**Patti Smith - bio**



Punk rock's poet laureate, **Patti Smith** ranks among the most influential female rock & rollers of all time. Ambitious, unconventional, and challenging, **Smith**'s music was hailed as the most exciting fusion of rock and poetry since **Bob Dylan**'s heyday. If that hybrid remained distinctly uncommercial for much of her career, it wasn't a statement against accessibility so much as the simple fact that **Smith** followed her own muse wherever it took her, from structured rock songs to free-form experimentalism, or even completely out of music at times. Her most avant-garde outings drew a sense of improvisation and interplay from free jazz, though they remained firmly rooted in noisy, primitive three-chord rock & roll.

She was a powerful concert presence, singing and chanting her lyrics in an untrained but expressive voice, whirling around the stage like an ecstatic shaman delivering incantations. A regular at **CBGB**'s during the early days of New York punk, she was the first artist of the bunch to land a record deal and release an album, even beating the **Ramones** to the punch. The artiness and the amateurish musicianship of her work both had a major impact on the punk movement, whether in New York or England, whether among her contemporaries (**Television**, **Richard Hell**) or followers. What was more, **Smith** became an icon to subsequent generations of female rockers.

She never relied on sex appeal for her success, she was unabashedly intellectual and creatively uncompromising, and her appearance was usually lean, hard, and androgynous. She also never made an issue of her gender, calling attention to herself as an artist, not a woman; she simply dressed and performed in the spirit of her aggressive, male rock role models, as if no alternative had ever occurred to her. In the process, she obliterated the expectations of what was possible for women in rock, and stretched the boundaries of how artists of any gender could express themselves.

**Smith** was born in Chicago on December 30, 1946; her parents moved to Philadelphia when she was three, and then to the nearby, less urban town of Woodbury, NJ, when she was nine. Something of an outcast in high school, she found salvation in the poetry of **Arthur Rimbaud**, the writings of the Beats, and the music of soul and rock artists like **James Brown**, the **Rolling Stones**, the **Doors**, and especially **Bob Dylan**. She attended the **Glassboro State Teachers College**, but dropped out due to an unplanned pregnancy. She gave the baby up for adoption and took a job on a factory assembly line, thus saving enough money to move to New York City in 1967. She worked in a bookstore and met art student/future photographer **Robert Mapplethorpe**, who became her lover despite living most of his adult life as a homosexual. In 1969, **Smith** went to Paris with her sister, busking on the streets as a performance artist. Upon her return, she moved into the **Chelsea Hotel** with **Mapplethorpe** for a brief period, then became involved with underground theater, not to mention playwright **Sam Shepard**; she co-authored and co-starred with him in the somewhat autobiographical play **'Cowboy Mouth'** in 1971.

During this time, she was also working on her poetry, and met guitarist **Lenny Kaye**, also a Bleecker Street record store clerk and rock critic. **Kaye** had written a magazine essay on doo wop that impressed **Smith**, and the two found that they shared a love of early and obscure rock & roll. When **Smith** gave a public poetry reading at **St. Mark's Church** in February 1971, she invited **Kaye** to accompany her on the electric guitar for three pieces.

Over the next two years, **Smith** continued to perform in plays and poetry readings; she also wrote for several rock magazines, published two volumes of her poems, and began contributing lyrics to the literary-minded metal band **Blue Oyster Cult**. She and **Kaye** performed again in late 1973, and their partnership grew into a much more regular occurrence. The following year, they added pianist/keyboardist **Richard Sohl**, and their performances grew into unique blends of Beat-influenced poetry, improvised spoken word with equally spontaneous musical backing, and covers of rock & roll oldies. Regular gigs around New York cemented their growing reputation, and in June 1974, with **Mapplethorpe** paying for studio time, the band cut a groundbreaking independent single, **'Hey Joe'** b/w **'Piss Factory'**. The former added a monologue about **Patty Hearst**, while the latter recounted **Smith**'s stint as an assembly line worker in vivid detail, incorporating lyrical snippets from the rock records in which she took solace. Both songs featured **Television** guitarist **Tom Verlaine**, who briefly became **Smith**'s lover, and along with **Television**'s own **'Little Johnny Jewel'**, the single helped kickstart the independent, do-it-yourself aesthetic that remains punk rock's hallmark even today.

In late 1974, **Smith** and her band played a few gigs on the West Coast. When they returned, they added guitarist/bassist **Ivan Kral** to flesh out their sound, and joined **Television** as part of the emerging new-rock scene at **CBGB**'s, a dive bar in the Bowery. Their two-month stand in early 1975 sometimes featured drummer **Jay Dee Daugherty**, who became a regular member, and attracted the notice of **Arista Records** president **Clive Davis**, who offered **Smith** a record deal. She entered the studio with ex-**Velvet Underground** member **John Cale** serving as producer, and in late 1975 released her debut album, **'Horses'**, which was essentially the first art-punk album. Rapturously received by most critics, **'Horses'** offered unorthodox covers of party-rock tunes like **'Gloria'** and **'Land of 1000 Dances'** (**Smith** opened the former with the declaration *"Jesus died for someone's sins, but not mine"*), as well as a mix of original songs and lengthy, improv-driven spoken word pieces. Despite nonexistent airplay, it sold well enough to climb into the **Top 50**.

The 1976 follow-up, **'Radio Ethiopia'**, was credited to the **Patti Smith Group**, and placed some of **Smith**'s most straightforward rock songs (**'Ask the Angels'**, **'Pumping [My Heart]'**) directly alongside some of her most experimental, free-form pieces (the title track). In early 1977, **Smith** was performing in Tampa, FL, when she twirled herself right off the stage; she broke two vertebrae in her neck and was forced to take some time off to recuperate. During that period, she wrote a book of poetry titled **'Babel'**. She returned to recording in 1978 with **'Easter'**, a more accessible nod in the direction of album rock radio, which featured **Smith**'s writing collaboration with **Bruce Springsteen**, **'Because the Night'** The ballad climbed to **#13** on the pop charts and sent **'Easter'** into the **Top 20**; plus, **10,000 Maniacs**' 1993 cover of **'Because the Night'** became their biggest pop hit and made the song something of a standard for the **Lilith Fair** generation. **'Easter'** also contained **Smith**'s most notorious cut, **'Rock n Roll Nigger'**, which attempted to redefine the term as a badge of honor for anyone who lived outside the establishment. Some critics roasted her for the conceit in the ensuing controversy, but the song achieved a measure of redemption when it was included on the **'Natural Born Killers'** soundtrack in 1994.

1979's **'Wave'** found **Smith**'s sound becoming increasingly polished, thanks in part to new producer **Todd Rundgren**; however, many reviewers found it her least developed set of material. **Smith** had been living with **Blue Oyster Cult** keyboardist **Allen Lanier** for some time, but now took up with **MC5** / **Sonic's Rendezvous Band** guitarist **Fred *"Sonic"* Smith**; indeed, **Wave**'s **'Dancing Barefoot'** and **'Frederick'** were both dedicated to him. The couple married in 1980, and **Smith** retired to a life of domesticity near Detroit, raising two children with her husband. In 1988, **Smith** re-emerged for a one-off album, **'Dream of Life'**, on which **Fred** co-wrote all the material and also played guitar, with backing by **Smith Group** members **Sohl** and **Daugherty**. However, it wasn't intended to establish a full-fledged comeback, and **Smith** disappeared from music again following its release. She continued to write, however, completing a poetry collection called **'Woolgathering'** (among other projects), and gave occasional readings.

Sadly, in the span of a few years, **Smith** lost some of her closest associates: longtime friend and album-cover photographer **Robert Mapplethorpe** died in 1989, followed a year later by pianist **Richard Sohl**. At the end of 1994, both her husband and her brother **Todd** died of heart failure, within a month of one another. A grief-stricken **Smith** returned to performing as a means of therapy, and re-formed the **Patti Smith Group**, with **Kaye**, **Daugherty**, and new bassist **Tony Shanahan**, for a few small-scale tours aimed at reconnecting with her audience and reorienting herself to the concert stage. In 1996, the group entered the studio and recorded **'Gone Again'**, which featured a new second guitarist in **Oliver Ray** and guest spots from **Tom Verlaine**, **John Cale**, and **Jeff Buckley**. **'Gone Again'** took a stronger, more optimistic tone than might have been expected, and was well received by many critics. Following closely on its heels, **'Peace and Noise'** appeared in 1997 and earned a **Grammy** nomination for the track **'1959'**; a much darker affair than its predecessor, it took into account the deaths of two more of **Smith**'s inspirations, **Allen Ginsberg** and **William S. Burroughs**. **Smith** returned in 2000 with **'Gung Ho'**, the most aggressive-sounding and socially conscious album of her comeback; the song **'Glitter in Their Eyes'** also earned her a second **Grammy** nomination.

**Smith** and **Arista** parted ways in 2002, with the label issuing **'Land (1975-2002)'**, a double-disc compilation of hits and rarities, as a wrap-up. **Smith** subsequently signed with **Columbia**. Her first album for the label, **'Trampin'**, appeared in spring 2004. **'Horses'** received the deluxe two-CD treatment in 2005 when it was reissued by **Arista** in a **30th Anniversary Legacy Edition**. On March 12, 2007, **Smith** was inducted into the **'Rock and Roll Hall of Fame'** alongside **Van Halen**, **The Ronettes**, **Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five**, and **R.E.M.**. She released an album of typically eclectic covers, **'Twelve'**, that same year.

by **Steve Huey**.

Photo by **Feria**