting to understand the problem of having been around for 10 years. You have different generations of audiences who expect different things from you."

"Somebody who's coming for the first time will be very delighted by what I'm currently doing. Someone who felt such an intimate bond with the campfire-type performance might feel left out. I hope not. I hope they hang with me. Believe me, I know what I'm doing."

■ Michelle Shocked and the Anointed Earls (bass player Jamie Brewer, drummer Cedric Anderson and guitarist Jubu Smith) play tonight and tomorrow at the Fly By Night Club in Fremantle.