

The Pantry Interview with Michelle Shocked

(another exclusive
WheatBread feature!)

- 4/14/96
- 21 Maywood St. Clark U., Worcester, MA
- In the pantry
- With Michelle Shocked, Bill Evans, Mike Rizzo
- Edited and transcribed by Mike Rizzo

On Cajun Roots:

"Just now I've been opening myself up to all this contemporary [music]. This single in New Orleans with these young brass bands [was] pretty amazing because musically they're not really proficient, but in terms of what the jazz tradition represents, they're right up the middle. They know exactly what the spirit is of that tradition. It's great. It's a vernacular tradition that makes me feel like I'm not the only one out there working in vernacular idioms... that wouldn't be just defined as like folk-singing kum-bai-ya kind-of-stuff... There are other forms of vernacular tradition.

"So it's great to be around that, because then I get to do something that departs from what they're doing but still lets me take my strength as a songwriter...I'm writing a lot of material inspired by the brass bands."

[Unfortunately, it seems that what's really commercially viable is not the vernacular.] "It's not. It's all pop. And that English [stuff]. I hate that! English elastica stuff you know...Everything refers to some record from some record collection. I despise that!" [Why?] "Just that it's not real. It's not living. It's dead culture and it's perpetuates culture dying too. It's like robbing graves... A lot of producers these days, I mean I even had the experience. They go back and they're trying to remake their record collection... If it's not "Blonde on Blonde," it's what's that one... I don't know... like even Liz Phair doing Stones' stuff... It's annoying to me.

"Vernacular to me means you know, you've had to find your own very unique, very curious kind of way of expressing yourself because you don't know no better, basically."

On Ani DiFranco:

"Yeah, I love her... I shouldn't... but I'd like to think that she got turned on to me pretty early on because this guy up in Buffalo... was actually bringing people from New York into Buffalo and he was teaching school, teaching kids. He's one of these beatnik hippie kind of guys, actually trying to poison and influence young minds. I think Ani one them..."

"Suzanne Vega had just gotten signed and it was that whole scene around '85. It was like a collective, a folk singer-songwriter collective... Yeah, I really relate and identify with [Ani]... I claim that woman as my little soul sister... I had even thought about contacting her and doing some kind of collaboration with her label... but they never really got back in touch with me. I thought it was a real lost opportunity... We finally met up last summer. It was in Lyons, Colorado. There was this little girl that had kind of glommed onto me, she was about 12 years-old... and her 8 year-old sister and we went up [to

Ani] and said, 'We are the Chinese delegation'... so we finally got to meet [her]."

On San Franciscan Roots:

"...I never felt like I had to play punk music. I just had to be a punk-go around drawing A's with a circle around it or something. I was a very serious student of how culture was created and how counterculture was created and how CC is generated and maintained and it seemed at a time when the political climate of the country was very interested in convincing me that that was dead, it was gone. That it no longer existed. It had been killed, stabbed in the heart, and that I was the last eskimo over the iceberg which I found to be a very lonely feeling.

"And yet I remain true. I couldn't deny what I'd experienced. Hanging out with the beatniks, hippies, and punks, I knew what that culture was about and what it could be...Even as the world moved into the late eighties, eeeeeewwwwww...I didn't want to do that thing of believing that the only alternative for me was being a yuppie...I mean I was a yuppie as I understand the term, which is that you're a young, upwardly mobile professional. Now I was doing professional kind of work, had a career and all that kind of stuff. But I couldn't deny what I'd seen and experienced when I was just vagabonding around. It was quite amazing, and I don't think I'll ever be quite so amazed now again.

"I've seen how predictable it was almost that then there was a punk revival. That the spirit of alternative, or grunge came through and then all this Indie stuff, and seeing it through the fashion victimization that it is. I don't think I'd ever be quite so naive again. It was a really easy time to believe that nothing was happening. But looking back...I was there at a critical threshold... When "Short, Sharp, Shocked" came out, the best understanding they had for what I did was Joan Baez or Joni Mitchell, but I knew very well that I was saying, Hardcore was alright... [but hardcore] really is fashion victimization, isn't it?"

"I admire Courtney Love in one respect for playing that game and fitting that stereotype, but ultimately, it is a stereotype. I would hate to be a cartoon of myself. I would hate it. There's only way to go with that. It's a dead street at some point... You had to play along with it being a boys' club. It really wasn't that satisfying as a female and later on, I started going to Circle Jerks concerts and actually getting kind of like this 'So you come here often?' It was like that whole heavy metal trip was trying to find a new focus and it kind of blended hardcore and metal and it was just like, 'You don't need me in this scene.' You all were doing fine without me, you don't need me.

"So then I was like, ok, well now it is a time to push a little more that woman agenda and for awhile it was almost like a backlash, because the only way you can get a break is to be a woman. For a while, it was like that. But I do

feel like it was so that [when] someone like Ani DiFranco comes along, and I feel I've been able to open doors for her. She's really true to herself. She has the nosering or the short hair, whatever, but she's not hung-up with the image of it. She just wants to have fun I guess..."

"She's done exactly the right thing. Taking it directly to the people and if the support is there, if it's real. Just do good work and, it's hard to believe in this day and age, it'll count for something..."

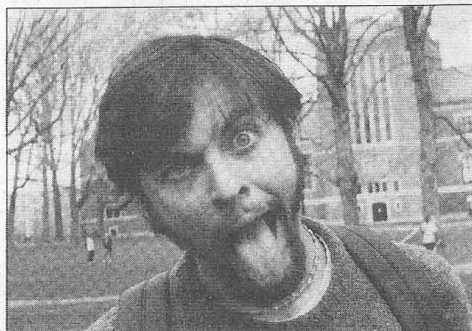
"There's still that romance and idealism that just by wanting to stand up and, What's that—Rage Against the Machine, it inspires people because everybody in that in their life in one way or the other. Art is one way you have the forum. You have the voice. You have the means simply to express the reality of it. Rather than that insanity I was describing. Like, 'This is a Cold War, but people are dying from bullets...' It's like, 'Godammit! This isn't a cold war at all!...We're selling weapons to Iran so we can buy drugs from South America and bring them here and get all our dissidents stoned, and then take that money and buy weapons...'"

On Personal Revolution:

"If I had to choose, I would have my own bus. See, that tells you a lot about me, if I had a choice between making records and having a studio or putting my money into having a bus so that I could go out on the road and not have to rent a bus every time I go out [on the road]. I would put my money on a bus..."

"I don't like records. I write songs so I make records and sell them. To me, they're a side-effect of making music. What's important to me is the vision. And I really identify with more than I was speaking to tonight. I don't feel any different [from anyone else]. I feel the kind of personal struggles, the insecurities, the uncertainties, the unsettling things I experienced, I believe everyone in their own way experiences.

"So for me, it's coming down more of a spiritual quest... To not be the kind of person that would steal your yogurt out of the refrigerator [ed. note: reference to Jello Biafra]... which is what happened to the hippies. They finally got so sick and burned out, they were like, 'You can't change the world, you have to change yourself.'"



Mike Rizzo, crack interviewer, transcriber, and scholar, reacts to the news that WheatBread bought the rights to his Michelle Shocked interview.