





# PATTI SMITH



BY JAAN UHELSZKI

**P**atti Smith isn't like the rest of us. Blame it on the childhood bout with scarlet fever that left her with recurring hallucinations a few years after her birth, in 1946. Or perhaps on her family's diffident view of faith. "They were open-minded people," she once said. "They had interests that ranged from horse racing to religion to UFOs," causing Smith to pursue religion for most of her childhood – but never catch it. "I started out as a missionary, but I couldn't find a religion that didn't promise things to some people to the exclusion of others. The personal voyage into some kind of light shouldn't be denied to anybody."

So Smith started her own religion, without a true plan to do so, improvising as she went along, opening herself up to the spirit that moved within her. "One could debate endlessly about where that comes from: the air, mass consciousness, subconscious, collective memory, but these things can be accessed at times through performance," she has said. "I do it within rock & roll, but other people do it in religious ceremonies."

Since the 1970s, Smith has been collecting like-minded devotees with her unexpected mix of art, culture, and rage. She reminds us that there are both solace and liberation in language, something she made material when she put her own stamp on Van Morrison's "Gloria" by uttering what would become some of the most famous words in rock: "Jesus died for somebody's sins . . . but not mine." She led us to the edge of hope, then drew us back into the light with songs full of sedition and will: calls to action, really, that demanded a response from her audiences. Thirty years later, they still do.

Early on, Smith's holy trinity became Dylan, the Rolling Stones, and Jim Morrison, with Anna Magnani embodying the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. Later, the visionary poetry of Arthur Rimbaud enflamed her, adding more exploding sparks to the

pyre of her imagination, forging her first a poet, then a rock star, and sometimes a painter, like a female Picasso during his blue period.

The move to music was neither haphazard nor accidental. It was a way of more effectively spreading the Word, her way – or as she described it: "three-chord rock merged with the power of the word." "I got into letters, words, the rhythm of certain words together, and gradually started writing poems that were songs because of my obsession with rhythm," she later recalled.

Patti Smith has always been a woman with obsessions. After a brief stint at a factory (the brutal experience documented in the lyrics of her first single, "Piss Factory"), followed by two years at New Jersey's Glassboro State College, she moved to New York City. She intended to become an artist's mistress, or so she later claimed. The artist who captured her fancy was a young art student and burgeoning photographer, Robert Mapplethorpe, whom she met while working at a bookstore in 1967. After their serendipitous meeting, instead of just becoming a muse, she drew and painted, spending a few months in Paris with her sister. When she returned to New York, she moved into the fabled Chelsea Hotel with Mapplethorpe. While the union didn't last, they remained close until his death, in 1989. (In fact, it was Mapplethorpe who financed the recording of "Piss Factory," as well as taking the cover photo of Smith for *Horses*, a picture inspired by a self-portrait by German mathematician-cum-painter Albrecht Dürer in 1500.)

Gradually, Smith put down her paints and sculpting tools to spend more time writing poetry, as well as collaborating on the play *Cowboy Mouth* with Sam Shepard. She started penning swashbuckling rock criticism for the pages of *Creem* and *Rolling Stone*. While her writing was revelatory, strangely erotic, and decidedly exotic, she wasn't destined to be constrained to the page. Her art demanded a bigger





Lenny Kaye and Smith, 1977; Patti celebrates with her brother, Todd; Sam Shepard and Smith at the Chelsea Hotel.

audience; she began acting in underground theater, all the while becoming more and more distinguished on the poetry circuit.

But the cataclysmic collision of high and low art occurred in 1971, when Smith decided to take her first tentative steps onto the minuscule stage at the St. Mark's Poetry Project, persuading rock critic and record-store clerk Lenny Kaye to provide a rather deconstructed musical backdrop to her feverish poetry. More a "happening" than a true concert, that night at St. Mark's Church left an indelible mark on Smith's psyche. Between 1971 and 1974, with increasingly impassioned readings, she refined the process

and expanded her accompaniment, recruiting keyboardist Richard Sohl, a second guitarist, Ivan Kral, and drummer Jay Dee Daugherty, creating the proto version of the Patti Smith Group.

It wasn't as if she didn't give fair warning: Her poetry had always been rock incantations – haunted by the ghosts of Brian Jones and Jim Morrison – rather than strict iambic pentameter, and she had already cowritten songs for then inamorato Allen Lanier's Blue Öyster Cult, such as "Baby Ice Dog," "Career of Evil," "Debbie Denise," and "The Revenge of Vera Gemini" (the latter of which she sang on the BÖC's *Agents of Fortune*).



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Patti Smith Group: Kaye, Jay Dee Daugherty, Smith, Ivan Kral, and Richard Sohl (from left); Smith meets Dylan, Other End, 1975; Fred and Patti Smith, 1988; Smith and the Easter cover, Hollywood, 1978.



It was only a matter of time before she made her own records, releasing her John Cale-produced debut album, *Horses*, in 1975, a year before the official birthday of punk rock. In hindsight, it's clear that this incendiary album was one of the sparks that ignited the movement, with its incantations of alienation, inequity, and exile, despite the fact that some of the songs run longer than nine minutes. Then more poetess than singer, with three volumes of verse already published, Smith had a shrill and confrontational rage that cut like a serrated blade through the uncertain world of post-Watergate politics, the fall of Saigon, and the bloated landscape of arena rock. Her extended diatribes and song suites, such as "Birdland" and "Land," pulsed with sedition and willfulness.

Following *Horses*, Smith released an album nearly every year – the experimental *Radio Ethiopia* (1976), the bitter-sweet *Easter* (1978), and the spiritually imbued *Wave* (1979) – despite a near-fatal accident when she plummeted from a Florida stage and injured her neck and back in January 1977. Her first four albums have influenced musicians as diverse as Michael Stipe, Courtney Love, Bono, PJ Harvey, and Jeff Buckley. While she always claimed she was "beyond gender and outside of society," she did much for the women's movement by showing that she could rock as hard as any man, spitting out her vituperative lyrical missives that rivaled anything Dylan ever scribbled on the back of a cocktail napkin.

At the very apex of her fame, with a Top Twenty album (*Easter*) yielding the Number Thirteen hit "Because the Night," cowritten with Bruce Springsteen, Smith decided to pursue another sort of dream. Following *Wave*, she married MC5 guitar avatar Fred "Sonic" Smith, planting her always too thin legs into the fertile Michigan soil. Smith then took herself off the radar – and consequently off the charts, pouring her prodigious talents into family life and, unlike Mick Jagger, deriving *much* satisfaction from watching her TV, when a man comes on and tells her how white her shirts can be. Smith discovered not only Zen and the art of laundry but the uncommon and simple joy of motherhood, giving birth to a son, Jackson, and daughter, Jesse, something she claims made her a better person.

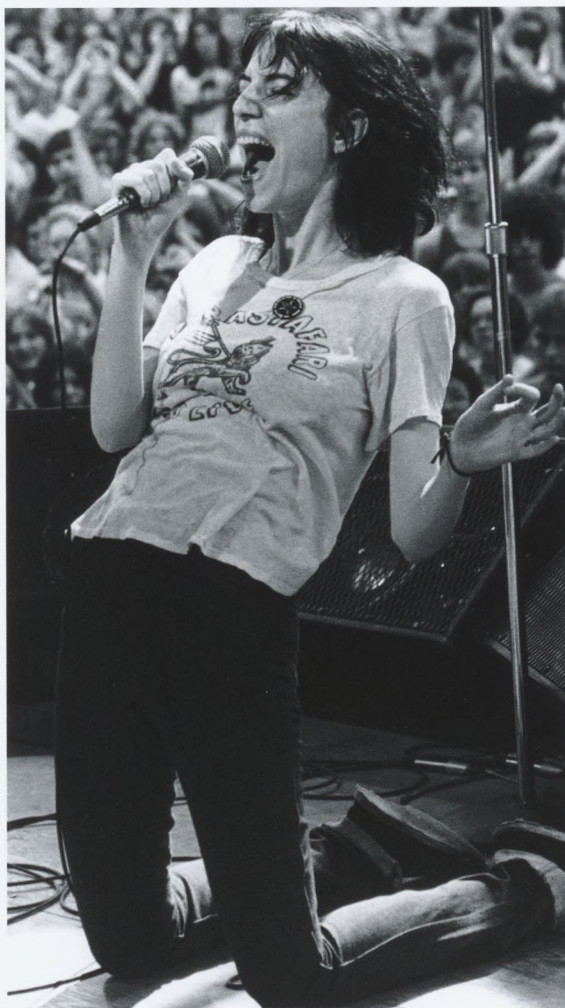
She made no apologies for abandoning the spotlight and had no regret for her self-imposed exile from show business. "Fred was a very private man," she later related. "I was just living as a citizen. I had resumed a citizen's life. Taking care of my home, and taking care of my children. But I was writing and working every day. I was studying, and continuing my work. I didn't turn into a domestic cow or anything. I did the work I had to do, and spent every leisure moment either studying or working."

The couple watched golf, Fred gave her guitar lessons, and they wrote songs together for 1988's *Dream of Life*, a different kind of musical document than what she had unleashed during her first decade. This album of love songs, gentle lullabies, and political missives – especially the anthemic "People Have the Power," which the two wrote while she was doing the dinner dishes – combined his White Panther polemics with her own revolutionary spirit, giving a clear-eyed vision of the future.

But the dream turned dark in 1994, when Fred Smith succumbed to a heart attack and her beloved brother, Todd, died six months later of a similar coronary ailment. After a



Smith backstage at the Roundhouse, London, May 1975



Smith at Central Park, 1976





Smith, around the time of 1988's *Dream of Life*

period of desolation, at the urging of friends like Allen Ginsberg, Bob Neuwirth, and Michael Stipe, Smith returned to what she knew best: being creative. She penned tentative poems, painted and took pictures, and, at the behest of Stipe, began planning to record. She collaborated with Stipe on "E-Bow the Letter," a song on R.E.M.'s *New Adventures in Hi-Fi*. She performed live with the band, did a short tour with Bob Dylan in 1995, and then it was time to get back to her own work.

In 1996 she reunited with Lenny Kaye and Jay Dee Daugherty and recorded the elegiac *Gone Again*. Her close friend

and keyboardist Richard Sohl had died in 1991; rather than hire a new piano player, Smith added guitarist Tom Verlaine, bassist Tony Shanahan, and Oliver Ray on guitar; Kral had returned to his native Czech Republic. Not unexpectedly, grief and loss and eventual redemption hang over *Gone Again*, as she honors her lost friends and family, including Kurt Cobain in "About a Boy." But it's not a document of self-indulgent pain and melancholy. Instead, it's a stately yet optimistic work, signaling not a comeback but an artistic rebirth, and a rededication to her *Peace and Noise*, as her 1997 album announced.

"As long as I can remember, service has been important to me," Smith said in 1999. "That's my initial, 'PS,' Public Service. I just know that our band is always conscious of being in the moment, that I try to engage people in the moment, and I think of performance as a mutual responsibility, and we're all deeply concentrating – there is some of that Vulcan mind meld. I have a responsible streak in me from being the oldest of four children. I think it's part of my nature. I can't always say that I always exercised it. Nor did I want to exercise it. I wasn't interested in my responsibilities when I wrote the lyrics to 'Gloria.' I was exercising my right to be free. The freedom of choice."

In 2004 Patti Smith released *Trampin'*, which included several songs about motherhood, some in tribute to her mother, who died in 2002, the others a celebration of the role. And it was something worth celebrating, especially considering the stellar job she did raising her children. Perhaps one of the greatest testaments to her success is not being made a Commander of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government's Minister of Culture, as she was in 2005, or tonight's induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. If you ask Smith, it might just be the Fender DuoSonic that her son, Jackson, a guitarist himself, gave her three years ago on Mother's Day. ☒



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: Patti Smith and Lenny Kaye say goodbye to CBGB, October 15, 2006.



