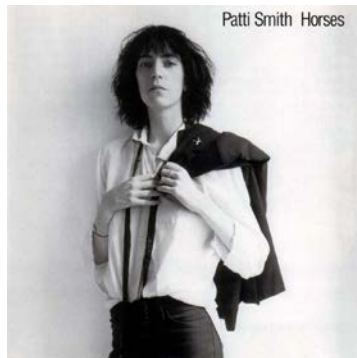


“Horses”—Patti Smith (1975)

Added to the National Registry: 2009

Essay by Kimbrow McLeod (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



John Cale

“*Jesus died for somebody’s sins / but not mine,*” Patti Smith growled during the opening lines of “Horses,” the first album to emerge from New York City’s punk scene. Released at the end of 1975, it can best be understood by surveying the panorama of influences that shaped its creation: first and foremost, the overlapping underground arts scenes in downtown New York City during the 1960s and 1970s. While “Horses” seemed to emerge fully formed from the mind of a brilliant lyricist and musician, it was also very much the product of an environment that enabled Smith to find her voice.

Growing up in a dreamworld filled with poetry and rock ’n’ roll, Smith first fell for Little Richard while living in New Jersey, which introduced her to the idea of androgyny. At age 16, she came across a copy of “Illuminations” by 19th-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud, which expanded her aesthetic horizons. By spring 1967, she graduated from high school and was doing temp work at a textbook factory in Philadelphia, which inspired her early poem-turned-song “Piss Factory,” about having her face shoved into a toilet bowl by bullying coworkers. Smith plotted her escape to New York City, where she landed a much more rewarding job at Brentano’s bookshop and also met Robert Mapplethorpe, who eventually photographed the iconic “Horses” album cover.

She and Mapplethorpe became lovers and moved into the Chelsea Hotel, where Smith cultivated social connections that led her to become a performer in underground theater productions around town. This included a part in Jackie Curtis’s “Femme Fatale” at the Off-Off-Broadway venue La MaMa in 1970, and around this time she fell into a relationship with playwright Sam Shepard, who also played drums in the downtown band Holy Modal Rounders. She penned lyrics for songs that Shepard used in his play “Mad Dog Blues,” and they also co-wrote a one-act, “Cowboy Mouth,” which they costarred in during its initial run until Shepard abruptly split town and returned to his wife and child.

Around this time, Smith met her future musical collaborator, Lenny Kaye, when he was working at Elektra Records, for which he compiled the influential garage rock anthology, “Nuggets.” Kaye was also a freelance music journalist who had written an article for “Jazz and Pop” about doo wop records, something that spoke to Smith about her own youth when she’d hear teenage boys singing on the street corners in New Jersey. She began dropping by the store he worked at, Village Oldies, which specialized in vintage 45 rpm singles, and the two developed a friendship while shooting the breeze as they stood around spinning old records.

The Off-Off-Broadway theater stage first inspired her to become a performer, and the next step in her artistic evolution was doing poetry readings, which set Smith on her musical path. When Andy Warhol assistant and poet Gerard Malanga did a reading at the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s

Church on February 10, 1971, he invited Smith to open for him. Her collaborations with Shepard taught her to infuse words with rhythm, and the budding performer disrupted the traditional poetry reading format by enlisting Kaye to play electric guitar during her reading. Setting improvised chords to her melodic chanting, the guitarist found it easy to follow her because she had a strong sense of rhythmic movement in her delivery.

This reading opened up several opportunities for Smith, including rock magazine "Creem" printing a suite of her poems and the publication of two poetry chapbooks. One of the poems she performed that night, "Oath," began with the line, "Christ died for somebody's sins / But not mine," which was later adapted for "Horses" first track, "Gloria: In Excelsis Deo." Smith then began performing her poetry at the Mercer Arts Center, where she opened for proto-punk band the New York Dolls and others in the downtown's underground music scene. Reading poems to an unruly audience that was waiting to hear the headlining rock act schooled Patti in the art of crowd control, and she began to find her footing as a musical performer who developed a charismatic stage presence. In late 1973, Kaye rejoined Smith for a successful show at the West End Bar, and then they opened for protest singer Phil Ochs at Max's Kansas City for two sets a night over six nights, her first residency.

When Smith's poet-musician friend Richard Hell invited her to see his band Television perform at the early punk venue CBGB, that group's raw, jagged music gripped her by the collar. Soon after, she formed a band with Kaye and keyboardist Richard Sohl, a minimalist lineup that allowed Smith to segue from her spoken-word poems to some musical numbers played on guitar and piano. After placing an ad in the "Village Voice," Smith found former Blondie guitarist Ivan Král and they began playing as a four-piece at CBGB before expanding the Patti Smith Group's lineup to include drummer Jay Dee Daugherty, who previously played in the Mumps.

With no major labels interested in signing an androgynous poet-singer, Smith decided to do it herself. Kaye previously produced an album by the Sidewinders for RCA Records and had played on a single, so he knew his way around the studio. Mapplethorpe loaned them the money to press a seven-inch single, and it was recorded at Jimi Hendrix's Electric Lady Studios in the Village. They performed the Hendrix staple "Hey Joe," along with one of her original songs, "Piss Factory," to which Television's Tom Verlaine added guitar. The group began distributing the single independently, and her audience grew in size while doing a residency at CBGB with Television, which led to more coverage for the nascent punk scene.

In mid-1975, Arista Records mogul Clive Davis offered her a major label record contract, which she signed on May Day. The Velvet Underground's John Cale produced "Horses," whose cover featured Mapplethorpe's striking black and white photo of Smith in a white men's dress shirt and skinny tie. The album received rapturous reviews in "Rolling Stone," "Creem," and the "Village Voice," and it placed high in several year-end lists (though Smith would not land a true hit record until she recorded "Because the Night" for "Easter," her third album, released in 1978). The music on "Horses" was a blend of musical influences that she made her own, particularly on her cover of the garage rock staple "Gloria," into which she interpolated a slightly-rewritten version of her poem "Oath."

"Horses" vacillates between quiet low-key moments that showcase Smith's lyrics and noisier bursts of energy that embraced her inner rock and roll animal (sometimes in the same song, like "Free Money"). The album stands as a high-water mark in the synthesis of poetry and rock music, something that was enabled by her time circulating within the downtown's overlapping arts scenes. This encouraged her to experiment and develop as a performer, especially after Smith's underground theater and poetry reading experience instilled her with enough confidence to take a headlong dive into rock and roll. The close proximity of CBGB, La MaMa, St. Mark's Church, and other downtown venues created connections between early punk, underground poetry, and Off-Off-Broadway, and few benefited from this convergence more than Patti Smith.

Kembrew McLeod is the author of several books and has produced three documentaries about popular music, including “Copyright Criminals,” which aired on PBS’s “Independent Lens.” His book “Freedom of Expression” won the American Library Association’s Oboler Book Award for “best scholarship in the area of intellectual freedom” and he received a National Endowment for the Humanities Public Scholar Award to support work “The Downtown Pop Underground,” published in 2018 by Abrams.

*The views expressed in the essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.