

Rock review

Shocked socks 'em with diversity

By Rob Thomas*The Capital Times*

Michelle Shocked calls her backup band the Mood Swingers, and there may never be a more apt name for a group of musicians.

At the Regent St. Retreat's Annex on Wednesday night, the band whipsawed back and forth between all kinds of musical genres. Shocked seems to pride herself on her eclecticism, taking forays into folk, swing and bluegrass on her records. But her live show had all those, plus garage rock, reggae, gospel, Tejano, Celtic and even children's music.

It was a dizzying and mostly satisfying two hours of primarily new songs, the best of 30 tunes Shocked wrote in 30 days with guitarist Fiachna O'Braonain, formerly of Hothouse Flowers.

And what an odd and big-hearted batch of tunes came from that creative downpour. The opening tune, "Match Burn Twice," was a simmering reggae song that got much of the crowd moving. The follow-up song was much slower, its somewhat unimaginative music offset by lyrics that seem to express Shocked's musical credo: "I need nothing from you/I'm here because I want to be."

And after that came a truly bizarre but imaginative number in which, over a stirring blues line, Shocked told how she and a rabbit traded bodies one night. It was like someone jumped on stage at a poetry slam and read a bedtime story.

Other highlights included a terrific garage rocker about high school, "Survival of the Prettiest"; an uplifting gospel-inflected song called "If Not Here, Then

Michelle Shocked
Regent Street Retreat

Where?"; and a gritty little funk tune called "Croi en Laoch" ("Warrior's Heart").

Shocked made no attempt to chart emotional arc with her set list, and the stylistic leaps were occasionally jarring. Eventually, the audience learned to expect the unexpected and enjoy each song on its own merits. Shocked's singing voice sounded as good as ever and was an engaging presence onstage. She clearly sees uplifting and inspiring people as part of her mission as a musician and several times offered eloquent messages to those in the crowd who might be struggling.

Musically, she's found a solid counterpoint in O'Braonain, a ferociously effective guitar player. Shocked let her sidemen take lead vocals for several songs during the night, and O'Braonain's autobiographical "Boudreauxtown Marsh" was far and away the best.

Shocked probably really shocked some of her audience during the encore, when she sang passages from Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd . . .") and encouraged the audience to "open your heart." She was just taking her uplifting statements of before further, but it came across as somewhat preachy.

But that's Shocked, always exploring different nooks and crannies of music, always willing to fight and unafraid to express what she believes in. She didn't get her name by playing it safe.