

Populist views spur singer

POP/ROCK

Michelle Shocked

Where: Nassau Presbyterian Church, 61 Nassau St., Princeton, in the Annual Concert for Peace

When: 8 p.m., Saturday

How much: \$20-\$110. Call (609) 924-5022 or visit www.peacecoalition.org

What else: She also plays Maxwell's, 1039 Washington St., Hoboken, at 9 p.m., Wednesday. \$20. Call (201) 653-1703 or visit www.maxwellsnj.com

BY KAREN IRIS TUCKER
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

For a musician who has often merged art with politics in her 20-year career, it seems only fitting that singer-songwriter Michelle Shocked has been on the campaign trail stumping, singing and raising money for progressive presidential hopeful Dennis Kucinich.

"I call it 'entertaining the troops,'" says Shocked, 42, of her quest to help elect the Ohio congressman by engaging prospective voters through song. "All along, I've had a political agenda," she confides in her east Texas twang. "But talk about taking (the message) down smoothly, it's so sweet you almost don't know you're taking the medicine."

In keeping with her role as provocateur, the Los Angeles-based Shocked will play a benefit for the Peace Action Education Fund of the Coalition for Peace Action this Saturday at Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton. She also plays Maxwell's on Wednesday. In those gigs, she'll sample some of her vintage material, including songs from her third album, 1989's "Captain Swing," which she is reissuing next week with 16 previously unreleased tracks.

Shocked will also spice her set with the funk- and gospel-fueled rock of her most recent CD, "Deep Natural" from 2002. It's her best record to date, though it's likely you haven't heard it.

Since 1992, Shocked has had neither the funds nor the publicity machine that fueled her earlier, more commercially successful releases issued via corporate music conglomerate Polygram Records, with whom she signed in 1986.

It turns out Shocked, much like populist Kucinich, is no fan of big corporate structures. After heralding in the third wave of American folk music with such acts as Indigo Girls and Natalie Merchant, Shocked began switching styles, from her early skeletal acoustics to deep-rumbling blues to Big Band music and back. When Polygram finally balked at her refusal to pick a style and stick with it (preferably a commercially viable one), Shocked sued them successfully for the rights to her entire catalog; it was a process that took five years.

Shocked has since set up her own label, Mighty Sound, on which she is reissuing all her CDs with bonus tracks, among those, previously unpublished demos and live cuts.

"I've made a point of being a moving target," explains Shocked of the multiple mediums she's explored. "I knew that if I allowed myself to be put into a particular style of music, that my fortune would rise and fall on the fashion of that style."

Such genre-hopping has ultimately made Shocked a mercurial performer who moves easily between cuts such as "Anchorage," a toasty acoustic-pop narrative, to the full-band, brass sound of "That's So Amazing," which showcases Shocked's deep spirituality as a born-again Christian.

Even by her lonesome, with just an acoustic guitar, Shocked holds listeners rapt with a scrappy, muscular guitar style and open-hearted asides, many of which detail her formative years as a child in an impoverished fundamentalist Mormon family.

Recently, Shocked has noticed that the children of her original audience have been popping up in tandem with their parents.

"That's always been the promise," says Shocked. "If you build a career that isn't for the short-term of fame and fortune, but for the long-term of doing great work and taking creative risks, you get two generations of an audience to build on."

So what about her jones for social justice? Does the future hold a Gov. or Sen. Shocked? "Oh, I'm much better as an artist than an activist," she says, clearly tickled. "I just go where I'm needed."



Fans of singer Michelle Shocked can find her in Princeton and Hoboken this week.