

PATTI SMITH
THE FILLMORE
JUNE 22, 2003



Her once raven-black, tangled hair is gone burnished pewter over the years, and time the avenger has given her face a bit more character, but on Tuesday evening she stepped on stage at the Fillmore and I fell in love all over again. As the band blasted right into "25th Floor" -- without a warm-up act -- the crowd roared alive. Three songs into the show with Patti snarling the words to "Summer Cannibals", the control-booth strobes hit the famous overheard "disco ball" -- something usually reserved by the dreadfully jaded booth-guys once every blue moon for the final crescendo of a truly exceptional and carefully polished set.



The 60-year old proto-feminist, proto-punker simply did not let up, playing and singing with the energy and power of a teenager. Her voice projected with such power it reverberated over two electric guitars, an electric bass and amplified drums against the back wall. After a crunching start, she and the band -- including sole survivor Lenny Kaye from the original 1971 group -- went into a puzzling set of covers, featuring "Jumping Jack Flash", before returning to her own material: "Paths That Cross", "Redondo Beach", "We Three," and, of course, the chart-toppers "Frederick" with "Dancing Barefoot."

One high point among many was a supremely ecstatic "Beneath the Southern Cross" with both Smith and Kaye putting out a steady drone on acoustic guitars while an electric gradually insinuated itself with steadily mounting dynamics into a moody series of wails as the backlighting shifted into subtle washes of crimson and lilac.

Born in 1946 in Woodbury, New Jersey of devout Catholic parents, Patti Smith survived a childhood bout with scarlet fever that left her with recurring hallucinations. She worked through college in a toy factory for two years, before dropping out to have a baby that she gave up for adoption. In 1967 she moved to New York with the intention, she stated, of becoming "an artist's mistress." The particular artist she found was Robert Mapplethorpe and the two of them journeyed for a while, living in the Bronx then Paris and then returning to New York where Robert's homosexuality probably put the kibosh on the "mistress" portion, although the two remained close friends until his death of AIDS. Many of her early album covers were composed from photographs done by Mapplethorpe. From painting and poetry, she segued into a bit of playwrighting with Sam Shepard, collaborating on "Cowboy Mouth."

Like a freight train gathering steam she put her hand to everything with frantic energy, writing gonzo journalism-style criticism, performing poetry, doing music, and painting. Her poetry, appearing on page quite often as beat-derived self-indulgent flamboyance, becomes truly "live" and effective when heard and seen in person, when the words become filled with musical nuance and the strength of her personality. She also allows her sense of humor to balance out the heaviness when performing, resulting in a very engaging performance which one cannot get from the relatively austere studio recordings. Her lyrical mentors -- Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Dylan, the Beats -- informed her style of composition and of performance.

As she moved into professional venues, a half-step above coffeehouses, like CBGB, she became lumped together with others in the "punk" aesthetic.

Rolling Stone had this to say about her involvement then:

... by 1975, subcultural gravity converged on CBGB, attracted by a small group of rockers -- notably Television, the Ramones and Smith -- who had little in common besides a commitment to ignore limitations. Punk was not a single style, but a boundary-crashing attitude. You could be a punk journalist, a punk painter, a punk poet. Soon enough, of course, punk would be codified into a canon of stylistic tics, few of which Smith indulged in, but it's always worth remembering that the central motivation was to escape limits, not to invent a new musical cage. As she said once, talking about "Piss Factory," "What is punk rock, anyway? Is it like, I'm writing something just to make a bunch of people with weird hair happy? I wrote it because I was concerned about the common man, and I was trying to remind them they had a choice."

In 1978 Patti fell off of a stage and broke two vertebrae in her neck. While convalescing, she wrote a book of poetry, journeyed to Italy and the lady who would scream, "I have not sold my soul to god!" was granted a personal audience with Pope John Paul, which resulted in the surprisingly affectionate song, "Wave".

After a somewhat heady, albeit misguided and regrettable, attempt to depoliticize racial epithets, such as the word "nigger" -- claiming this title for herself as a start -- she married long time companion Fred "Sonic" Smith and retired to the Detroit suburbs to become a housewife and raise two kids. But life and music had not done with Patti, to her continuing anguish.

Robert Mapplethorpe died of AIDS in 1989, followed by band pianist and friend Richard Sohl. A number of other associates and friends died of AIDS

about this time as well. Kurt Cobain, with whom she sympathized and was acquainted, committed suicide in 1994. In late 1994, first her husband, then her brother, died of heart attacks within two months of each other.

She began giving poetry readings in New York again, and reformulated her band with the occasional assist from John Cale, dividing her time between music projects, book publishing and political causes, including an intense effort on behalf of Ralph Nader during the Stolen Election.

There were some reminiscences Tuesday night, as via the song "1959", but the fire in Patti Smith refused to be doused by grief as she proved Tuesday night. After an incendiary "People have the Power," to which the heavily produced studio recording does not give the slightest justice, she exploded with her withering version of "Gloria", in which the letters of the name become pre-verbal musical notes shouted into a maelstrom.

The audience, screaming and stomping, brought her back for a very appropriate "Distant Fingers (Pissing in a River)" before she ripped into a very self-consciously ironic and very punk "So You Wanna Be a Rock and Roll Star", which she turned into a typically Patti political statement while banging furiously and atonically on a telecaster as Kaye slammed his strat on the top of the Marshalls behind him. "Oh f--k the Rolling Stones! Who do they think they are with charging \$135 dollars a ticket like they're in f--king Las Vegas!" This was especially pointed in view of Smith's penchant for calling up people for impromptu free concerts, which she had done only days before in Berkeley. She then launched into an excoriating diatribe against the present power elite in America.

"F--k those people and their hatreds and their intolerance and their greed! F--k Bush and their stupid wars!"

Guys half MY age were shouting from the back, "Oh Patti! Take me home with you!" Well, we imagine that she would be more than a handful. Patti Smith is not one to be easily contained. That is one reason we love her still.

