

Singer Finds Faith Through Gospel Music

Michelle Shocked began visiting a Pentecostal church for its choir, but experienced a profound spiritual awakening

A simple yet powerful quote by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. changed the life of alternative-folk, rock and blues singer Michelle Shocked and ultimately led her into the arms of Jesus Christ.

King, during a speech at Western Michigan University in 1963, said 11 a.m. Sunday is the most segregated hour in America. "When I read [King's quote], I was struck to my core because I realized although Christianity professes to be the gospel of love, the people who profess that can't even come together as brothers and sisters," she said.

"So I decided to attend the West Angeles Church of God in Christ, not just because it's a large African-American denomination, but also because it has a reputable choir."

The self-described one-time punk feminist felt drawn to the 24,000-member Pentecostal church in South Los Angeles. She told herself she planned to research the roots of American musical traditions and follow the trail of rock 'n' roll back to blues, soul and gospel music. She had a spiritual awakening after listening to the church's gospel choir.

Now, 17 years later, the Academy Award winner realizes that the activism of her youth and her music, which led to a quick rise to fame and celebrity in the late 1980s and early 1990s with *Short Sharp Shocked* and other albums, was part of her search to fill a spiritual hunger. "I tried to substitute political activism for my own spiritual nature, but finally with maturity I was able to acknowledge that God had placed this spiritual nature inside of me," Shocked said. "He lets us

come to Him in our own time and in our own way.”

Today Shocked sings in West Angeles’ choir and recently released her first gospel album, *ToHeavenURide*, which was recorded live at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival in 2003. The album features two songs by one of her greatest influences, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, an African-American singer and guitarist whose gospel songs were among the first to cross over to secular audiences.

Church of God in Christ Bishop Charles E. Blake, pastor of West Angeles, said Shocked came to the church in an unassuming, quiet way and joined the choir. “It was only later that we came to realize she was a very renowned singer and musician,” Blake said.

“She invited me to one of her concerts. It was only then I understood the magnitude of the person. I look forward to her album, knowing it will be a blessing to the Christian community. She has succeeded and sold hundreds of thousands of records in the secular world and now, as a Christian and lover of the Lord, that she would do this in the service of our King is something I’m so very happy about.”

Raised in a strict Mormon household in the swamplands of east Texas, Shocked rebelled, running away at age 16 to live with her hippie-atheist father.

Later, with a degree in literature from the University of Texas at Austin in one hand and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* in the other, Shocked headed west to California, becoming a singer and political activist whose photo struggling with police at the 1984 Democratic National Convention landed on the front page of the *San Francisco Examiner*.

She hitchhiked throughout Europe and then returned to the United States. She played some songs at the Kerrville Folk Festival that were secretly recorded by a journalist and record producer, who released the recording as the Texas

Campfire Tapes. It became a hit on the BBC and ignited her musical career.

Leery of her newfound fame, Shocked chose to use it to further her political activism, championing against homelessness and advocating for environmental and global justice movements. After several hit albums, including Captain Swing in 1989 and Arkansas Traveler in 1992, Shocked began exploring gospel traditions while attending West Angeles. She got married the same year and began drinking “to put up with his drinking.”

In 2002 she gave up alcohol, and the couple divorced the following year. Since then, Shocked says she has drawn closer to Jesus. In her ToHeavenURide manifesto, Shocked said: “[One] white girl attending a black church wasn’t going to change the world or anything, right?”

“I was just going to check out the gospel choir, ya know? ... Years later, on top of another mountain, the Holy Spirit erupted. And now here I am bringing it home to you.”