

“Horses”—Patti Smith (1975)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original album



Original label



John Cale

She's known as the high priestess of punk and the poet laureate of rock. Patti Smith is also a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the winner of a National Book Award for her autobiographical “Just Kids” from 2010. Her emergence as one of music's most iconoclastic and revered artists began with her 1975 album “Horses” and its literary, poetic, loud, radical, angst-ridden, searching, screeching, pounding and passionate approach to the art of rock and roll.

Despite her persona—actually more forced on her by the public than necessarily created by the woman herself—Smith did not have a clichéd rock ‘n’ roll rebel upbringing. Born in Chicago, she was raised in Deptford Township, New Jersey. She comes from a stable, lower-middle class home and received a good—largely religiously-based—education. She graduated from high school in 1964. Afterward she went to work in a local factory (the inspiration for her fractious 1974 song “Piss Factory”) though she had previously entertained dreams of becoming a high school art teacher.

Later, around 1967, continuing her youthful obsession with poetry, spoken word performance and R&B music, Smith headed to Manhattan vaguely following a dream of achieving success as a poet or artist. Not long after, a chance meeting with another struggling creator, photographer and painter Robert Mapplethorpe, would forever alter both their lives.

Romantically involved for a time, the two served as lifelong friends and mutual muses. While Mapplethorpe worked in paint and sculpture before turning to photography with the aid of a cheaply-bought Polaroid camera, Smith churned out original poems and became entrenched with the underground art scene, dabbling in music, theatre, film and early examples of performance art. Though Smith worked in a bookstore, the artistic duo lived a mostly hand-to-mouth existence, the penitence to be paid for following their mutual artistic paths.

With time, Smith's exploration into music moved to the fore. Smith held her first concert, a poetry reading augmented with rock guitar (and harkening back to the days of smoky coffee houses and the great beat poet), on February 10, 1971. There she debuted her poem “Oath” and its galvanizing opening line of “Jesus died for somebody's sins...but not mine.”

Always possessing the look of rock as well as its sensibility, Smith became more ingratiated into the music world via a series of working partnerships with Todd Rundgren, the group Television and various other musicians. Slowly, they and others began putting the New York nightspot of CBGB's on the map as the birthplace and Mecca for an aggressive new rock form known as punk. In time, Smith began fronting her own four-man backing band which included guitarists Lenny Kaye and Ivan Kral, drummer Jay Dee Daugherty, and pianist Richard Sohl.

Smith's local notoriety and CBGB's connections eventually brought her to the attention of John Cale, formerly of the Velvet Underground. He would produce Smith's first album, "Horses" released by Arista Records in 1975. The album's stark black and white cover photo (taken by Mapplethorpe) of a decidedly un-vampy, un-glamorized, androgynous-looking Smith bespoke of the album's interior; this was a disc that was uncompromising in its subject matter and its performance. Smith's voice is almost remarkably non-musical. There's little melody there. Yet she delivers her lyrics with an articulate, diction-heavy, venomous spit that few others at the time—or since—could ever hoped to approach.

Beneath her vivid imagery and piercing, declarative statements though there was a pounding rock and roll soul. Smith and her Group's take on such rock stand-bys as Chris Kenner's "Land, of a thousand dances" and Van Morrison's "Gloria," each augmented with Smith's poetics (the latter with the reprised "Oath" serving as lyrics), reinvented and revitalized both these songs, making them punk manifestos ready for the mosh pit.

Even if some of "Horses'" eight tracks reinterpreted earlier rock recordings, Smith's distinctive stamp is still born out on all of them. It's her unflinching words and dark musings (which Camille Paglia has called Smith's "Delphic posturing") which enlivens the album: the religious ponderings of "Kimberly" (named after Smith's sister); "Redondo Beach," a song about a tragic lesbian relationship, and "Break It Up," a song set at the grave of Jim Morrison.

Though set very much within the idiom of loud, pure rock and roll, Smith nevertheless plays with its various forms. She merges spoken word passages (rap?) with her beats and she explodes the normal, radio-friendly durations of typical album cuts (the tracks "Land" and "Birdland" each clock in at just over nine minutes in length).

Today, Smith's "Horses" is often cited as one of the greatest rock and roll albums of all time. Both "Time" and "Rolling Stone" regularly sing its praises (and move it up their rosters) when they issue one of their occasional lists of the most seminal works in American music. Smith's work inspired not only a generation of punk rock acolytes but also such musicians as Morrissey, The Smiths (no relation), and REM. As a female rocker, her influence can be seen in everyone from Siouxsie Sioux to Courtney Love. Smith even served as served as the inspiration for Gilda Radner's whacked-out rocker Candy Slice on the early seasons of "Saturday Night Live" (though Slice's resemblance to Smith, the real person, was slight at best).

Almost immediately after "Horses," Smith returned to the studio to put down her 1976 album "Radio Ethiopia." After the triumphant of "Horses," reaction to her sophomore effort was, not surprisingly, far more subdued with some critics even labeling it a disappointment. Smith now admits she may have been overly rushed in its production. For the album, producer Jack Douglas took over for John Cale and added to Smith's recording—for better or worse--a smoother, more refined feel; he has since received his share of "blame" for the record. Nevertheless, "Radio Ethiopia" did produce one bone fide master work--"Radio Ethiopia/Abyssinia," a free-jazz influenced 10-minute mash-up that would become the centerpiece of most of Smith's stage shows.

The following year, 1977, would see Smith publish a collection of poems, her forth, titled "Babel." That same year, her album "Easter," produced by Jimmy Iovine, returned Smith to rock's elite ranks and scored her her only top 20 hit. "Because the Night," co-written with Bruce Springsteen, climbed to #13 in May of 1978. The song would later be successfully covered by 10,000 Maniacs in 1993.

Subsequent albums for Smith include, among others, "Wave" (1979); "Dream of Life" (1988); "Gung Ho" (2000), "Trampin'" (2004), and "Banga" (2012).

“Dream of Life,” co-produced by Jimmy Iovine and Smith’s late husband Fred “Sonic” Smith, is especially notable as it introduced Smith’s composition “People Have the Power.” “People” has since been widely adopted as a political anthem, a source of inspiration for scores of people across all economic and social strata. It is, today, arguably, the song with which Smith is most identified.

“Dream of Life” would also serve as the title for a 2008 cinema verite documentary by Steven Sebring on Smith’s life and work.

Finally, the resounding success of her 2010 autobiography “Just Kids” has shown that even 35 years after “Horses,” Smith’s power with images and words has yet to be dulled.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).