

Music

## Being Patti Smith

by Allyson Polsky McCabe

When Patti Smith arrived in New York in the summer of '67, she was self-consciously outside society. She slept in graveyards, shacked up with Robert Mapplethorpe at the Chelsea, and shamelessly pilfered art supplies to nurture Mapplethorpe's creative spirit. Mapplethorpe returned the favor by encouraging Smith's poetry and song, and calibrating her androgynous image with his now-iconic album portraits.

Always a formidable stage presence, Smith spat, sneered, screamed, and sweated her way to the top. But behind that facade was the conventional woman who was squeamish about Mapplethorpe's nipple-piercing and probably never touched any drug more potent than an occasional joint. Mapplethorpe openly explored homosexuality, sadomasochism, and occasionally hustling. Smith, a serial monogamist, eventually turned her back on the gritty, experimental downtown scene to become a housewife and stay-at-home mother.

Smith has since said that her 16 years in suburban Detroit with Fred "Sonic" Smith were her most artistically productive, and the musician who re-emerged in New York following her husband's 1994 death was in many ways more adept. But her early return-appearances to the stage, orchestrated with the help of influential friends like Bob Dylan and Michael Stipe, were wobbly affairs. A tentative Smith often forgot the words, lost her place, and went on tirades about whatever cause happened to move her. Smith's new songs were no longer menacing, jagged, or hungry, but framed by incantations and haunted by the loss of Mapplethorpe and Fred Smith; her brother, Todd; and her longtime pianist, Richard Sohl. She found her former mojo only



Photo: Steven Sebring.

by resurrecting her back catalogue and her old punk-poet persona.

As if to counterbalance the emotional weight of her 1996 comeback album *Gone Again*, Smith also released the *Patti Smith Masters*, a limited-edition CD box set of her first five albums, digitally remastered and with original cover art and liner notes. Smith's next two albums, 1997's *Peace and Noise* and 2000's *Gung Ho*, were elegiac, political, and, from a commercial standpoint, bombs. In 2002 she rebounded with another career retrospective, *Land*, then an album of original material, 2004's *Trampin'*. When the latter failed to crack the *Billboard* 100, Smith followed with a better-performing album of canonical rock covers—2007's *Twelve*. She hasn't released any albums of original material since.

Though Smith's return to recording has been mixed, she has been working hard to establish her legacy. After years of unsuccessful nominations, she was finally inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007. In 2009, PBS broadcast *Patti Smith: Dream of Life*, a documentary filmed over 11 years by the fashion photographer Steven Sebring, which chronicled her triumphant return to public life. A small tour and art exhibition followed, then a major promotional blitz for *Just Kids*, her memoir of Mapplethorpe and late-'60s New York, published in early 2010.

Following the book's publication, rumors swirled that a new record was in the works, slated for release in early 2011. Smith actively contributed to the hype by explaining to reporters that she was inspired in part by St. Francis of Assisi, a visit to poet Dylan Thomas's home, and *The Master and Margarita*, an acclaimed anti-Soviet novel written in the 1930s by Russian author Mikhail Bulgakov.

Smith has since explained that *Just Kids*, which won last year's National Book Award, has waylaid that project. Yet she has managed to find the time to maintain an ambitious worldwide performance schedule, work on a forthcoming detective novel, put in a guest appearance on *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, and begin adapting *Just Kids* for the screen with collaborator John Logan, a Tony Award-winning playwright. She has also picked up Sweden's prestigious Polar Music Prize and made this year's *Time* 100 list.

In place of Smith's anticipated album, Sony Legacy released another greatest-hits collection in late August. *Outside Society* contains no new material, and its highly publicized liner notes and personal recollections barely pass as tweets. The compilation could easily be dismissed as a shameless publicity grab if it didn't suggest that Smith has reached a more troubling creative stalemate.

While the boomer nostalgia market is potentially lucrative, if she doesn't figure out a way to stay raw and relevant, Smith risks becoming the darling of the 92nd Street Y crowd: an accolade-collector reduced to reminiscing about the good old days and her beloved collection of ancient 45s. I don't know how she can avoid this trap, which is itself the price of aging, but I think a clue can be

found in her rendition of “Are You Experienced?” on *Twelve*. Twenty-five-year-old Jimi Hendrix recorded this song as a generational anthem, all fuzz and distortion, a salute to free love and the psychedelic drug scene. Two years later he was dead.

Smith, in contrast, strips the song down to a sexual provocation, frank and direct—powerful stuff coming from a woman now well into her 60s, who has survived many summers of love and riots and avoided many of rock’s most deadly clichés. For her next act, Smith needs to show us she’s still alive and kicking—not necessarily stoned but beautiful.

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