

"Baby is a Rock'n'Roll Nigger"

— a skinny poetess who looks like Keith Richard's sister has a new career, a new town and a new album (her third).

Maybe you think I enjoy this, that I get lots of free records writing for this magazine and that, what the hell, I only have to play each record a couple of times to review it. Well, let me tell you, this job isn't all it's supposed to be. Sure, I get a few free records, not many. The inserts are usually missing and there's a stamp across each record: PROMOTIONAL COPY ONLY. NOT FOR SALE. If I don't like an album I still have to play it about ten times. And I don't get paid, hell no.

So why do I bother? After all, you shouldn't need people to tell you that right now rock'n'roll is in pretty bad shape, that it has become an industry more concerned with making money than good rock'n'roll. But what makes it worth it are the albums which every so often stand above the rest of the dross. Only the Talking Heads album, *Talking Heads: 77*, and Patti Smith's *Easter* have shown up so far this year.

Great rock'n'roll is born, you see, not made. Or, as Patti Smith once put it, "... when you clear away the tons and tons of bullshit, the heart of rock'n'roll is integrity." And with all great rock'n'roll there is also an element of myth.

Patti Smith first fell in love with rock'n'roll when she saw the Rolling Stones on the Ed Sullivan show. Up until then she had liked black music, had harmonised to early soul records in the back of the high school bus. She was a skinny and frail child, the eldest of four children, born in Chicago, December 30, 1946, and raised in Pitman, South Jersey. Her father had been a tap dancer before working in a

factory, her mother had given up a singing career for waitressing. At seven Patti had scarlet fever. She hallucinated.

I lay there at seven / swirling in my bedroom / felt everything pumping blue around me / I am still, still not sure / but I feel, feel feel, feel deep in me / oh, hey Lord, come into my room / I want to open up your 98 wounds ...

Her parents were Jehovah's Witnesses. They taught her to read the Bible and they kept UFO magazines around the house.

When / when will you be landing / when when will you return ... deep in the forest / awoke / like I did / as a little girl / then my eyes rise to the sky / looking for you ... Will you take me / high in the sky ...

She was sent to Glassboro State College. There, as Patti once told a friend, the cases of epilepsy were so many that all the kids carried popsicle sticks in their pockets to use as tongue depressors if one of their classmates had a seizure.

While at high school she started working for a toy factory, a job which she continued after leaving school. She hated it.

Sixteen and time to pay off / I get this job in a Piss Factory inspectin' pipe / 40 hours, \$36 a week / but it's a paycheck Jack / It's so hot in here / hot like Sahara / I couldn't think for the heat / But these bitches are too lame to understand / too goddamn grateful to get this job to realise they're gettin' screwed up the ass.

In 1967 she moved to New York, hoping to be an artist. There she met and befriended Robert Mapplethorpe, an artist who encouraged her to do larger drawings and to combine them with poetry. She wanted to go to Paris to study art but eventually went with her sister, Linda, to travel



rather than study. They were taken under the wing of a street theatre troupe, saw the Rolling Stones playing "Sympathy for the Devil" in Godard's *One Plus One*. Patti began dreaming about Brian Jones a few days before his death. Then she began dreaming of her father, about his heart. The two girls returned to Pitman, where they found their father recovering from a heart attack.

After a brief stay, Patti returned to New York. By 1973 her paintings had become poems. She had co-authored a book of plays with Sam Shepard, "Mad Dog Blues", and three books of her poems had been published: "Seventh Heaven", "Kodak" and "Witt" (pronounced white). Her poetry readings — with former rock critic, Lenny Kaye, backing her on guitar — had given her a minor cult following. Among those interested in her was Steve Paul, manager of Johnny and Edgar Winter, who wanted her to drop the poetry and start singing. But, she told him, she wanted to keep the poetry too.

Should I pursue a past so twisted / Should I crawl, defeated and gifted ...

She was writing occasional pieces for *Rolling Stone*, *Creem* and was a staff writer for *Rock* magazine until, it's said, she interviewed Eric Clapton and asked him only one question — what are your six favourite colours? She was living with Allen Lanier and writing some song lyrics for the band he was in, Blue Oyster Cult.

Jane Friedman, a partner in the Wartoke publicity firm, became Patti's manager and convinced her to try singing. "I always wrote like rock'n'roll," Patti later said. "And I always listened to rock'n'roll as poetry." She began singing at home at the piano. Soon she had a band and was playing guitar. In the band with Lenny Kaye were Richard Sohl (keyboards), Ivan Kral (bass) and Jay Dee Daugherty (drums).

In the middle of 1974 she recorded a single, "Piss Factory" b/w "Hey Joe" on Mer Records, a label financed solely for that release by Lenny Kaye, Robert Map-

plethorpe and Wartoke. To "Hey Joe" Patti added an introductory piece about Patti Hearst:

I was wonderin' were you gettin' it every night / from a black revolutionary man and his woman ...

Patti Smith and her band played for several weeks at Max's Kansas City and later at CBGB's. Clive Davis signed them to Arista Records in early 1975.

Bob Dylan showed up to see her when she played at the Other End in May. "We never discussed nothing," Patti said. "You know how I felt? I've been talking to him in my brain for 12 years, and now I don't have nothing to say to him. I feel like we should have telepathy by now. Me and my sister don't talk."

Dylan asked her about a poem she had written. "I felt like I'd been caught writing about a boy in my diary," she said.

have you seen / dylans dog / it got wings / it can fly

"I didn't decide to do a record out of the blue," she said during the recording of *Horses*. "I've been deliberating for many years. I'm not interested in having a family. My creative instincts are with art, poetry and music. I don't have any other motivation than to do something really great; I mean, I wouldn't want to do a Captain & Tennille record. I'd rather be a housewife, and a good housewife, admired by all the other housewives in the area, than be a mediocre rock singer. The only crime in art is to do lousy art."

Horses was praised by everyone from *Rolling Stone* to the *New York Times*. The album opened with a re-working of Van Morrison's "Gloria", retitled "Gloria (in excelsis deo)":

Jesus died for somebody's sins / but not mine!

"Elegy" was dedicated to Jimi Hendrix, "Kimberly" was about Patti's then 18-year-old sister, "Birdland" was inspired by Paul Reich's dream about his father, psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich, and "Break It Up" was co-written with Tom Verlaine of Television and based on a dream Patti had about Jim Morrison.

Patti had chosen John Cale to produce the first album and it had been, she said, "like *A Season In Hell*". For her next album, *Radio Ethiopia*, the producer was Jack Douglas. Douglas had produced Aerosmith's platinum album, *Rocks*.

"Radio Ethiopia/Abyssinia" was the album's intended masterwork, 12 minutes ten, recorded live and dedicated to Arthur Rimbaud and Constantin Brancusi. Patti described it as an extension of "Birdland" but it was too long and tortuous and it marred an otherwise excellent album.

The hand of God / I feel the finger / hand of God / I start to whirl / and whirl / and I whirl / Don't get dizzy / Do not fall now / Turn God / like a dervish / Turn around, Lord, make a move / turn, turn / I don't get nervous / Oh, I just move in another dimension ...

A year ago Patti Smith fell from the stage during a concert, breaking her neck. The band had been playing "Ain't It Strange", Patti had been spinning, dizzy, half in trance.

After a long break she is performing again. The new album, *Easter*, is better than any she has done; the songs are stronger, the band equal to the challenge. "Ghost Dance", with tambourines and a group chant, is the album's benediction, "Because the Night", co-written with Bruce Springsteen, its anthem. The title track is a haunting and evocative paean for resurrection:

I am the sword / the wound / the stain / the scorned, transfigured child of Cain / I rend / I end / I return again ...

"Babelogue / Rock'n'Roll Nigger" is recorded live; Patti attests that "at heart I'm a Moslem / at heart I'm an American artist". The artist is the neo-nigger, a stigma to man, a stigma to God, "a mutant who will be once again forcefully dealt with ... this time within the glittering circus of rock'n'roll".

Do you like the world around you / are you ready to behave?

Rock'n'roll, Patti Smith says, is royal warfare. Her weapon is a Fender Duo-Sonic with a maple neck and the original pickups. It once belonged to Jimi Hendrix. **Jeremy Templer**

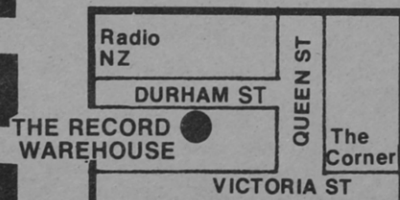
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